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SPEECH TEXT

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Release/
Publication :

SEPTEMBER 15TH, 1997

RESPECTING DIFFERENCE TO MAKE CANADA WORK

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TO:

The Canadian Club

Toronto, Ontario

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY



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BANQUE TORONTO DOMINION

Well, you must be thinking, here we all are. The Sheraton Center. Another Canadian Club luncheon. Another speech on national unity. Summer, we now know, is truly over.

I broach this well-worn topic with some trepidation -- and considerable humility. Certainly, before me have come many far wiser than I -- often bearing the scars of bitter experience.

And I am also conscious of the fact that when CEOs like me come before you to talk about national unity, we speak in measured tones -- purporting to address the heart of the matter but, in fact, often skirting the edges.

Concerns are expressed -- but they are tempered. Criticisms are made -- but they are couched carefully. And the usual clichés are trotted out -- separation would have its costs; this is a wonderful country; in the end, Canada will, of course, endure.

If at the conclusion of my remarks today, you feel I have followed in that tradition, I will have failed. Because I don't believe any of us -- anywhere -- can afford the ritual rhetoric and reassurance of the past.

I will be as blunt as I can be.

In my view, barring divine intervention, blind luck -- or bold new leadership -- the next referendum could well be lost.

The odds are not with us. Let me count the reasons why.

One, the demographics in Quebec are not in our favour.

Two, the polling results are not encouraging, especially given the very tough fiscal decisions the Government of Quebec has had to make and the absence of a campaign.

Three, year by year, the public opinion environment in Quebec is becoming more and more impermeable, its journalistic, political and artistic elite never daring to speak the word Canada, except to deride. The sovereigntist movement has adroitly appropriated

the most powerful symbols of Quebec for its cause. As a result, francophone federalists sink into a posture of silence or virtual apology. In that environment, how realistic is it to expect Quebec federalists to campaign actively in the next referendum?

And finally, of course, the slate is not clean. The Constitution was repatriated in 1982 without the consent of Quebec. Meech Lake was rejected. The Charlottetown Accord did fail. The last referendum was almost lost.

There are now hundreds of thousands of Quebecers who made the decision for the first time in their lives to vote 'yes'. The question is: having made that momentous decision, why would they now go back to voting 'no', when by their own actions, the cause of sovereignty has now become a reflection far less of francophone social division than of social consensus.

In years past, many who worried were accused of crying wolf. This time, the wolf is at the door.

Now, some may say, not to worry. Improving economic fundamentals in the country will help turn the situation around. The cutbacks in government spending in Quebec will sour that society on separation. Mr. Bouchard will fumble -- or perhaps even change his mind.

They may be right. Maybe that will happen.

But I do not believe we can afford to wait until the next referendum is almost upon us. Smart campaign ads, seductive speeches and large, last minute rallies -- no matter how heartfelt -- are not going to turn this around. This issue will be decided on the basis of emotion, belief and conviction. It is about choosing a country, not a platform.

But before we contemplate action, we need analysis. Why are we on the precipice? How did we get there?

In answering those questions, we tend to focus on missed opportunities and mistakes -- and certainly, there have been more than enough of those.

Too many tend to look exclusively inside Quebec and focus with disdain on the manipulative tactics of the hard-line separatists. The fuzzy referendum questions. The manufacture of myths of perpetual humiliation. The bait of economic partnership and the deliberate downplaying of the costs of separation.

But tempting as those targets are, and as valid as criticism of them continues to be, I believe we commit a gross error in so narrowly restricting our focus.

We will not change their message. Our challenge must be to limit its appeal.

And here, let me make one of my central points. Yes, Quebecers are being asked to create a new country. They are also being asked to leave another country behind.

What kind of country is that? What have we become?

Now, I wish we could take refuge in the easy re-assuring answers -- pointing to the splendour of the Rockies, the breadth of the land, endorsements from the United Nations and the like -- but I don't believe we can.

Because there is today a new spirit stalking this land, as damaging and as divisive as any separatist slogan or strategy.

A poisonous parallelism has taken hold.

For separatists, if Quebec is a success, it is despite Canada, not because of it. For many outside of Quebec, if Canada is a success, it is despite Quebec, not because of it.

For separatists, if Quebec has problems, they are caused by the Canadian connection. For many outside of Quebec, Canada's problems can largely be attributed to the continued presence in the federation of that troublesome province.

For separatists, the federation is unfair to Quebec.

For others, the federation has been too fair to Quebec.

For separatists, the cost of separation would be short-lived and tolerable. Many outside of Quebec, now say the same thing.

If many Quebecers are saying 'let's leave the rotters' more Canadians than ever are saying 'let the rotters go'.

Yes, we are two solitudes. But we are also becoming two scorpions in a jar. Why has this happened? I believe there are several, related causes, some more recent than others.

The fact is, we are gripped by an appalling, abiding ignorance of each other, of our shared past, of what has made this country great. The lessons of history are forgotten. The ties that bind are falling away.

Our cultural reference points are increasingly non-Canadian. Our historical reference points are increasingly non-existent. Our sense of common heritage, joint achievement, and shared values is withering away.

