

TOWARDS THE AMERICAS OF THE YEAR 2005: DEMOCRACY, DEVELOPMENT AND PROSPERITY

Speech delivered during the Luncheon hosted by the Prime Minister of Quebec

**Speech by the Prime Minister of Quebec
The Honourable Lucien Bouchard**

Check against delivery

Mr. President,
Honorary Vice-Presidents,
Speakers of the assemblies and parliaments of the Americas,
Representatives of international organizations,
The Secretary General of the Organization of American States,
The Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean,
Representatives of the diplomatic and consular corps,
Mr. Mayor,
Government ministers,
Distinguished guests,

On behalf of the Quebec government and the Quebec people, I would like to welcome you to Quebec City, a United Nations World Heritage Site that is nearly 400 years old and the capital of Quebec.

I would like to congratulate the conference's organizers, in particular the President, Jean-Pierre Charbonneau, and the two Vice-Presidents, Messrs Facal and Ciaccia. The organization of such an event demands close attention to detail, energy and perseverance. You and the members of your team have every reason to be proud of what you have accomplished and of the success of the event, which reflects well on Quebec and its capital.

Parliamentarians from the Americas have not met for over a century to discuss a common challenge. Why? Because we were never before confronted with a change as important as the economic integration of the Americas.

This reason is crucial. Why, then, meet in Quebec, in the capital city of one of the smallest nations in the Americas, from the standpoint of population, that is, only 1% of the total, and the home of a people that speaks French, which is the least widely spoken language in the hemisphere?

Perhaps there are two reasons. In both the southern and northern hemispheres, we are all engaged in economic integration that is designed to enrich us. We have other resources. Each table here

represents identities, traditions and cultures that reflect the remarkable cultural and social diversity of the Americas. Whether we come from Calgary or Valparaiso, New York, Caracas or Montreal, each of us proudly bears our national traits.

The challenge of broader economic integration has raised a number of fears in our respective countries. One example is the fear of losing part of the regulatory, legislative and tariff measures which, for a long time, have been regarded as a guarantee of security.

There is undoubtedly an even more basic fear of the risk of the homogenization of national cultures. I am thinking in particular of the fear of witnessing the disappearance of part of the feeling of belonging that is essential to individuals and societies.

We must avoid exaggerating these fears, but we would be mistaken to overlook them.

Quebec is keenly aware of the precious nature of our identities. Our friends south of the border are the greatest economic and cultural power the world has ever known. Our Canadian friends have the advantage of speaking the same language as the Americans do. Our Spanish-speaking friends enjoy some degree of security because of their numbers. Our Brazilian friends are, by themselves, an economic and cultural power.

Quebec and the Quebec people are living somewhat dangerously. Quebec's economy cannot rely on the domestic market alone. We export 54% of our output. Our collective wealth depends on it. Consequently, we are the most fervent free traders in all of Canada. Quebec was the key player in Canada's participation in free trade with the United States, then under the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Quebecers' faith in free trade is contagious and is gradually winning over pragmatic, open-minded individuals. We supported the free-trade agreement signed by Canada and Chile and I have assured President Cardoso of Brazil of our support for an agreement with the Mercosur countries. Quebec is concluding agreements and engaging in trade with the New England and Great Lakes states, our main trading partners.

From an economic standpoint, Quebec is fully playing the integration card.

However, from a cultural standpoint, Quebec cannot rely on its numerical strength or the proximity of a French-speaking power. Our French-speaking Acadian neighbours to the east are thriving. However, it should be noted that Quebec is the only place in Canada where the proportion of French-speakers in the population is not declining. This has been true for the past 20 years, since we adopted the Charter that protects our language and culture.

From a social standpoint, each nation is meeting in its own fashion the challenges that are arising as the century draws to a close. There are no good or bad choices. Quebecers have made decisions that set them apart from some of their partners. As is the case elsewhere, we are eliminating our deficit, but our labour legislation, unionization rate, family policy, wage equity measures, and the partnership we have established between the government, businesses and the unions and community organizations all reflect a people that reasons in its own way. Mention

has been made of a Quebec model, although it must meet the criterion of competitiveness inherent in economic integration.

