THE FRANCOPHONE SUMMIT

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Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to bring greetings from the Government of Quebec to the International Communication Association, to the Canadian Communication Association, and to L'Association de la Recherche en Communication du Québec. We are pleased that you have chosen to hold your annual meeting in Montreal and we hope that your visit here is a great success.

It is no coincidence that Canadians have thought long and hard about communications issues, and that some of us have made notable intellectual contributions to the development of your field. We have had to respond to the challenge of building a national consciousness across a vast and sparsely populated geographical space, and that in the face of a very much larger and very dynamic neighbour to the south. We have also had to respond to the challenge of preserving a French language and culture based in Quebec and very much in the minority in North America. The prospect of assimilation on the morrow concentrates the mind wonderfully on communications, if I may paraphrase Dr. Johnson. So it is that in Canada, your deliberations have even greater policy interest for our governments than would be the case in many other western countries.

Indeed, for the good reasons of domestic policy which I evoked just now, communications issues loom very large even in our foreign relations. It occurred to me that you might be interested in tracing those concerns in the emergence of a major international institution whose very organizing principle is a language, a means of communication. I refer to the summit of French-speaking nations, or Francophone Summit.

It is not difficult to build an elementary taxonomy of international organizations premised on the organizing principles which have animated sovereign nations to group together over the last fifty years or more: common defence interests (like NATO, NORAD, or The Warsaw Pact), trade and economic development (OECD, EEC, COMECON), regional interests (ASEAN, OAS), common ideological or religious commitments, and so forth. To build such a taxonomy is to enumerate the moving forces of geopolitics in the twentieth century. It may therefore be instructive to examine an institution which constitutes an exception in its premises, an international organization of
heads of government whose common characteristic is the French language and
the culture which springs from it.

The Francophone Summit

The idea of such a summit was first expressed in 1966 by Leopold
Senghor, the then president of Senegal. However, due among other things to
the difficulties presented by the participation of a sub-national government,
that of Quebec, in the summit, the first actual summit meeting did not take
place until February 1986 in Versailles. In the interim a secretariat called the
Agence de coopération culturelle et technique was established. An international
steering committee works with the Agence to oversee summit programming in
five sectors:
- energy
- agriculture
- culture and communications
- language-based industry
- scientific and technical relations

Working groups from each of these sectors reported to the second summit,
held in Quebec City in September of this year, on the progress achieved to
date. One point which merits attention is the participation of almost all
Francophone nations. A world language originates inevitably from a mother
country, often one with a colonial past. Sensibilities in that regard are never
far from the surface. Nevertheless, the former colonies are very much a part
of the summit. Habib Bourguiba, President of Tunisia, has said:

Language makes for a remarkable relationship, one that goes beyond
ideological grounds. It helps to make us fully developed individuals
within the community of free nations.

The essential goal of the Summit is to promote the French language. This
is a goal with which many can feel an instinctive sympathy, but it is not the
kind of goal which normally moves head of government to high profile
international engagements or national treasuries to make significant financial
commitments.

The Francophone Summit ought to be understood as a recognition of two
fundamental demands upon governments with French-speaking citizens. First,
that the development of the language and of the culture—or cultures—which are
grounded in it, will require explicit and co-ordinated action by governments.
Second, that the development of the language and culture cannot be undertaken
without explicit attention to its economic and technical environment; in other
words, that a language without an economic or technological base is likely to be
condemned over the long term to folkloric status.
Culture, Economy, Technology

Ensuring the continued growth of a language and culture is very much a matter of providing the indispensable economic and technological infrastructure. In a speech at the opening of the first Francophone Summit in February 1986, the Premier of Quebec, Robert Bourassa, opportunely noted:

We have learned, and we increasingly realize with each passing day, that true development can only be on a comprehensive level. There is no social progress and cultural growth without a strong and health economy, ...without the mastery of the new technologies of information and communication.

Our sense of the indivisibility of language and culture, on the one hand, and economy and technology, on the other, owes much to our analysis of the development and impact of popular culture, particularly electronically-borne popular culture. It is a phenomenon that is more than familiar to you, so I shall not belabour it.

Suffice it to say that the electronic media— the cinema, the radio and recording industries, television—are the most powerful vehicles for popular culture in the world today. They have three characteristics which help explain their revolutionary impact:

1. They are far more accessible, both physically and intellectually, than printed material or the visual arts. They require less effort, less literacy, less education;

2. Cinema and television, and through them, the recording industry, benefit from an industrial organization which exploits important barriers to entry and economies of scale and scope;

3. Technological developments continuously improve their capacity to penetrate markets and render national sovereignty progressively less relevant to the development of popular culture.

The lingua franca of electronically-borne popular culture is English. This popular culture is in the process of transforming national cultures in countries other than the United States from a collective possession to the carefully tended franchise of paid professionals. The process has reached different stages in different countries, but in any event, the popular culture of the late twentieth century is becoming more and more homogeneous, less and less respectful of political borders. National particularism resides less and less in the habits and cultural patrimony of millions of national subjects. It clings to a precarious existence, essentially in the hands of the professionalized elite. This elite's principal claim to support and resources is that it speaks for the nation, a
nation whose presence in the popular culture of its people is under constant assault.

Unity or Diversity?

