

3 août 1961, Québec

Accueil de l'Association parlementaire du Commonwealth (Section canadienne) à l'Assemblée législative

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 French speaking 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 is, 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.