What does this mean? It means that the Quebec people, a French-speaking community of exporters who have devised a specific model, represent to some extent a test case for the integration of the Americas. We are a living laboratory of the trends that prevail in our respective countries.

Quebec lies on the border with its giant neighbour to the south and its trade with the rest of the continent is increasing rapidly. However, it is attempting to demonstrate that it is possible to preserve its cultural, social and political identity while broadening its relations with its neighbours. To act otherwise would be disturbing and would send a warning to all cultures.

What we are seeking is to prove that economic integration can be achieved, not by diluting the cultural differences that are the hallmark of the Americas, but, to the contrary, by bolstering what sets us apart and what unites us.

As you know, some people, such as myself, the members of my government and nearly half of the Quebec electorate, believe that Quebecers should go one step further in the twofold logic of integration and the bolstering of the national character by making Quebec a sovereign state, associated economically with its neighbours. Our friends in the Official Opposition do not share this opinion. We are debating the issue in one of the Americas' and the world's oldest parliaments, proud to participate in one of the most vigorous democracies in the world. Allow me to point out that 94% of voters took part in the 1995 referendum on sovereignty.

Here in Quebec, we are searching for the means to combine economic integration and the preservation of our social and cultural character. We know that you share this concern. Indeed, we share the same duty. That is why this conference is so valuable. Through it, we must pool our experience, compare our methods and broaden our thinking.

As the century draws to a close, globalization is an inexorable force. To attempt to resist it would be to fight a rearguard battle. I prefer the vision of Bolivar who, 150 years ago, convened the first pan-American congress. However, we must ensure that various peoples do not serve globalization, but that globalization serves the peoples concerned. That is why we are here today.

We can discuss together key issues such as democracy, human rights, employment, education and training, social protection, health, sustainable development, culture, language and communications. We have gathered here to share our experience. Quite frankly, we are here to steal from each other our best ideas. Among parliamentarians, this is quite legal.

One the eve of the 21st century, we are not alone in engaging in this type of discussion. However, we do have an advantage over the Asians and Europeans who are debating these issues. We are fortunate in being able to examine these questions with parliamentarians from the United States, that is, from the country that is the hub of globalization.

I am especially pleased that numerous American parliamentarians are participating in this conference. The stakes are not the same for you, although debate about the strength of national identities in an increasingly interconnected world concerns all of us equally.

In the United States, there is widespread debate on how to strike a balance between multiculturalism and the need for a solid core of national values and a strong national character. Even the question of an official language has become an issue, not only along the border with Mexico, but in New Hampshire as well. The impact on your economy of an expanding free-trade zone figures prominently in many political campaigns.

In the United States, you seem to be asking the very questions about cultural and economic cohesiveness that the other nations of the Americas have to consider because of your considerable strength.

Regardless of where they live in the Americas, parliamentarians need to examine this process. We must ask ourselves how to better achieve integration while preserving national identities and how the priorities adopted by voters can be achieved through the integration process. We cannot be passive in this regard.

One thing is certain: there are no easy answers. This conference affords us a remarkable opportunity to start examining these issues.

While our origins are different, we live on the same continent and have a shared past. We have had to master, settle in and adapt to these new territories. We have had to establish relations with the indigenous populations. We have also had to cast off the shackles of colonialism.

However, it is our future, more than anything else, which unites us. Business dealings in the Americas are proliferating. Goods and services are crossing our borders with ever greater ease. By the year 2005, economic issues will be of paramount concern in the Americas.

The remarkable outpouring of emotion sparked by the deaths of Princess Diana and Mother Theresa vividly reveal the need of various peoples for humanity. The economy and prosperity must serve humanity, not the opposite.

Politics is the art of giving people the means to achieve their hopes, enabling them to enjoy their rights and making them aware of their responsibilities. These hopes, rights and responsibilities are in our hands.

Let us strive together to ensure that integration allows for our mutual enrichment, of course, but also that it helps to advance civilization and humanity.

Thank you.