

2 août 1961, Québec

Association parlementaire du Commonwealth

C'est avec grand plaisir et beaucoup de fierté que je souhaite aujourd'hui la bienvenue aux délégués de la section canadienne de l'Association parlementaire du Commonwealth. Comme Premier ministre de la province, je suis flatté que votre conférence se tienne chez nous et soyez assurés que mes collègues de l'Assemblée législative, de quelque parti qu'ils soient, partagent mon sentiment à cet égard. Comme citoyen et député de la Vieille Capitale, je suis heureux de votre présence. Je pense que vous aimerez notre ville et que vous en goûterez le charme. Ceux d'entre vous qui viennent ici pour la première fois verront vite que, pour ses habitants, Québec est beaucoup plus qu'une ville. Québec a une valeur de symbole. C'est par Québec que la civilisation occidentale a fait son entrée dans le territoire qui devait devenir le Canada; c'est par elle aussi que la culture française s'est établie dans notre pays et c'est en grande partie grâce à elle qu'elle a pu y survivre. Par son existence même, notre cité a en quelque sorte pris figure de monument élevé à la fidélité qu'éprouve le peuple canadien-français pour ses origines et ses institutions.

Québec, however, is not just the capital of our province. It is one of the great cities of our country and is part of the common heritage of all Canadians. It is also one of the cities of our Commonwealth and its citizens are happy to welcome the delegates to this meeting.

I would like to take advantage of this opportunity that I have been given of speaking to you, to express the hope that the gathering that you are holding in our city will be a most profitable one. I am not expressing this hope merely as a polite way of welcoming you here. Through your work, you are helping the cause

of democracy, and as a result, all the people in the world may eventually gain something from your discussions. I won't go so far as to say that your meeting will settle the fate of the world. Your immediate aim is less ambitious, but it is nevertheless a very important one.

As you know, Canada's traditional role in Commonwealth affairs has been one of leadership, assistance and co-operation.

Our fellow-members from all over the world know that we have « no axe to grind » and that we have always given unbiased advice and help whenever we have been asked. In this modern age, parliamentarians in the Commonwealth and in Canada face a greater challenge than ever before. To-day, a member of parliament is weighed down by heavy responsibilities at the local, provincial and federal levels, and the meeting in Quebec could lead to important reforms affecting Senators and Legislative Councillors, as well as members of parliament and legislative assemblies.

The parliamentary system, like any man-made institution, is in a constant state of evolution. It was not perfect when it began, and it is not perfect to-day, and being familiar as you are with the normal human endeavour to strive for perfection, you and I naturally come to realize that the parliamentary system never will be perfect. Nevertheless, in spite of its shortcomings, I think that it would be difficult to find a form of government that has a greater

respect for the dignity of the individual or which offer better protection for the rights of the citizen.

There is, however, one indispensable condition attached. Before the parliamentary system can give the results that we can expect to derive from it, it must be set up within a democratic framework. We forget all too often that parliamentary government is an institution and a form of government. Parliamentary government is not necessarily democracy, because democracy is a way of life as well as being a form of government. We all know of countries where a form of parliamentary government exists, but where democracy is conspicuous by its absence. We all know of countries where the citizens may exercise their right to vote, but where there is no true democracy. In this case, of course, the right to vote is fictitious, but the fact remains that these countries have a parliament or an institution resembling one, and they sometimes even have political parties. In some ways these countries may appear to be democratic, but they do not have a democratic spirit. Democracy does not exist as an abstraction. It materializes in human institutions and is expressed through collective behaviour. As a result, it can be easily distorted and can be easily misrepresented. The democratic way of life is never fully acquired. The degree of liberty that it gives to the individual can, in certain cases, lead to abuses that may bring about its gradual decline and abandonment. Undesirable and unscrupulous elements can take advantage of circumstances and undermine the confidence of the people in democracy. You know as well as I do that these things have happened, and that even those countries which have a strong tradition of a democratic way of life are never completely free from this danger.

