

**Speech by Mr. Jean-Pierre Charbonneau  
President of the National Assembly of Québec  
and President of the Conference**

**Saturday, September 20, 1997, at 8:00 p.m.**

**Ball Room, Château Frontenac Hotel  
Quebec City**

It is a great pleasure to welcome you this evening to the Château Frontenac. You know, it is on this promontory overlooking the Saint Lawrence River that the residence of the representative of the King of France used to stand, and later that of the representative of the British Crown in what the Europeans then called the New World. The Château Frontenac is one of the jewels of Québec's architectural heritage. These halls in which we are gathered have witnessed events that have left their mark on the history of our community and, on certain occasions, on that of all humanity. It was here that Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, together with their military staff, met in 1943 and again in 1944. From these summit meetings were born the elements of a strategy that was to carry the Allies to victory.

These walls were also the theatre of another historic occasion. On October 16, 1945, with the aim of eliminating famine around the world, representatives of 44 States agreed, to create the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. Two years ago, the ministers of Agriculture and Development of the FAO member States met right here to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the organization.

I also imagine that after a certain time, people will remember that the first gathering of the parliamentarians of the Americas also took place within these walls, in order to discuss a fundamental issue: the foreseeable future of the 775 million persons whom they represent.

Before going further, I would like to take the opportunity, while you are all here this evening, to acknowledge and express my gratitude to all the financial partners of the Conference for the remarkable trust that they have shown in the National Assembly of Québec through their generous support of this gathering.

To the Governments of Québec and of Canada, to the leaders of private and public enterprises, thank you. Your invaluable and close collaboration is a significant gesture for us.

At this stage, allow me also to thank all the employees of the National Assembly who, in the course of their duties, assisted in the organization of our Conference in one capacity or another. Their professionalism and enthusiastic devotion have been remarkable and are worthy of recognition.

Finally, I would like to salute my predecessor, President Roger Bertrand, today Minister of Industry and Commerce for the Government of Québec. He was the first to believe in the value of this project proposed by the Interparliamentary Relations Section of the National Assembly. For my part, I have had the pleasure and the honour of orchestrating its organization.

The Parliamentary Conference of the Americas is already drawing to a close. Tomorrow, a wrap-up of the discussions will be presented to us, and together we will prepare the Closing Declaration. Although it is not yet time to assess matters, I would like to share with you a few impressions on what we have just experienced together: impressions gathered by chance as I went from place to place and during my conversations. First of all, I very soon felt that a convergence of viewpoints was taking shape and that elements of consensus were coming forward. The environment in which each of us lives is certainly unique, but it seems to me that a number of the steps that we can take for the advancement of our societies are common among us. That being the case, it becomes possible, together, to explore avenues of solution. This is what we have already undertaken to accomplish.

Upon the conclusion of these two days of deliberations, I also feel that each of us will return home richer than before, with a richness acquired in the course of our debates and during our pooling of experiences, a wealth of knowledge and new ideas — that enable us to progress as individuals; that we can draw on to better fulfill our role as elected officials and as representatives of the people, and also as servants of the State, as researchers, or as socioeconomic leaders.

Friends, it is becoming increasingly clear to me, as we approach the closing of the final curtain on the Conference, that this first gathering of the parliamentarians of the Americas is only a beginning. It also appears increasingly clear to me that it will be followed by actions, small and large, that we will take, inspired by a firm will to act. It appears increasingly clear to me, finally, that the Conference and its sequels will open the door to concrete and large-scale actions, not only with regard to the creation of a free-trade zone in the Americas and on the delicate management of the impacts of this process, but also with regard to other decisive issues for the development of our continent and of our peoples.

Among these issues, there is a fundamental one on which we have in fact already conferred at great length: democracy — that which already exists, and that which we wish to see appear, be consolidated, and flourish throughout our different areas.

And to speak of democracy is necessarily to speak of parliamentary systems, unless we think that the organization, operation and leadership of our societies can and must be done now and in the future only by elected monarchs. For my part, I am convinced that those of us here this evening all share the profound conviction that in spite of its imperfections and its occasional setbacks, parliamentary democracy still remains the best system ever invented for governing peoples.

