

Notes for a Speech by

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**QUEBEC: AN ASSET FOR CANADA AND
CANADIANS**

Government Motion

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Mr. Speaker

I welcome this opportunity to rise today to speak to a motion which goes to the heart of what it means to be a Canadian and a Quebecois. Today's motion is an opportunity to remind ourselves what is at stake for the Quebecois, but also for all Canadians.

The success of our country has not happened by accident and it is not something which can or should take for granted.

We think of Canada as a young country. A country, as has often been said, with more geography than history. It is therefore ironic that this young country should also be one of the oldest democracies and one of the oldest federations on the planet.

Canada represents a paradigm shift from the 19th century nationalism of the nation-state based on cultural, linguistic and ethnic homogeneity. Canada was premised on the concept of diversity as a permanent characteristic.

The Fathers of Confederation chose a form of government uniquely suited to expressing and accommodating regional, linguistic and religious diversity. The most important example of this diversity was undoubtedly the existence of the two major language groups. One of the major factors in the creation of Canada as a federation was the presence of Quebec. The founders of our country wanted to build a country which embraced our diversity.

Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald stated emphatically, "I have no accord

with the desire expressed in some quarters that by any mode whatever there should be an attempt made to oppress the one language or to render it inferior to the other; I believe that would be impossible if it were tried, and it would be foolish and wicked if it were possible."

Georges-Étienne Cartier stated in the Confederation debates, "We can not legislate for the disappearance of French Canadians from American soil, but British and French Canadians alike can appreciate and understand their position relative to each other...It is a benefit rather than otherwise to have a diversity of races."

From a historical perspective, we have a long tradition of dealing with the accommodations necessary in a society with two important language

groups. The federal structure is perhaps the most obvious, but by no means the only one.

In the context of a North America which is overwhelmingly English-speaking—the Canadian federation has had to provide the framework for an effective commitment to the continuity and survival of a French-speaking society centred in, but not limited to Quebec.

Today it is hard to imagine any other arrangement which could have served us so well. And which one hundred and forty years later is still a model for the world.

The challenge of accommodating diversity is perhaps one of the most difficult facing the world today. The recent debate in Quebec on what constitutes

reasonable accommodation for religious minorities is echoed in similar debates across the globe.

Diversity is a modern reality. Most states in Europe, Asia or Africa contain a variety of languages, religions and cultures. And many of the most successful in dealing with this diversity have chosen a federal system of government.

Looked at from a contemporary world viewpoint, it is the apparently homogenous states that are the exception. The nation-state, which implies the parallel occurrence of a state and an ethnic “nation”, is extremely rare. In fact, there are no ideal nation-states. Existing states differ from this ideal in two ways: the population includes minorities; and, they do not include all the national groups in their territory.

Today's Canada is a prosperous politically stable country because we have made diversity an asset rather than a problem. Canadians are able, as a result to make democratic choices based on a respect of human rights. Today, more than ever we understand that accommodating pluralism is not merely a political necessity but is also a source of pride and enrichment which reflect Canadian values.

Our capacity to adapt as a society and to build institutions that respond to demands of its citizens has served us very well. Federalism is the natural response to governing a large, demographically and regionally diverse country. With ten provinces, three territories, six time zones and bordering on three oceans-- Canada's regional diversity is obvious. Our diversity is also reflected in our two official languages. Almost all Canadians speak English (85%) or French (31%) and one in five also speaks a

non-official language. In Newfoundland and Labrador, 98% are English mother tongue, while in Quebec 81% have French as a mother tongue. While in Nunavut, 79% speak Inuktitut, a language spoken by less than one in a thousand Canadians.

Today, nearly one million Canadians report an Aboriginal identity. This is also a rapidly growing segment of our population.

Canada is increasingly urban and multicultural – in 2001 nearly 80% of Canadians lived in cities of more than 10,000 people. In today's Canada, immigration represents 41% of growth (2004) and new Canadians tend to settle in our major urban centres. Between 1996 and 2001, Toronto received more than 445,000 immigrants, 180,000 settled Vancouver and 126,000 in Montreal.

Beyond accommodating regional preferences and diversity, Canadian federalism has provided an environment in which complementary national, provincial and cultural identities have flourished. Federalism allows and encourages experimentation in political, social and economic matters.

Quebec is inescapably at the heart of the Canadian dream. Canada's values have been shaped by the challenge of understanding each other and responding to the presence of two major language communities with courage, generosity and sensitivity. Each successive generation of Canadians has had to face this challenge. The choices we have made express our shared hopes for the future of this vast land and has made us the envy of the world. Anyone who has traveled extensively outside our borders knows that Canada remains one of the world's most favoured nations. Our prosperity and

civility are the product of much hard work and cannot be taken for granted.

Canada is a pluralistic society not just because of the diversity in the make-up of the population—whether linguistic, cultural, ethnic or regional—but more importantly because we have come to understand that these differences contribute to our national community.

Across the country, Canadians work together in variety of ways to build a better nation than either group could build in isolation. As a result, Canada has become a model for other countries. In a world with some 6,000 languages and only 200 states, pluralism is the norm, not the exception. Success requires a uniquely Canadian talent, the ability to work together and transcend our diversity.

This vision of Canada as a nation inspired by generosity and tolerance, has repeatedly triumphed over the narrow ethnic tribalism. Canadians, in Quebec and across the country are proud of our successes. Our Canada includes a strong vibrant Francophone Quebec.

Canadians have every reason to be proud of our Francophone heritage, which is centered in Quebec and very much alive across Canada. It enriches our public life, arts and culture and is a source of cultural enrichment for millions of Canadians who speak French as a first or second language. Canada's diversity is a source of strength from which all Canadians benefit. Our respect for diversity has in no small manner contributed to the enviable reputation we enjoy throughout the globe.

This great country, with its new economic plan, Advantage Canada, unveiled last week by the Finance Minister, is fully assuming its role in world affairs and we stand on the best economic footing of any of the G7 economies. We are an emerging energy superpower and we are taking action to improve our environment. Mr. Speaker, we are building a country that is a formidable economic player in the world.

That is why, Mr. Speaker, I am proud today to speak in support of the Government's motion recognizing Quebecois as a nation in a united Canada.

Thank you