

Political Forum

Ottawa Report

Dream merchants prey on people's prejudice

Reading the news reports of the five Town Hall meetings I've just had, you can tell that people are still steamed up about Quebec, Meech lake and the constitution.

It seems a lot of people thought the defeat of the Meech accord last summer put Quebec back in the box and that we could all forget about French Canadians for a while. Meanwhile, in Quebec, that defeat has been festering for months now.

The result: Polls show about 65% of English-speaking Canadians will not accept any special deal for Quebec even if it means Quebec leaves Canada. Polls also show about 70% of Quebecois want to leave Canada if no special status is granted.

A great many people at my meetings greeted this with a shrug - comfortable in the inevitability now of a "final resolution to the Quebec question. "They've always wanted to go anyway," I was told more than a few times, "so why not just let 'em do it?"

For starters, no country ever got stronger or wealthier by getting smaller. Quebec accounts for more than a quarter of the whole economy. And if a country of 26 million people can't balance the books, how can we possibly do it

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by losing six million of those people?

You know, there are people here who think Quebec separation would make no difference to their lives - that the dollar wouldn't fall, or interest rates go up, or taxes spike higher. And there are Quebecois who believe they can have the emotional high of nationhood and yet the prosperity that has come from being part of Canada.

Both opinions are wrong. You can't suck and blow at the same time. You can't have the wealth that a united Canada has created (average Canadian household income: \$50,000), with one quarter of it carved out. You can't divorce yourself from Canadian

laws and still expect to enjoy that wealth.

Last week, in Quebec City, the prime minister said this: "Watch out for the dream merchants; those who say it's no problem to destroy a great country and rebuild it later; those who claim they alone can change the course of history."

Mulroney said it right - there are dream merchants out there, selling to people's prejudices, intolerances, regional loyalties and misconceptions.

In Quebec they tell the average people that independence would bring much and cost little. They spin the myth that the rest of Canada doesn't want them. They say that Quebec can only protect its French culture and language by leaving Confederation.

In the rest of Canada, the merchants tell us the break-up of Canada is inevitable. They say Quebecois never really wanted to be Canadians. They may even tell you there's a plot to have "the French" take over Canada. And they always speak of French being "rammed down the throats" of others.

I asked a woman at one of the meetings what she meant by that. It turned out she hates the French

label on her bran flakes box.

Mulroney also said this, in French: "My responsibility as prime minister of Canada is not to treat with kid gloves those who are set on destroying our country."

I hope most of you reading this agree, because I do. As your federal Member of Parliament I'm not about to accept Quebec separation. I'm not going to treat a declaration of independence with a shrug. And I refuse to accept the inevitability of that province leaving Canada.

Emotionally, I am committed to a Canada that starts at St. John's and ends at Victoria, without any holes in the middle. Economically, I expect a Canada which remains one of the biggest industrialized countries and does not shrink to the stature of Bolivia. Politically, I expect the people who live in Quebec to be part of the system that I am.

Yes, we have problems and the need to find solutions is obvious. But the break-up of Canada is not one of those solutions.

As the MP for Halton-Peel I will not accept it. And I hope you can back me.

Queen's Park Report

Laid-off workers offered assistance

This week's report deals with the announcement by Labour Minister Bob Mackenzie on January 24, 1991, about a plan to help the rapidly-growing number of workers devastated by job losses due to plant closures and layoffs. "We have a responsibility to everyone in Ontario to ensure a high quality of life is maintained - especially during these times of recession," announced Mr. Mackenzie.

Our government will put in place a five-point plan to assist these workers.

- \$7.5 million in new funding will be used for the coordination of services provided to laid-off workers through Labour Management Adjustment Committees. These committees are set up in firms faced with layoffs or closures and consist of representatives from labour, management and government. They are responsible for ensuring that laid-off workers receive the vocational counselling and academic upgrading they need to help them find new jobs. Employment and Immigration Canada has agreed that federal training and support programs will be readily available for workers referred to these programs by the adjustment committees.

- an additional \$25 million in new funding will be provided to create new programs to assist laid-off workers and enhance existing ones. These programs, which include literacy and basic skills development, are administered by the Ministries of Labour, Skills Development, Colleges and Universities, Educa-



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tion and Citizenship.

- to co-ordinate all government activities relating to assistance for laid-off workers, the Office of Labour Adjustment (OLA) will be created. Aside from funding to help laid-off workers find quality work, the Ministry plans a number of legislative initiatives. These form the final two elements of the program.

- the Wage Protection Fund, announced last October and outlined in a previous Queen's Park Report, will be established following consultations now underway. This fund is intended to protect workers who lose wages owed to them as a result of business insolvency, bankruptcy or abandonment. Legislation dealing with the fund is expected to be introduced during the spring session and, once passed, will be retroactive to October 1/90.

- the Ministry also plans a number of amendments to the Employment Standards Act which will improve protection for workers in such areas as the length of notice of termination,

payment of severance pay, and advance notice of technological change. Consultations with interest groups on these proposed amendments will begin in February and legislation will be introduced during the spring session.

"This five-point program is a direct response to the commitment that we, as a government, have to the people and the communities of Ontario," Mr. Mackenzie announced. "We are in very difficult times and are determined that the victims of the recession get the comprehensive assistance they need."

In a related announcement on February 4/91, Education Minister Marion Boyd stated that \$1.27 million in funding would be provided to twenty-seven workplace literacy projects throughout the province. Through the Ontario Basic Skills in the Workplace program, the Ministry will help a variety of organizations develop expertise in providing effective literacy training and basic skills training in the workplace. The funding will go to train literacy instructors, produce curriculum materials, and explore new ways of delivering programs.

Given the massive increase in the number of requests to Halton Region for social assistance, it is apparent that the recession has already had a severe effect upon the families and communities in this area. It is our intention to reduce the impact of the current economic conditions with measures such as the five-point plan to assist laid-off workers.

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