We live totally in the present, forgetting our past and so risking our future.

We assert disagreement with people we haven't even met, much less know.

We live totally for ourselves, not each other. We focus on our province and our region -- not on a great national enterprise.

I was appalled, as I am sure were many of you, by the results of a recent poll of young Canadians done for The Dominion Institute.

Just some examples.

Almost half of young Canadians don't have a clue who Sir John A. MacDonald was. 65 per cent do not know what happened on D-Day. And 36 per cent not only do not know the date of Confederation, they don't know its century.

That was a survey of young people. But I'm not convinced a poll of Canadians older than they would yield a much better result.

This matters. If we don't realize that our future is the result of generation upon generation of Canadians making the difficult, but conscious choice to work together -- not apart -- why would we strive to work together in the future?

If we don't know how we survived the destructive episodes that also permeate our past -- the pitting of English against French, Protestant against Catholic, new Canadian against old -- how can it be said that we have learned from history? And as Mark Twain told us... "although history does not repeat itself, it rhymes".

If we are unaware of the extraordinary sacrifice, courage, imagination and leadership that went into building this peaceable kingdom, why should we value it, treasure it, and see it not simply as an address, rather than as a legacy left to us, not to squander, but to pass on to those who come after.

There is a related, and in the immediate term, more worrisome trend. Our political discourse is being colonized by a set of concepts and values that are literally foreign to our collective experience.

Individual rights are being trumpeted over long-held community values.

Increasingly, the articulation of the existence of different needs and different realities is being dismissed as special pleading. Equality is defined as uniformity, rather than respect of legitimate difference. A concept that goes to the very core of this nation's being is discredited -- the fact that here, we have chosen -- both out of desire and

necessity -- to create a society which builds unity and strength out of a profound respect for difference.

The reasons for this trend are not hard to identify. The individualist thrust of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Americanization of our popular culture. Fiscal hard times which have weakened governments, and led to the need to rely much more on one's self. And, perhaps most importantly, the profound amnesia of our collective Canadian experience.

But it is the result, not the reasons for these conditions that troubles me deeply.

Because behind the simple slogans of 'everyone is equal' and 'equality of citizens and provinces' is a troubling implication. If everyone is 'the same', if difference is defect, not asset, then there is something wrong -- something inadmissible, even unpatriotic -- about the proposition that respect for divergent realities is at the heart of our civil society -- and our national unity.

If everyone is the same, the very structure of our federation is called into question, because Confederation itself, indeed various fundamental covenants that precede it, including the Quebec Act, are anchored in a mutual respect for difference.

If everyone is the same, then recognition of the special needs of various regions of the country -- whether through equalization or transfers or stabilization is simply wrong.

If everyone is the same, then acknowledgment of the special circumstances of Quebec's language and culture -- or Aboriginal reality, as only one other example -- is not only unwarranted, it is wrong.

This idea of 'sameness' undoubtedly has a smooth, seductive surface simplicity, on the one hand. But on the other, it is disingenuous, divisive, intolerant and destructive of Canadian values. The appeal of sameness is obvious. After all, who can be against 'equality'? Who would argue for 'special treatment and privilege'? The problem is,

Canada itself could not exist -- could not have even come into being -- if our forebears had confused sameness with equity as we are so patently in danger of doing today.

Federalism at its core is based on the respect of different regional needs and realities. Confederation itself came about because wise leaders at the time knew this large and diverse land could only survive if Ontarians could be Canadians the Ontario way, Quebeckers the Quebec way, Maritimers the Maritime way and so on.

What was true for other countries -- smaller in geography, far more homogeneous in culture and tradition -- could never work here.

Certainly, as a matter of practical choice, I happen to believe making Canada work has always required the active respect for, and accommodation of, difference. I happen to believe it is also a superior moral choice.

There are only two ways to deal with difference. One is to ignore it, destroy it, deny it. The other is to respect it and work with it. The latter day Lord Durhams who seek to de-legitimize the very ethos of this country will, I fear, destroy it, if their views are not strongly countered. We have left a vacuum, and they are filling it.

Of course, the hard-line separatists understand this. They revel in the ascendancy of this political philosophy. Not that they agree with it. Precisely the opposite. They understand, far better than do we thus far, the incompatibility of this concept with the existence of the country itself. This is an informal alliance of profound convenience.

Now, this change in our political culture is not brand new. It has been building. The failures of both Meech and Charlottetown owe a great deal to its existence. Indeed, I find it a tragic irony that some of those who fought hardest against those accords -- in the name of the notion of equality I have described -- come from communities and parts of the country that would be the surest to suffer were national affairs in fact run on that basis.

Now, it can never be our purpose to change the views of hard-line leaders -- whether francophone or anglophone. Those views are set in concrete. What is worrisome about the current state of affairs is the absence of a confident and vocal middle.

If we let the extremes define the debate now, they will define the outcome down the road.

What is required is to reach beyond the hard-liners to the 20 or 30 per cent of francophones who have yet to close their minds or their options. And here, I believe, we come to the core of the matter. The national unity issue is not, for these people, about laws or legislation, nor about the transfer of powers or its absence. It is about respect.

