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Quebec's International Role

OTTAWA MUST ACKNOWLEDGE THAT IT CANNOT CLAIM TO SPEAK FOR QUEBEC IN AREAS WHERE QUEBEC HAS JURISDICTION

- Gilles Duceppe

Ottawa, Monday, April 10, 2006 – “Ottawa cannot claim to represent Quebec when it comes to negotiating and signing treaties in areas where Quebec has jurisdiction unless Quebec has specifically authorized it to do so. This is a necessary premise for defining Quebec’s role in international forums. Canada must acknowledge the international application of Quebec’s jurisdiction by making an unequivocal statement and then standing by that statement,” Bloc Québécois Leader **Gilles Duceppe** said today during a press conference. Duceppe was accompanied by Foreign Affairs critic and MP for La Pointe-de-l’Île, **Francine Lalonde**.

The Bloc Québécois Leader called on Prime Minister Stephen Harper to immediately begin the process that will enable him to honour the many commitments he made during the election campaign regarding respect for Quebec’s jurisdiction and the application of that jurisdiction outside Canada.

The right to negotiate, sign and ratify

“Changes are needed to ensure that the federal government recognizes the international application of Quebec’s jurisdiction in the areas identified in the Constitution, including health, education, culture, domestic trade, labour and such civil law matters as adoption and key issues related to human rights,” **Duceppe** said.

In that context, the Bloc Québécois Leader noted that, in keeping with the Gérin-Lajoie doctrine, the role it plays must give Quebec the authority to negotiate and sign international agreements directly in its own name when those agreements pertain to its areas of jurisdiction. Quebec must also be able to establish its own relations with foreign countries. International adoption is one example that springs to mind.

The right to express its views and give its consent

The Bloc Québécois insists that in international discussions held in a framework where there can be only one Canadian delegation, Quebec be given the right to express its views whenever its jurisdictions or responsibilities come into play. Whether it is an area of exclusive jurisdiction or shared jurisdiction, such as the environment, transportation or international trade, Quebec must be able to determine by itself the positions it wishes to see defended.

“In international negotiations that have an impact on Quebec’s specific areas of jurisdiction or responsibility,” Bloc Québécois Foreign Affairs critic and MP for La Pointe-de-l’Île, **Francine Lalonde**, said, “the federal government cannot defend a position unless it has been mandated by Quebec to do so. In the absence of a mandate, it must abstain from any vote as Belgium does in such circumstances.”

“Under the current system, all of the provinces have to agree to implement a treaty or convention between Canada and another country before the convention can come into force. Without the agreement of Quebec and the other provinces, Canada cannot ratify any agreements it signs. What the Bloc Québécois is proposing for Quebec is the right to express its views and negotiate before, rather than after, which would respect Quebec’s areas of jurisdiction and facilitate coordination in negotiations,” the MP added.

Participation in international organizations

“During the election campaign, Stephen Harper clearly undertook to give Quebec a role in UNESCO similar to its role at the Francophonie summit. We now know that he should have done his homework before promising the impossible. Stephen Harper cannot honour his word because UNESCO rules do not let him. In order for Quebec to play such a role, it would first have to become a sovereign state. Quebec will not be content now to be nothing more than a bit player,” said **Duceppe**.

Whether the organization is UNESCO, the WHO or the ILO, the Bloc Québécois proposes that Quebec be given a statutory role in cases where Canada can have only one representative when Quebec’s specific jurisdiction or responsibilities are involved.

“Quebec’s representative would thus be able to participate on all levels in preparations, discussions and negotiations and present Quebec’s position. In the event of disagreement, Quebec could defend its own point of view, and Canada would have to abstain from voting or making any commitments unless it had Quebec’s consent,” **Lalonde** went on to say.

Enable Stephen Harper to honour his commitments

“Prime Minister Harper made serious commitments that are dear to the hearts of Quebecers. He now has a responsibility to deliver the goods. Quebecers are a people and a nation. Quebec must be able to fully exercise its own authority both at home and on the world stage. The Bloc Québécois will contribute, as it is doing today, by asserting Quebec’s demands,” added **Duceppe**.

Duceppe noted, however, that the Bloc Québécois’s proposal at most enables Stephen Harper to honour his commitments. “The proposal we are making will prevent the federal government from defending in international forums positions that are contrary to the interests of Quebec in areas affecting Quebec’s areas of responsibility. But it will still be very hard for Quebec to put forward positions in areas where, because they are of little concern to Canada, Ottawa has chosen not to take part in the discussions. Moreover, the federal government will be able to continue acting alone in areas where it has exclusive jurisdiction. Only through sovereignty will Quebec be able to take its rightful place on the world stage and bring all its potential to bear in order to promote both its own interests and its vision of the world,” **Gilles Duceppe** said in closing.

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