Car, il ne faut pas oublier que l'espèce humaine est encore à faire l'apprentissage de la démocratie. Lorsque l'on considère l'histoire de l'humanité, l'on est bien obligé de conclure qu'elle vient à peine de sortir de l'époque du despotisme, de l'autoritarisme, de l'arbitraire. Ce qui est plus grave, c'est que des nations entières n'en sont pas encore libérées. Au lieu donc de prétendre comme certains le font trop souvent que l'expérience démocratique n'a pas réussi, il convient plutôt de s'efforcer de vivre d'abord cette expérience. Rares sont, encore aujourd'hui, les pays où la démocratie authentique, comprise dans le sens où nous entendons habituellement ce terme, a pu être réalisée. Il n'y a à cela rien d'étonnant car, pour qu'elle existe vraiment, il faudrait que l'être humain réussisse à vaincre certains des automatismes, certains des comportements naturels qu'ont créés chez lui des siècles de lutte brutale pour la vie. Le souci du bien de la communauté, le respect de l'opinion des autres et des droits de ses semblables sont des réactions relativement nouvelles de l'être humain. D'aucuns diront que la nature humaine est telle que jamais la démocratie réelle ne pourra être intégralement vécue. Cela est bien possible, mais ce n'est pas une raison pour croire qu'on ne peut se rapprocher de cet idéal. Aucun médecin par exemple ne croit qu'il réussira à vaincre la mort; pourtant, aucun médecin n'abandonne la lutte pour la santé.

À l'heure actuelle, plusieurs nations jouissent de régimes démocratiques même imparfaits. Ce sont ces premières expériences de la démocratie qu'il faut s'efforcer de protéger, de faire comprendre et de rendre encore plus efficaces. Chaque peuple a sa façon bien à lui de vivre en démocratie. Ce régime de gouvernement, même s'il repose sur les mêmes principes fondamentaux partout dans le monde, s'actualise chez des peuples dont la culture, le tempérament et l'histoire diffèrent. Il n'existe pas d'après moi de comportement

démocratique unique et valable pour tous les pays; j'admettrai cependant qu'un même esprit, qu'un même idéal, avec tout ce que cela suppose, doit animer tous les régimes qui se disent démocratiques.

Je le répète, la cause de la démocratie n'est jamais définitivement gagnée. Elle demande une vigilance constante et ne sera authentiquement réalisée qu'à deux conditions essentielles. D'abord, il est nécessaire de promouvoir constamment la cause du parlementarisme et de se rappeler que celui-ci ne peut être sain que comme instrument de progrès pour l'ensemble de la communauté et non comme gardien des intérêts particuliers. En effet, le gouvernement doit s'efforcer d'augmenter le bien-être de toute la population; il ne peut être au service de groupes de pression qui canaliseront à leur avantage la législation qu'ils réussiraient à lui faire adopter. Lorsqu'une administration publique oublie ou néglige de se conformer à cette règle de conduite, elle éloigne le jour où pourra se réaliser un régime démocratique véritable.

Furthermore, public opinion should be well informed, wide awake and even exacting. I would say that this requirement is even more important than the former for the safeguarding of democratic institutions. When the people take no interest in the work of its government, when the legislation that is drawn up does not create any reaction that is either favourable or unfavourable, the administration feels alone and forgotten. Or rather, it feels that it is no longer being watched by those to whom it is responsible for its actions. The administration can easily get the impression that it is being left to work in its own way in a sphere of activity that is of no interest to anyone. I say that it is then that the danger of abuse becomes great; the party in power, particularly if it is not deeply convinced of the value of the democratic way of life, may end by no longer being able to distinguish between party and government. If this happens, favouritism, nepotism, the use of influence and arbitrary measures arise quite naturally, and the cause of true democracy loses ground. Every democratic government in the world is exposed to the risks that I just mentioned. The Government of Quebec is not exempt from these risks any more than those of the other provinces. Like them, the Government of Quebec is taking the necessary steps to ease the progress of true democracy. It is also doing its best to restore the dignity of public office, and to create, through education and culture, a better informed public opinion.

To me, it only seems right that a gathering such as the one that you are holding in our province should, in addition to strengthening the parliamentary system through your discussions and reflections, contribute to the enlightenment of public opinion. It will give, I am certain, to the people of Canada an awareness of the great advantage that the western peoples have of living under a form of government that respects fundamental human liberties. In one way, we become accustomed to it too easily. We forget the long hard road that the human race had to travel to get where we are to-day, and we also forget the long road that is still ahead.

As Premier of Quebec, I am particularly happy to have you here, because the government which I have the honour to direct is — at this very moment — bending every effort towards the building and strengthening of democratic institutions in the province.

Once again, I bid you welcome and express the fervent wish that your discussions will have met with all the success that their importance to our parliamentary form of government justifies.

