A VIEW FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Notes for a speech to

THE CANADIAN CLUB, Toronto

by JOHN N. TURNER

1:00 p.m. E.D.T.

October 25, 1976

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Canada is a worried country. Symptoms of unrest are everywhere. English and French-speaking Canadians grumble once more about language. Labour is angry. Business is suspicious. Our federalism seems out-of-joint.

Canadians share a world-wide anxiety about the future. Future shock has become contagious. There is a general cynicism in the country about government -- all governments. But what is even more disturbing -- for a Canadian at least -- is a seeming loss of faith in the future of our country. Our two cultures appear to be locked on a collision course. The two solitudes seem more remote than ever.

What better forum than this Canadian Club to talk about these issues! Surely there is no more appropriate place to speak about national unity. Today I want to talk about our country -- about language and about our federalism.

As a nation Canada is not a product of logic, nor economics, nor even geography. Only history explains us. Canada was a hesitant historical compromise between two cultural strains and diverse economic regions. We wove the threads of parliamentary tradition and territorial federalism into a consensus called the British North America Act. As a country we are a creation more of hope than of reality. The "Canadian Identity" is almost impossible to define. Whether we have been fashioned by the vastness and remoteness of our land and water, by a composite of our varied heritage, or by our resistance to American "manifest destiny", we are a unique and a distinctly separate people on this continent.

And,as others judge us, we have been a happy people, a fortunate nation, blessed with abundant resources and free from the ravages that have scarred so many other places. Why now the tensions and the distrust and the gloominess?

Perhaps it is the stress of change. Perhaps it is the uncertainty of ordinary men and women living under the stress of worldwide inflation. Whatever it is, we are edgy. Edginess projects tension. And one of the symptoms of that tension in Canada is a flaring up again of that historic conundrum of language.

Let us examine the language issue. Why is language so important to people? Because the use of one's own tongue, the right to express oneself in one's own language is pivotal to the flowering of the human personality. This right to self-expression in one's own language is essential to individual dignity and economic equality. For me it is a fundamental human right. I could not conceive of a Canada surviving for long if that right were not equally accorded to both of the historic cultural communities of the country.

The current policy of bilingualism derives its sanction from the Official Languages Act, which was passed by Parliament in 1969-- with the support of all four political parties. I was Attorney General at the time, and had a good deal to do with the negotiation of the terms of the Bill with the provinces, particularly the western provinces, and with its passage through the House of Commons. I can remember vividly how deep the concerns went, particularly west of the lakehead, where half a continent had been unified under the English language.

What does that Act do? It establishes that every Canadian shall have the right to deal with the federal government and its agencies in either English or French. The statute bears particularly on the national capital and those areas of the country with significant linguistic minorities of English or French. That is all the statute says. It does not impose bilingualism on the country. It doesn't force any Canadian to speak the other language.

On the contrary, by allowing him to approach his government in his own language it relieves him of the necessity of learning the other language. It really allows most of us to remain unilingual.

Because the people of Canada were to be able to deal with their federal government in either or both languages, the public service of Canada had then to be equipped to deal with the public in either language. Certain positions had to be designated as bilingual because of their contact with the public.

Not contemplated in the Act, but set forth and buttressed by a subsequent resolution of Parliament, was a secondary thrust of bilingualism. This was that citizens of either language should be encouraged to enter the public service of Canada and have equal opportunity for promotion.

This meant that the bilingual requirement was necessary not only to meet the public but to allow the internal operation of the service to be conducted in either language. This extended the scope of definition of bilingual positions as originally contemplated in the Official Languages Act.

At any rate, what we are dealing with is institutional bilingualism -- not universal bilingualism. This distinction has never been brought fully home to the average English-speaking Canadian who somehow sees the program as a threat to the use of his own mother tongue, and as giving an unfair advantage to the French-Canadian. To him it smacks as further proof that French Canada has a disproportionately heavy voice in national affiars.

