
Thoughts of a New Speaker

The first action of every new parliament is to choose its presiding officer who then gives a short address reaffirming the traditional role of the speaker. The following is a slightly abridged version of the acceptance address by the new President of the Quebec National Assembly

by Jean-Pierre Saintonge

As I prepare to assume this office, to which many aspire, I do so with mixed feelings of apprehension, pride, perhaps even temerity, but above all with an immense respect for the women and men whose deliberations I shall direct, for the institution they renew here a thirty-fourth time, and for the citizens whom they represent. ...

You may be certain that I understand and undertake this responsibility with all the earnestness and devotion of which I am capable, for I have always believed that the respect in which a people holds its parliament owes much to the esteem which is accorded its President.

Upon his election as Speaker of the House of Commons in London in 1884, Arthur Wellesley Peel stated: "I know how necessary it is for any man, who aspires to fill that great office, to lay aside all that is personal, all that is of party, all that savours of political predilection, and to subordinate everything to the great interests of the House at large."

I solemnly pledge that this vow of impartiality, which I make my own, will guide my every action.

But the duties of those who guide the proceedings of an Assembly such as ours, whether as President or as Vice-President, do not stop there. Upon their shoulders also weighs the obligation to facilitate, so far as is possible, the consideration of each matter; to allow every Member to express his or her opinion, so long as the rules of decorum are observed and no time is wasted and to see that the matters submitted to the Assembly for its consideration are dispatched in an orderly fashion.

He who assumes the Chair thus becomes the appointed defender of the rights and privileges that, on September 25 last, the people of Quebec granted severally to all Members of this Assembly, whether they belong to the government majority, speak in the name of a party in opposition or sit as independents. This concern of each and every one of you will at all times be uppermost in my mind.

In return, I shall insist upon the strict observance of decorum and the rules of procedure. For some years now, the eminently democratic institution we have the privilege to be a part of, and which is the envy of peoples the world over, has become the object of growing disenchantment among our own population. We shall leave to political scientists the task of elucidating the extrinsic causes of this phenomenon.

Let us acknowledge among ourselves, however, that our speech and our demeanour have not in all circumstances evinced a depth and a gravity befitting the magnitude of our charge and the expectations of those who have entrusted it to us.

Indeed, the public image of our National Assembly is all too often that of an institution which stands paralysed as its Members engage in partisan quarrels. It is, of course, normal and natural in a democratic Assembly such as ours for us to diverge in the programs we hope to implement, the ideas we defend, even the concept we hold of our society. But differ though we may, let us nevertheless remain vigilant, lest we make of these precincts a rostrum from which to vent sterile rivalries.

Our Assembly will have gratified fully the hopes to which it gave birth nearly 200 years ago only if, far from providing a medium by which to advertise our personal differences, it remains a forum whose enlightened and productive debate proves indispensable to the life of our nation.

I am convinced that the pluralism of the National Assembly constitutes a factor for Quebec's enrichment, not a hindrance to its progress. For my part, I intend to devote myself unstintingly to the task that is before us. I shall succeed provided that the office of President remains independent of all partisan influence and that its decisions do not serve as a pretext to impugn its neutrality. As Peel said upon his re-election in 1892: "Without the support of the House a Speaker can do nothing; with that support there is little he cannot do."

Jean-Pierre Saintonge is President of the Quebec National Assembly.