Too many Quebecers simply do not believe that Canadians outside Quebec respect their existence and aspirations. And too many Canadians outside Quebec resent the fact that so many people in Quebec seem unwilling to call themselves fellow citizens -- that they don't respect Canada.

This is a false portrait of most Quebecers and most Canadians. It has been created by ignorance of one another. There is a silent majority in Quebec who would prefer to remain within a Canada that demonstrated through deed and declaration its respect for Quebec. And there is a silent majority throughout Canada that would prefer to be citizens of a country large enough in spirit to want Quebec to stay. If those silent majorities aren't awakened -- and brought together, re-inforcing one another -- then the vocal minorities will win. And if they do win, it will be because others walked away from the battle.

Now, some might say, all that is fine, but, in the end, it doesn't really matter, does it? After all, while Quebecers might pay a price, the rest of us would not. After some minor adjustments life would go on as usual.

Well, I'm not going to debate the numbers. And as a banker, let me say that a country does not exist solely as an economic construct -- some flag of corporate convenience or a clearing house for cheques. It serves a larger purpose.

But let there be no doubt. The price we would pay -- all of us, across the country -- would be high. It would be abiding. Higher interest rates, a deteriorating currency, escalating unemployment and declining equity markets would not only be a Quebec phenomenon, but would confront all Canadians from St. John's to Victoria.

Separation would put the economic well-being of each and every Canadian at risk. Uncertainty about the future would jeopardize the sense of economic security and stability that we now enjoy. We have sacrificed so much to regain our economic health in recent years. Separation would put all that at risk.

Sure, we would survive economically -- Quebec without Canada and Canada without Quebec -- but since when is our standard and our aspiration simple survival?

What an irony -- perhaps a typically Canadian one -- this would be. Here we are, after years of difficult decision and some hardship, now equipped with some of the finest economic fundamentals in the world, poised to leave the era of deficits behind, yet looking squarely at the possibility of the ultimate made-in-Canada recession. Some boom. Some bust. Some echo.

The issue is: are we willing to pay that price?

And what about the price to be paid to avoid it? -- statesmanship, generosity, reaching out, having the guts to argue that to respect someone else's difference does not detract from our rights and privileges. It strengthens us all.

I have spoken briefly about economics. But that, in the end, is not my primary concern. My real worry is not that separation would break the bank, but that it would break the spirit of the country.

The co-existence, co-operation and collaboration of francophones and anglophones, of Quebec and the rest of the country -- always difficult, never automatic -- has been the hallmark, the primary example of the sort of tolerance and accommodation that has distinguished us from others, indeed made us what others want to be.

We, better and for longer than just about anyone else, despite our scars and blemishes, have risen above the tribalism of skin colour and language and demonstrated that unity and success need not be purchased at the price of uniformity or submission.

But what if that covenant were to break down over Quebec? The issue then would be where next would it break down? With the precedent set, the path of intolerance taken, who would suffer next? Immigrants? The less well-off provinces? The disadvantaged? I fear separation not simply because of what it would mean by itself -- but because of what could come after. We would not only be diminished in size, but also very much diminished in spirit.

And what shame would we feel, this generation of Canadians, unable, unwilling to rise to the challenge met by every generation before it? How would we feel, knowing that we were responsible for the dissolution of one of the finest democracies in the history of the world?

I have no neat solution. But I do have some propositions.

First, while I believe it is certainly necessary to strive to reform the roles of the provincial and federal governments, at some point systematic devolution amounts to giving Canada away in order to save it.

Secondly, I believe it is wise to secure a judgment from the Supreme Court as to what the law says about separation. But the real risk here is not the judgment. It is the use to which it will be put. Will it provide a context for discussion or become the basis of a threat?

Thirdly, I believe the provinces need to play a bigger role on this issue and am encouraged by the activity and initiatives that are beginning to flow from the recent meetings in St. Andrew's.

Finally, I believe, that in the end, what is required today more than anything is to re-kindle a sense of national pride, of common Canadian purpose.

We need to re-discover who we are and why we are.

We need to articulate, without apology, the Canadian ideal -- the ability of a small and diverse population in a large and difficult land to live together -- not simply to tolerate one another, but to take pride in helping each other be what we want to become.

Today, we need to come together on a national agenda -- not a federal agenda, but a Canadian one.

Much as it has been needed, deficit elimination is not a vision. I am very conscious that I say this as a banker. Much as it must still happen, debt reduction is not a rallying cry for a nation.

Why not set goals for education, for innovation, for strengthening medicare, for child poverty and, yes, for youth unemployment?

Why not rise up and challenge the damaging political discourse that today we are too willing to let dominate the debate?

And why not cast off our Canadian caution, our reticence to tell our own story?

A country that has demonstrated there is a choice other than assimilation or separation.

A people proud of what we share -- each other.

In the court of history, there is one law, unwritten, that stands above all others. Do any of us have the moral right to let this country come apart? That is the judgment that counts -- the one that awaits.