From the beginning, as a policy, institutional bilingualism was generally acceptable to the country.

I believe it still is, if it were properly explained and if some practical adjustments were made to the style of its implementation. Parenthetically, the policy was begun by Mr. Pearson on behalf of the English-speaking majority of this country. It is not being "rammed down our throats" by a French-speaking Canadian called Trudeau. But now, instead of uniting the country, bilingualism has become a symbol of a host of discontents.

What went wrong? To begin with, I believe that there is some truth in the government's own assertion that the policy has not been sufficiently explained to the people of the country. Once it was passed, the Official Languages Act was taken for granted as the law of the land. But you can't just legislate language. It takes more than that. It takes persuasion and persistence.

Perhaps a deeper reason for the reluctance of English-speaking Canadians to accept the policy fully is that the majority in this country has never been complimented for its understanding acceptance of the policy, and its basic tolerance. I believe strongly that English-speaking Canadians sincerely want to make this country work. Some may feel frustrated about Quebec every once in a while or say in anger, "Let them go!" -- but in our sane and sober moments no one really means it. For my part, I could not conceive of a Canada without Quebec any more than I could conceive of this country without British Columbia, to which I hold a special attachment. I believe that we are <u>proud</u> of a bilingual and multi-cultural country. We <u>want</u> to make it work, but we resent being called bigots when we question how the policy is being applied.

And the weaknesses of the bilingualism policy lie in its application. First of all, it is now being recognized more widely that middle-aged civil servants cannot be rendered bilingual by the touch of a wand or by shell-shock immersion. Dr. Wilder Penfield told us during his lifetime that the cortex of the brain was no longer flexible at that age and that the learning process was too difficult. Some of us have insisted since the beginning of the program (and I so stated on several public occasions when I was the Member of Parliament for Ottawa-Carleton) that the country would receive a better return if the impetus of bilingualism were directed towards the next generation in our primary and secondary schools across Canada. Even Keith Spicer, the Commissioner of Official Languages, has become a convert to this thesis. And the Speech from the Throne has finally acknowledged it as government policy.

The definition of the requirements for a bilingual position would also appear to be too widely drawn. Far fewer positions need to be so defined for a proper working of the system either for dealing with the public or within the system itself. Nothing is more frustrating for the conscientious public servant than to spend a year of his life learning the second language only to find little use for it when he returns to his job.

And sharper focus on the standards of proficiency in a second language is needed. Is it really necessary to be an accomplished linguist in both languages to serve in a bilingual position? Surely that depends on the job! I rather subscribe to the point of view advanced by Douglas Fullerton, former chairman of the National Capital Commission and like me a strong advocate for bilingualism, who said that

we ought to be thinking in the terms of "passive" rather than "active" bilingual competence.

What he means is that the system will work if most of those involved in the so-called bilingual positions of the public service acquire a capacity to understand the other language orally or by reading. If such a person understands what his fellow civil servant is saying or writing and in turn can communicate with him in his own language confident of being understood, then the system can work. Undoubtedly, there are some positions where an active ability to express oneself in another language would additionally be necessary. But for most cases a situation in which either person could communicate in his language and be understood, would be adequate and efficient. How much easier it is to acquire a facility to understand the other language than to master the active capacity to communicate in it.

One of the ironies at the present time is that while we have tried to promote bilingualism on the federal scene, the provincial government of Quebec appears to have been moving the other way. From their point of view one can understand why priority status should be given to the French language within Quebec. English has enjoyed a corresponding status in the other provinces having English-speaking majorities since Confederation. What has coloured the Quebec legislation is that the freedom of choice of immigrants for their children and the acquired rights of the English-speaking minority in Quebec appear to have been truncated. The lack of response for so long by the federal government to Bill 22 has placed the credibility of its own bilingual program in jeopardy across the country.

