

Statement on the Election Campaign by William Johnson, President of Alliance Quebec

Monday, November 09, 1998 - Almost two weeks into the Quebec election campaign, English-speaking Quebecers find little to cheer. It is symbolic that there will be no debate in English between the party leaders, though English is the mother tongue of hundreds of thousands of Quebecers as well as being one of Quebec's two official languages.

Opinion polls suggest that the great majority of English-speaking Quebecers will vote for the Quebec Liberal Party and the candidates of its leader, Jean Charest. They will do so for one paramount reason: secession is the issue which matters most to them. Only Mr. Charest and his Liberals can defeat the Parti Québécois, and so prevent another referendum on secession within the next four years.

Given the block vote that Mr. Charest and his party are likely to receive from English-speaking Quebecers, his position with respect to the rights and legitimate interests of English-speaking Quebecers is of special interest. The Liberal leader summarized his policy when he was in Valcourt last Friday, as reported in *The Gazette* of Nov. 7 by Sean Gordon:

"Today's consensus on language issues was hard-won, and a Liberal government would do nothing to upset the status quo, Jean Charest said yesterday. "There's absolutely no question of coming back on that topic," Charest said....

"In the Liberal Party, we say very clearly that there is a consensus on the issue of language in Quebec and we are not going to change that consensus," Charest said at a morning press conference."

By speaking of a supposed "consensus on language," Mr. Charest used the same language as Premier Lucien Bouchard did on Oct. 1 when he summoned in the major store retailers to warn them not to put up English signs in their stores. The fact is, though, that innumerable polls have shown that there is no such consensus on language - or on the rights and interests of English-speaking Quebecers.

As one example among many, the following is from a news report by Hubert Bauch published in *The Gazette* last May 29:

"English-speaking Quebecers are strongly opposed to key aspects of the province's language law, notably the restrictions on access to English schools, according to a new poll commissioned by The Gazette. The survey, conducted last week by the SOM polling firm among Quebecers who speak English at home, indicates that even in the absence of any major linguistic confrontations in recent years, there is no English-French consensus on language as has been suggested by some politicians, notably new Liberal leader Jean Charest.

"The poll shows a strong majority of Quebec anglophones support positions that have been dismissed as radical by francophone politicians and the province's mainstream anglo political establishment. The findings include:

- Of those surveyed, 82 per cent favour freedom of choice in public education and unlimited access to English schools in the province.
- While two-thirds (65 per cent) think it is reasonable to require French on all public signs, 80 per cent believe that English or other languages should be allowed equal visibility, as opposed to the current law requiring French sign lettering to be twice as large.
- With respect to partition, 67.7 per cent agreed that if Canada is divisible, so is Quebec. Of these, 54 per cent agreed strongly with the partitionist principle, and support increased with the level of education of respondents."

What "consensus" can Mr. Charest be talking about? Clearly the reference to a fictitious consensus can be nothing but an excuse to avoid dealing with the real injustices which English-speaking Quebecers are subjected to, and which they have never accepted as fair or equitable. Nor is this repudiation of the status quo a new phenomenon. For instance:

- In April 1987, CROP asked: "Are you in agreement with the fact that French is the language of instruction for the children of immigrants in Quebec?" The answer of anglophones: 84 per cent disagreed.
- In April 1991, CROP asked: "Are you in agreement with the fact that French is the only language of instruction for the children of immigrants in Quebec?" This time, 89 per cent of anglophones disagreed.
- A CROP poll of April, 1991, showed that 79 per cent were against "the fact that French is the language of work in Quebec," 90 per cent were against "the fact that French is the only official language in Quebec," and 93 per cent were

opposed to "the policy of the Quebec government regarding commercial signs". (At the time, before Bill 86, practically all English on commercial signs was forbidden.)

In March, 1988, people were asked: "Is the issue of the language used in signs an issue in which you feel personally concerned?" Sixty-four per cent replied that they cared "a great deal" or "a lot."