Does this mean that because parliamentary democracy is present today, nearly everywhere in the Americas, that our societies are well governed? — and that our fellow citizens are well satisfied?

Can we in fact say that the democratic state of health of our countries is good, or at least acceptable?

Are the best existing democratic standards to be found in our Hemisphere?

And if so, are these high standards generalized?

Have violence and intimidation disappeared everywhere and given way to tolerance and peace?

Have abuses of power and abuses of policies, of all kinds and from all directions, on the part of business people, union leaders, the media or interest groups ceased even in the wealthiest and most materially developed of our societies?

Have corruption and favouritism been eradicated from all corners of our Hemisphere? Is our conduct as elected officials and leaders fully reflective of the ethical requirements that are inseparable from our positions and responsibilities?

Are the levels of information, of awareness building, of civic empowerment, of political commitment and of popular participation, for example in the processes of electoral choices and referendums, in keeping with the standards of the needs and requirements of healthy democracies?

In asking these embarrassing questions, like all of you in fact, I am essentially aware of the answers. I know, as do you, of the immense amount of work that remains to be done in order to make it possible for democracy, justice, prosperity and peace to flourish everywhere.

On the other hand, like yourselves, I am aware of the immense progress that we have accomplished on the path toward the democratization of our Hemisphere. In this regard, our presence for the past three days in Quebec City is both a great moment and a significant step.

History will recall, I hope, that the legitimate representatives of nearly all the populations of the Americas and its parliamentary institutions chose to be actors rather than passive spectators as concerns the building of the future.

We parliamentarians have all felt that our silence would lead to an inevitable erosion of our influence and of our legitimacy as representatives of the population; many social groups are already participating actively in talks on economic integration and on the renewal of inter-American cooperation. I sincerely believe that we should be glad of this openness, but — like yourselves no doubt — I am also convinced that parliamentarians must occupy the place that is naturally and legitimately theirs.

Thus, business people have held gatherings on the fringes of the meetings of the Ministers of External Trade of the Americas, which have been held every year since 1995. They make known to the Ministers their viewpoints and positions regarding the discussions leading to the creation of a free trade zone extending from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. They have formed a network, and using the new information technologies, they conduct a continuing dialogue and exchange strategic data and information. Their presence with us and the active support of a number of them for our initiative are indicative of this major commitment.

Labour organizations have also followed suit by participating in the last meeting of the Ministers of External Trade, last May in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. Non-governmental organizations devoted to environmental protection also grouped together and held meetings on the fringes of the Summit Conference on Sustainable Development in Bolivia in December 1996. They pleaded, before the governmental authorities of the Americas, for an economic integration and a liberalization of trade respectful of the biodiversity and the long-term requirements of development in the Hemisphere. Early this week, it was the turn of the Québec representatives of popular organizations to gather, and yesterday they formally submitted their grievances to us.

Friends, these networks that are being created, these meetings that are being held, reflect a willingness not to allow the specialists and our colleagues the Ministers to decide alone, behind closed doors, on the economic, social and cultural future of the 775 million individuals whom we represent.

As elected officials, our reading of reality is not necessarily the same as that of the technocrats, however competent and indispensable they may be.

We have the possibility of ensuring an attentive vigilance. For example, we may urge the negotiators to take into consideration certain decisive issues for the future of the populations, which might otherwise have been neglected.

It is our duty to question the finer details as well as the implementation framework of an eventual free trade zone of the Americas. It is also our duty to explain to our constituents the reasons that may provide a solid basis to justify such a project, as well as the advantages likely to result from it. We have the responsibility of being part of the process, open yet vigilant, active and influential.

This first gathering, as well as what will result from it, offers us this possibility.

It also offers us an excellent opportunity to prove to our compatriots, who have become so sceptical and cynical toward the political class, that parliamentary democracy more than ever has its reason for being, and that it must be everywhere and always at the centre of the fundamental debates and choices of society.

Guests, I now invite you all to raise your glasses in a toast to fraternity between the populations of the Americas and between the parliamentarians of our Hemisphere.

Thank you and good evening.