I need to make a second point as strongly as I can. Excessive emphasis has been placed upon bilingualism as the sole prerequisite to national unity. That is difficult to swallow, particularly in western Canada where acceptance of two languages means rewriting history and where issues of resource ownership, transportation and the tariff structure are perceived to be equally important as factors contributing to the harmony of this country. For Atlantic Canada, equality of economic opportunity rates as the paramount question.

National unity is not a one-dimensional issue. Bilingualism is not the total answer even to the apirations of French Canada. If I had been born a French-Canadian I would have insisted on equal access to my federal government in my own language. And that is now the law.

I would also have insisted that I be well represented in Ottawa, in the Cabinet and the senior ranks of the civil service, by my fellow Quebeckers and French-speaking Canadians. That is the case now and it has been so for some time.

But that wouldn't have been enough. I would have never felt completely comfortable as a French-speaking Canadian or in particular as a Quebecker, if I did not have enough scope within the constitution of the country to fulfill myself, not only as an individual human being, but also as a member of a distinct cultural society. This would have meant for me that I would want to feel secure in my own language, under my own civil law, within my own culture and within my own collective psychology -- on my home ground known as the Province of Quebec -- the only piece of geography on the face of the globe where I find myself among my own kind in a majority.

It would have meant that in terms of my own culture, my ability to communicate, my ability to fulfill myself in economic terms, I could do so as a Canadian within a constitutional fabric flexible enough to give me as a Quebecker enough living room. For a French-speaking person living in North America there can be distinct advantages living in the Canadian Federation: a share in the potential of half a continent, insulation from the waves of an anglophone sea, and participation in a successful common market. But only if such a federation worked for me -- only if I felt at home in Canada -- could I stifle the emotional urge, despite the risks, for an independent nation-state.

Well, I was born English-speaking, but I don't think I am talking in a vacuum. I can understand (if I don't always agree with all the details) the thrust towards "cultural sovereignty", transfer of income support programs and enough flexibility of the economic levers --

all under the umbrella of provincial rights. This urge is not unique to Quebec. I hear the same arguments emanating from British Columbia and Alberta, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland.

We may have to do some re-thinking about how we have been using our federal-provincial structure. Ontario has been the main beneficiary of Confederation. It has enjoyed a common market from sea to sea. It has prospered from the concentration of manufacturing capacity and economic power. Perhaps we shall have to contemplate some de-centralization of that influence, some broadening of the decision-making leverage in political and economic terms. The time may be here for contemplating amendments to the British North America Act to reflect a new reality. Or perhaps we just need to apply what we have with a better sense of the requirements of federal-provincial balance and the shifting needs of our time.

I am among those who would like to see our constitution come home. But I could not subscribe to any unilateral patriation of that constitution without an amending formula agreed upon first by the federal government and the provinces. Unless this were done we would find ourselves in a perpetual straight-jacket, inflexibly locked in, unable to amend our constitution short of unanimity.

Looking to amendments to our constitution, I could envisage some necessary decentralization. With countries, as with families, a little more distance can often improve the feeling of togetherness. If more scope were given for legitimate provincial priorities, French Canada would be given more room as well. This would recognize not only the individual rights of French-Canadians as citizens in terms of access to their government and a role in the government of the whole country in their own language. It would also recognise the collective needs of French-Canadians as a community or society.

I envisage that this approach would also satisfy some grievances of western Canada, a vigorous growing community that is chafing under the resentment of feeling manipulated by a remote eastern establishment.

We need to see Canada whole -- in all its parts, not just our own part of it. We need to reconcile the legitimate priorities of every region. At any one time, these priorities are not necessarily all shared equally across the country. That is why we are a federal and not a unitary state.

Nor must the concerns of one part of the country be perceived by others as perpetually paramount or dominant. Every Canadian, no matter where he or she lives, must have reason to feel included in the overall thrust and direction of the country.

There is no one design for Canada or its future. Canada is a house of many mansions. The solutions to our current problems are not one-dimensional. I think it is time for us all to stand back a little -- to see our country whole and together to draw a pattern for our future that reflects a broader reconciliation and a common purpose.