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Hon_ Jean Lesage, Premier ministre le 3 août 1961]

Hier, j'avais le grand plaisir de vous souhaiter la bienvenue dans notre capitale. Aujourd'hui, je suis heureux

de vous accueillir à l'Assemblée législative. Comme Premier ministre de la province, je tenais à ce que vous visitiez notre parlement.

Il y a quelques semaines à peine, l'endroit où vous vous trouvez maintenant bourdonnait d'activité, Nous terminions une des plus longues sessions qu'ait connues la Législature. Elle fut, je crois, l'une des plus remplies et, – dois-je ajouter, sous peine de me faire accuser de vantardise – une des plus fructueuses.

J'aurais vraiment aimé que vous assistiez au moins à quelques-unes des séances que nous y avons tenues pour vous rendre compte par vous-mêmes de la façon dont elles étaient conduites. Si je m'exprime ainsi, c'est que l'administration provinciale du Québec évolue dans un cadre que les circonstances historiques lui ont donné sans qu'elle ait elle-même à en déterminer tous les détails.

Je m'explique. Comme vous le savez, la grande majorité de la population du Québec est d'origine canadienne-française. Il en est naturellement de même des représentants qu'elle élit. Cependant, notre régime parlementaire est de type britannique. On pourrait ainsi être porté à croire que, lorsque le député canadien-français siège à l'Assemblée législative, il se trouve à l'intérieur d'une structure parlementaire qui lui est étrangère et à laquelle son tempérament est mal adapté. Pourtant, tel n'est pas du tout le cas, car le peuple canadien-français a non seulement su s'habituer à des institutions d'origine britannique, mais il les a littéralement acclimatées.

La population les accepte d'ailleurs comme siennes. Personne par exemple ne songe à proposer que notre régime parlementaire soit radicalement modifié ou qu'il soit remplacé par un autre. Nous apprécions celui que nous avons parce qu'il a su permettre à notre peuple, même à l'intérieur d'une institution transplantée ici, de se gouverner comme il l'entendait et de se donner les lois qu'il désirait.

[There is nothing to be astonished about the fact that

the only population in North America of which the majority is Frenchspeaking was able to adapt itself to the British form of parliamentary government. History is full of similar antitheses, and particularly contemporary history, where population shifts take place so often and so frequently, and where communications are being speeded up more and more. The process of adaptation, for adaptation there ie, does not always take place without some difficulties, but it does, eventually, take place.

The most striking thing about French Canada is the almost total absence of these difficulties and sudden impulses that often appear when new institutions are established in a place where there is the ultimate possibility that they will

result in causing changes. I will not go so far as to say, as others have done before me by misquoting a saying and twisting its meaning, that we are « a people without history », but the fact is that we do not have « a history of violence ».

Historians and sociologists will probably see in this the result of the influence of British institutions on our people, institutions sufficiently flexible for people to become adapted to them little by little, but institutions, nevertheless, that are authoritative in their structure. On the other hand, I don't think

- that this is the principal reason for a growing people to have behaved so well. I believe, on the contrary, that it has seldom been necessary for us to resort to violence in

the course of our history. The French Canadians have been able to make the most of their rights and have been able to defend them through the workings of these same institutions that they adopted.

They learned to use the British form of parliamentary

government at the same time as they learned the meaning of the democratic way of life. They accept this form of government today, and in it they can see one of the reasons for their survival in this part of the world where they form only a minority. As for the democratic way of life, it is the crystallization of their innate sense of social and political justice. For amongst the French Canadians, injustice, oppression and arbitrary conduct have always produced what I would call an instinctive reaction. As a national minority, they understand minority peoples whose rights are knowingly or unknowingly neglected. I will even go as far as to say that they have a sort of natural instinct to sympathize first and foremost with the victims of what appears to be an injustice. Anyone who has had the experience of suffering injustice is able to associate himself, morally at least, with those nations of the world whose deep aspirations are not respected.

I could say a great deal about these « deep aspirations ». In French Canada we often speak about our own deep aspirations, and we are doing our utmost to realize them. We are equally proud of our cultural heritage and what we call our « own characteristics »; they give us a character of our own and make a definite contribution to that « Canadian accent » which distinguishes the citizens of our Canada from our neighbours to the south.

