

Please check upon delivery

After the Referendum: What?

Notes for an Address

by Michel Bélanger

Chairman of the Organizing Committee for the NO Coalition

at the Canadian Club

Royal York Hotel

Toronto, Ontario

Monday, November 6, 1995

Ladies and gentlemen:

First, I would like to thank the Canadian Club for inviting me here today to speak to you about the results of the referendum held exactly a week ago.

I will leave to the political pundits the task of dissecting the strengths and weaknesses in the campaign strategies of the YES and NO camps. We now all know the outcome, and it is from this perspective that we must try to understand what the results mean for the future.

This is the second time in fifteen years that Quebeckers have said YES to Canada, the second time they have democratically chosen to continue to share Canadian values. However, the choice they have made in 1995 certainly does not have the same significance as the one made in 1980.

I believe that Prime Minister Chrétien accurately summed up the general feeling in the statement he made in Hull on the eve of the referendum vote. He said that the one thing we have all learned from this campaign is that we should never take our country, Canada, for granted.

The results of the vote confirmed his statement. A majority of Quebec voters did show their pride in being both Quebeckers and

Canadians. But, as you know, it was a very slim majority. The other half of the electorate clearly expressed its dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs.

Does this mean that the shadow of separation will continue to darken our common history indefinitely?

The outcome of the referendum must indeed be taken very seriously. But it must also be seen for what it is. The opinion polls all indicated that approximately 25% of would-be YES voters understood that the question meant that Quebec would still maintain ties with Canada. Obviously, we don't know how many people actually voted on this premise. But we do know that some of those who voted YES did it without necessarily supporting separation. As surprising as this might be, it is a fact that reflects the confusion surrounding the question.

But, the narrow win must also be seen as a consequence of the deep resentment felt by very many Quebecers with respect to the process and content of the 1982 constitutional change. Added to this was the bitter disappointment that Quebec's character as a distinct society was not entrenched in the constitution when the occasion arose a few years later.

Those elected to high office everywhere in Canada can choose to acknowledge or to ignore this resentment.

If one chooses to acknowledge it, as I believe we must, then the messages behind the results of the referendum must be clearly identified. As I see it, two important messages are to be read in the outcome of the vote.

The first message is addressed to the promoters of the proposal that was turned down. By rejecting the separation option, the people of Quebec are telling their government to deal with the mandate it received in the September 1994 election. If it is to respect the results of the referendum, the Quebec government has no other choice but to govern within the context of existing Quebec and Canadian institutions.

Quebeckers now expect their government to get down to work and show them what is meant by "l'autre façon de gouverner," "the other way of governing," the slogan under which the Parti québécois was elected.

Whatever their opinion on Quebec's political status, we must not forget that a vast majority of voters share the same interests: they want to earn an honest living and to provide the best quality of life for their families.

In keeping with the PQ's election promises, Quebeckers expect the government to tackle the issue of public spending, decentralize some functions to the regions and take care of the least fortunate in our society.

A good government is a government that creates conditions under which each and every citizen can achieve his or her aspirations in a free and responsible manner.

Rather than considering yet another referendum, the government of Quebec, under the new leader it will choose, must prove that it is able to govern effectively in a way that contributes to the improvement of the economic and social conditions of all Quebecers. Only thus will it deserve their trust.

In the present state of public finances and taxation, it will be very difficult to be both fiscally responsible and popular with the electorate. For that reason alone, it is hard to imagine a government deciding to launch yet another referendum in the near future.

The people of Quebec also expect their government to defend their interests in every arena. It is very likely that a majority of voters would view the government's refusal to participate in solutions to the Canadian federation's common problems as a misuse of its mandate.

This brings me to the second message in last Monday's results. Quebecers, like Canadians, also expect change. Some elements of this change are directed toward Quebec only, while other elements concern the whole of the Canadian federation.

It is essential that the good intentions expressed toward Quebec by Canadian political leaders during the referendum campaign do not remain empty words. The hope they raised must now become reality.

The spirit of federalism under which the NO coalition fought the referendum recognizes that Quebec is a distinct society under the Canadian constitution. It also acknowledges that the constitutional relationship between the governments of Quebec and Canada cannot be changed without Quebec's participation and consent.

When, how and in what precise form should we put these principles into practise? It is up to our elected officials to respond. But I would say it should be done very clearly, without ambiguity, and as soon as possible. This, of course, recognizes that final inclusion in the constitution will necessarily have to wait for the time when the government of Quebec is a willing participant in change within Canada.

