

# Clinton appeals for Canadian unity

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President Bill Clinton has demonstratively reaffirmed Washington's support for the unity of Canada, the US's northern neighbor and largest trade partner.

At the opening of the United States' new Ottawa embassy last Friday, Clinton voiced support for a "strong, united and democratic Canada." Then, in an address to a Canadian government-sponsored symposium on federalism held at Mont Tremblant, Quebec, the US president touted the Canadian federal state as an example to the world: "For two centuries you have shown the world how people of different cultures can live together in peace, prosperity and mutual respect, in a country where human differences are democratically expressed, not forcefully repressed."

Clinton's speech, which closed the International Conference on Federalism, was widely interpreted as a strong rebuff to Quebec's ruling provincial party, the Parti Québécois (PQ), which had sought to use the conference to make the case for Quebec independence. Calling for national minorities thinking of independence to ask "serious questions," Clinton delivered an unmistakable message to Quebec.

Before pursuing secession, said Clinton, a people should ask, "Is there an abuse of human rights? Is there a way people can get along if they come from different heritages? Are minority rights as well as majority rights respected?... How are we going to cooperate with our neighbors; is it going to be better or worse if we are independent or if we have a federalist system?"

"If every racial and ethnic and religious group that occupies a specific piece of land" seeks independence, continued the president, "we might have 800 countries in the world.... Maybe we'd have 8,000." Such a development, he declared, would threaten international cooperation and the world economy.

Canadian government officials and the press were quick to seize on Clinton's remarks, claiming they constituted a stunning rebuke to Quebec Premier and

PQ leader Lucien Bouchard, who had sharply criticized the Canadian federal system and Canada's treatment of Quebec in his welcome address to the conference.

But the US president's remarks were also clearly an attempt to give a veneer of coherence and principle to US foreign policy. Major military interventions by the US and its allies in the Balkans and now East Timor have been largely justified on the grounds of upholding national self-determination. At the same time, the US remains a strong ally of regimes, such as those in Turkey and Sri Lanka, that have waged violent repression and war against minority groups opposing systematic state discrimination, and Washington is generally strongly supportive of the nation-state system.

Certainly if Clinton applied his own question—(Is it going to be better or worse if we are independent or if we have a federalist system?)—to the former Yugoslavia, he would have to admit that Washington's support for Croatian and Bosnian independence was, at the very least, a catastrophic mistake.

Needless to say, none of the mob of reporters covering Clinton's speech asked the president to go beyond platitudes and explain the contradictions in Washington's invocation of national self-determination.

The giddy response of Canada's political elite to Clinton's speech underscores the depth of its anxiety over the future of the Canadian federal state. "Clinton buoys federal cause," proclaimed the *Globe and Mail*. The *Toronto Sun*, a right-wing tabloid that usually castigates and ridicules Clinton, ran a banner headline across its front page, "Vive le Canada libre." This was a reference to a 1967 speech by French President Charles de Gaulle that almost caused a rupture in diplomatic relations between France and Canada. Speaking from the steps of Montreal's City Hall, the French president voiced support for Quebec's secession, declaring "Vive le Québec, Vive le Québec libre! [Long live Quebec!

Long live free Quebec!]"

Although opinion polls continue to show that a majority of Quebecers oppose separation, Canada's political elite is haunted by the specter of another referendum on independence. In October 1995, the PQ fell only 50,000 votes short of obtaining majority support for negotiating a new partnership with Canada based on the recognition of Quebec as a sovereign state.

Primer Minister Chretien and the opposition Reform Party now routinely threaten that Quebec could be partitioned were it to secede from Canada's federal state. The federal Liberal cabinet is reported to be debating whether to introduce legislation giving the government of Canada a role in the writing of any future referendum question and/or stipulating that a majority greater than 50 percent plus 1 will be necessary for secession.

Taking advantage of diplomatic protocol which calls for a visiting head of state to meet with the premier of any province he visits, Lucien Bouchard demanded an audience with Clinton. He was allowed to meet with the US president for 20 minutes, but Ottawa exercised its right to insist that Canada's US ambassador, Raymond Chretien, who is also the prime minister's nephew, attend the Clinton-Bouchard meeting.

At the conclusion of his meeting with the US president, the PQ premier was anxious to proclaim his loyalty to Wahsington: "I told him ... that in any case ... no matter what the outcome of our internal political debates, whatever Quebec's political future, the United States will always find in Quebec an ardent partner in free trade and a very great friend."

Founded in 1968, the PQ once had radical pretensions, claiming to be a party fighting for the "national liberation of the Québécois" and having a "favorable prejudice" to the workers movement. But after gaining provincial office in 1976 and enacting discriminatory language laws that boosted the career prospects of the French-speaking middle class, the PQ moved sharply to the right and into open conflict with the working class.

Since becoming premier in 1996, Bouchard has presided over massive cuts to social spending and used draconian labor laws to quell worker discontent.

In the 1970s the PQ's founder, René Lévesque, routinely met with David Rockefeller and US diplomatic personnel to reassure them that the PQ was

no threat to the interests of Washington and Wall Street. In recent decades, the PQ's pro-US stance has become even more pronounced.

In a law adopted prior to the 1995 referendum, the PQ stipulated that an independent Quebec would belong to NATO, the North American Free Trade Agreement and other US-led alliances. Now many PQ leaders are urging Canada adopt the US dollar as its currency, believing this will reduce the leverage of its Canadian rivals on the Quebec economy and reassure its middle-class supporters that independence is not a radical program.

The Mont Tremblant conference, which was attended by leading political figures and academics from 25 countries, was also noteworthy for the ignorance of its Canadian participants. In their respective speeches to the conference, neither Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien nor Quebec Premier Bouchard could correctly identify the year in which the Canadian federal state was born, 1867.

Questioned by reporters, an MP from the PQ's federal sister party, the Bloc Québécois, singled out a speech by the Sri Lankan Justice Minister, Gamini Lakshman Peiris, as proof that whereas Canada's federal regime is "sclerotic," elsewhere federalism is "moving." The Peoples Alliance regime of which Peiris is part has continued the brutal 15-year war aimed at securing the Sri Lankan state's domination over the island's Tamil-speaking northern and eastern regions.

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