One of our characteristics which creates the greatest impression upon foreign observers is the way that Quebec's political life expresses itself, even within the framework of the British parliamentary system. I would say that we have remained « typically Latin ». We like political life and political struggle. Very few of our people remain indifferent to these two things, as

can be seen during the election campaigns that take place in our province from time to time.

As you know, the French-Canadian people like to argue, discuss, and exchange opinions. There is probably nothing that they appreciate more than freedom of speech, and they would find it very difficult indeed if they were deprived of it.

I firmly believe that the Members of Parliament share

this sentiment and react in the same way as their fellow citizens who elect them. Everybody agrees to the fact that the sittings of our Legislative Assembly are often very lively. Believe me, my friends, – and I speak from experience – there are members of each party who take it upon themselves to keep them that way: Those who have something

to say like to say it; those who do not agree there are always some who want to make sure that the public and their opponents know about it. There follows, as you can well imagine, exchanges — which are often noteworthy for the strength and originality of the expressions used. We like to prove, disprove, and convince the member opposite that he really should never have stood up to make proposals or to pass remarks which at least this is what every member believes – the truth contradicts so brutally! And there you are. When one is sure that one is right, – it is very difficult, in fact it is really heroic,

to have to wait patiently until someone who is making a long (and obviously wrong statement) has finished expressing his views. And then the old Latin spirit – always on the look out for an opening at any meeting of Quebecers – comes to the surface to make rejoinders or short interruptions which have the knack of turning the most pompous speeches into oratorical disasters.

In my opinion, we should not be misled by all this and say that the rules of parliamentary procedure are not respected in this province. We must accept the Latin temperament as it is and remember that the rules of parliamentary procedure were never designed to prevent Legislative sessions from being lively.

I really feel that by carrying on in this way, the French Canadian is showing to what extent he believes in democratic procedure and how much he has assimilated it. We see the same

phenomenon not only at political meetings but everywhere that public discussions are held. Everyone has the right to express his opinion, but each one of us must expect to be disagreed with.]

Des attitudes comme celles dont je viens de parler ne sont pas à mon sens étrangères à la conception que les Canadiens français ont de l'autorité. En effet, j'ai bien l'impression, si j'en juge par mon expérience de député et

de premier ministre et par celle de mes collègues, que celle-ci au Québec s'exerce d'un commun accord entre celui qui commande et celui qui exécute. Je veux dire par là que le Canadien français sera prêt à se conformer aux désirs de ceux qui détiennent l'autorité pour autant que celle-ci ne s'exercera pas arbitrairement et qu'il sera convaincu du bien-fondé de ce qu'on attend de lui. Avant d'agir, il demande en quelque sorte à être persuadé que les actions qu'on réclame de lui sont rationnelles et sont justifiées par un respect bien compris du bien de la communauté. Lorsque, au contraire, on veut lui interdire telle ou telle action, il

aime bien à savoir pourquoi. En d'autres termes, le Canadien français comprend mal l'obéissance aveugle; il n'est pas porté au fanatisme. Il prend difficilement au sérieux ceux qui lui semblent se prendre au sérieux: Il a moins le sens du solennel que celui de l'humain. L'homme politique du Québec, le personnage public, lorsqu'il est au milieu de ses concitoyens, se sent accepté d'eux moins comme représentant de l'autorité civile que comme ami. On sera enclin à le trouver d'autant plus sympathique, qu'il sera moins distant. On l'aimera d'autant plus qu'il se considérera l'égal de ceux avec qui il se trouve.

Je pense être justifié de dire qu'en général le héros désincarné et inaccessible ne plaît pas au Canadien français! Au contraire, ce dernier trouvera attachant l'homme honnête et dévoué, le citoyen qui, sans être parfait, a néanmoins le sens du devoir, de la responsabilité et de l'idéal.

[It seems to me that the French-Canadian people, in fact, come to realize that their form of parliamentary government encourages the broadening of these qualities amongst those of its citizens who are called to public life. It constitutes a framework within which the democratic way of life that they have assimilated has found a means of expression. Evidently, as I was saying a few moments ago, our people have transformed parliamentary government through their use of it. They have not transformed its spirit, but they have transformed its application, and have made it conform to

their own cultural characteristics.

Through our ability to adopt an institution such as this, as well as to appreciate the intellectual and material achievements of other nations, while at the time remaining resolutely faithful to our past, we too have become a modern nation. To-day we are proud of what we have succeeded in becoming. We can now hope that to-morrow, those who come after us will be proud of what we shall have permitted them to be.]