In addition to these two very basic and difficult questions concerning Quebec's place within Canada, there are other matters regarding change that are equally of interest to all parts of the country. For if Canada is to continue to grow stronger, each of its constituent parts must have room to breathe and flourish.

We would indeed work to build a stronger Canada if we work for change to give more autonomy to the provinces that want it so that they can more effectively fulfil their responsibilities.

With global competition and the constant development of new information technologies, the business world has recognized the need to decentralize decision making in order to ensure more efficient production, quicker response to market needs and closer relationships with customers.

Financial constraints, among others, are now leading governments to search for ways to provide public services that clearly respond to the needs of the population in a manner and at a cost that satisfies the electorate.

Canadian taxpayers all share the same concern: they want value for their money. As we see how power, decision making and vision are changing in the goods and services producing sector, we have every right to insist that our governments make the same efforts to re-engineer their processes and re-examine their programs.

It is up to the elected politicians to seek the balance that will best respond to the concerns of Canadians. How better could they do it than by making sure that each public service is provided by the level of government closest to the citizens, unless there is a clear advantage to doing otherwise?

Without such a concerted effort to deliver public services to the citizens in a way that taxpayers are clearly willing to support, we could not for long maintain the services that Canadians value so much and that reflect the type of people we are.

And this cannot be achieved without agreed upon and commonly defined principles. But there is a considerable difference between a principle imposed from above and one that has been discussed and accepted by all the parties involved. There is also a wide gap between a principle and its concrete application.

If services are to be provided efficiently by the government closest to the citizens, the central government should not dictate in specific detail how services are to be delivered, provided it is satisfied that the commonly defined goals and principles are respected.

Above and beyond the referendum, all Canadians continue to face the changes forced on us by the same constraints that are felt by other highly industrialized countries. Whether we live in Victoria, Toronto or Chicoutimi, we cannot escape the effects of the globalization of markets as the world's economies become increasingly interconnected.

We cannot escape either the limits that chronic deficits and ever-growing debt have imposed and are imposing on the ability of governments to maintain existing programs. The difficult changes and the long period of adaptation that are unavoidable require a high degree of public awareness of the issues if success is to be attained.

The convergence of these two phenomena—globalization of the economy and governments' restrained fiscal position—poses considerable challenges to our society and to our way of governing. This

convergence calls for changes in the way we think and in the way we act at all levels of society.

We cannot choose the problems we face but we can most certainly choose the solutions that are most appropriate under the circumstances. A measure of our success will be our ability to put issues in order of importance and to deal with them in a coherent manner.

All Canadians want changes that will lead to a more effective federation, where each level of government clearly deals with its responsibilities.

Not a month ago, on October 12, your premier, Mr. Harris, told this club that Ontario would support the kind of change that would provide taxpayers with better value for their tax dollars.

Ontario will have an important role to play in leading the way toward an efficient, citizen-oriented, fiscally responsible and creative government style in Canadian public administration.

Mr. Harris stated clearly that his government intends to fulfil its role as a major partner in the federation by indicating that a new equilibrium is needed in Canada. Therein lies the way of the future.

In this same perspective, and in time, there could be a return to enthusiasm in Quebec to continue building, developing and changing Canada for the benefit of all its parts and of all Canadians.

Quebeckers have not forgotten that it was on the present-day territory of their province that Canada came into being. Many of our ancestors, settlers and explorers, landed on the shores of the Saint Lawrence and opened up this vast country that now spans the continent. And those who came from France to settle in North America were given the name "Canadiens." The Canadiens were indeed the first Canadians, as those nations that occupied the territory before their arrival had then, as now, their own names.

By drawing on the strength of their roots and their vision of the future, Canadians, including Quebeckers, have built a country that is the envy of the world. We have built it on a foundation of the shared values of democracy, tolerance, generosity, compassion, and respect for differences.

In recent history, we have missed opportunities to improve relations between all Canadians and between Quebeckers and other Canadians. However, the most important opportunity is still ahead of us. We all have reason to be proud of what we have accomplished to date, and we have every reason to believe that we can in time, carefully, and with respect for differences of view, reach new levels of success.

To that effect, we must strive toward our goals calmly, serenely and with perseverance, tackling problems one by one, so that we can pass on to our children a better country than the one we inherited.