On two other issues, which are evidently judged more important than language rights, Mr. Charest does respond to the interests of English-speaking Quebecers. His clear promise not to hold a referendum if he forms the government meets the wishes of most Quebecers of all ethnic origins, and particularly of English-speaking Quebecers. Moreover, his dismissal of any plans for constitutional amendments during the coming mandate responds to three conclusions derived from many experiences over the past 11 years:

- Quebecers are too ambivalent, too divided, to be able to embrace any stable constitutional settlement. They are able to say No to whatever amendments are negotiated, but are unable to give a stable Yes to an enduring constitutional package.
- The many futile attempts to reach a constitutional settlement over the past 34 years have led to increasingly bitter divisions and the radicalization of the Quebec electorate.
- The several constitutional proposals put forward by Quebec leaders all have had in common the objective of entrenching the spirit of the Charter of the French Language, with its intention of restricting and diminishing the place of English in Quebec.

For these reasons, English-speaking Quebecers must insist that any constitutional amendment that involves promoting Quebec's "distinct society" or "unique character" must at the same time recognize the English dimension of Quebec's history and identity as part of that distinctiveness. Otherwise, no constitutional amendment is better than any amendment that is likely to be proposed by Quebec's political leaders.

Premier Lucien Bouchard is the leader of a party committed to secession. The program of his party seems meant, above all, to blot out from Quebec's history, from its institutional structure, from its economic and social life, the English dimension that has been such an important part of Quebec's development. The PQ's program contains many proposals further to restrict

the use of English. Though the most extreme have not yet been put into effect by the PQ government, the resolutions which were adopted in convention to remove English as a common language must leave most English-speaking Quebecers disquieted. They send the clear message that English is not wanted.

In addition, Premier Bouchard has used the election campaign to carry forward his anti-Canadian crusade. It is not enough to propose to reject more than three-quarters of our fellow citizens. The premier goes further. He slanders Canadians in general, ignoring their signal contribution to Quebec's welfare. (Two economists from the University of Calgary have calculated that, during the 30 years from 1961 to 1991, Quebec received a net benefit of \$168 billion from the federation.) Instead of acknowledging such generosity, Mr. Bouchard spits out his spiteful sentiments, as in the following quotation printed in *Le Devoir* on Oct. 30.

"Quand est-ce qu'on va cesser d'envoyer la moitié de nos impôts à Ottawa et de faire gérer ces impôts par des gens qui ont des intérêts différents des nôtres, qui les gèrent par une majorité qui n'est pas la nôtre, qui vient nous contrecarrer dans nos décisions, qui vient nous bloquer, qui vient envahir nos compétences, qui vient discuter, nous faire perdre du temps, nous diviser, nous affaiblir, nous débiliter? Il faut que ça cesse."

Can one imagine a purer form of ethnic nationalism, with its obvious anglophobia?

The Equality Party, does not seem likely to play a major role in the election campaign, even though it has tailored its policies to respond to the interests and the demands of English-speaking Quebecers. The fact that it cannot prevent the PQ from coming to power, and its inability to garner votes in the French majority seem to be decisive factors in marginalizing it, even in the English-speaking community.

It is regrettable that Equality Leader Keith Henderson has seen fit, on more than one occasion, to attack the credibility of Alliance Quebec by suggesting that its course of action in suspending the boycott of Eaton was dictated by the interests of the Liberal Party, whether in Ottawa or in Quebec. The most recent example was an interview given by Mr. Henderson which appeared in last Saturday's *Le Devoir*, under the signature of Jean Dion. "La récente croisade pour l'affichage bilingue dans les grands magasins menée par William Johnson aurait pu servir de tremplin, mais elle a très vite été interrompue, "parce que le gouvernement fédéral, qui contrôle les finances

d'Alliance Québec, lui a dit de se taire", opine Keith Henderson, qui est candidat dans Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, dans une entrevue au Devoir."

This accusation is utterly false and unfounded. In 1992, the Chambers Task Force on English Education reported that "English-speaking Quebecers do not feel welcome or wanted in Quebec." The current election campaign, as it has developed so far, will do little to change that sense of alienation.

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