The power of the electronic media results in the erosion of national popular cultures—which, a century ago, were highly differentiated. They are replacing them with a relatively homogeneous popular culture of essentially American origin. Are we better off? Has homogenization helped to further international understanding? The Judeo-Christian mythology of the tower of Babel suggests that the proliferation of languages is a curse, sent by heaven to punish arrogance. This would not be my view of the world, nor is it the spirit that animates the Francophone Summit. Unravelling the culture that a people has woven for itself throughout its history seems to me a tragedy. Diversity of language and culture is surely a source of wealth and progress.

Before the first Francophone Summit, Javier Perez de Cuellar, the Secretary General of the United Nations, sent this message to the participants:

L'organisation des nations-unies ne peut que se féliciter de mouvements tels que la Francophonie. C'est avant tout à ceux qui ont eu le privilège de parler français dès l'enfance qu'il appartient de défendre ou plus exactement de faire vivre leur propre langue. Ce n'est pas un combat dirigé contre une autre langue, mais plutôt contre la facilité, voire la paresse intellectuelle. Au dela de la pureté, c'est le génie d'une langue qu'il importe de préserver.

Several decades before, Alfred North Whitehead had been even more explicit in Science and the Modern World:

The differences between nations and races of mankind are required to preserve the conditions under which higher development is possible. A diversification among human communities is essential for the provision of the incentive and the material for the odyssey of the human spirit. Other nations of different habits are not enemies. They are godsend. Men require of their neighbours something sufficiently akin to be understood, something sufficiently different to provoke them, and something great enough to command their admiration.

The Francophone Summit, then, involves not only the promotion and development of French, but also of the notion of a linguistically pluralistic world. Furthermore, as Perez de Cuellar pointed out, the spirit of the Francophone Summit is not hostile to the English language nor to American popular culture per se. It stands, however, for the possibility of choice, for the potential which diversity offers.
The Situation of Quebec

You will not be surprised when I remind you that what is at stake in the Francophone Summit is of absolutely fundamental interest to the Government of Quebec. It is no accident that the Government of Quebec has a Minister of Communications and a Minister of Cultural Affairs for whom the development of French and the omnipresence of American popular culture in Quebec are matters of continuing and very practical concern. To understand fully why we are preoccupied with such phenomena, a little history is required.

Quebec has a population of over six million people—about the size of a medium-size state. Of that population, about five and a half million speak French. They are virtually all descended from about ten thousand French settlers who had arrived in North America by the beginning of the eighteenth century. To imagine the odds on the emergence of a people from this tiny handful of a few thousand settlers is to understand the existential character of Quebec politics. How to be French-speaking in North America? How to combat the most fundamental forces of social evolution: demography and economics? How to live side-by-side with two hundred and fifty million English-speaking North Americans, without becoming one of them?

Francophone Quebeckers have refused to accept the logic of history. They have cheated the sociological odds. Their institutions and their collective life have been marked by an overriding preoccupation with survival as a distinct society. In the seventies and eighties, popular culture has emerged along with demography and technology as one of the principal battle-grounds for linguistic and cultural survival. Quebec is a classic case of a peripheral society struggling to retain a distinctive culture for the mass of its citizens while bearing the full brunt of American cultural marketing. Its citizens want the most popular of foreign cinema, television, and popular music but they also very much want high quality indigenous products. They want to have their cake and eat it too.

It undoubtedly seems bizarre to Americans, though not to those in this audience, that cinema, television and popular music are subjects of sustained political interest and debate in Quebec and in many other countries. I have tried to suggest that the industrialization of popular culture and the efficient operation of entertainment markets have had and will continue to have a homogenizing effect on the content of that culture and a centripetal or concentrative effect on its production. In the last thirty years, popular culture has become big business, generally big American business.
Quebec and the Summit

Quebec's and Canada's concerns in this regard are merely a microcosm or a precursor of the concerns of many other countries. For the French speaking countries, the Francophone Summit provides a mechanism for developing Francophone popular culture in the electronic media by increasing market size through cultural trade and co-production and through exploiting innovations in communication and information technology. French is spoken on five continents, by some tens of millions of people. The 1986 Summit, for example, brought together forty-one countries defined as Francophone to one degree or another. First there are countries like France and Monaco, for whom French is the only language. The next are the countries of the "French diaspora," in which French is one of the official languages: Canada, Belgium, Luxemburg, Switzerland and Haiti; certain of the countries of North and black Africa; some Asian countries and islands of the Indian Ocean. Finally, we have the regions where French exists as a language of culture.

After France itself, Quebec is the centre of the second largest concentration of French speakers in the world. It is this fragmentation of Francophone markets which the summit must begin to attack. Two good examples of the communication and information projects which fit into this scenario and are among summit priorities are Television 5 and French language software. Television 5 is a satellite broadcast system presently available in Europe and coming to North America early next year. It involves the governments of Quebec, Canada, France, Belgium and Switzerland and features the best of French-speaking television from those jurisdictions. The arrival of Television 5 in North America, combined with revolutionary changes underway in broadcasting in France, promises to add a vital new component to the Canadian broadcast scene. I may add that some of the partners in Television 5 are most interested in exploring the possibilities of an American market for our francophone programming.

A second priority of the Francophone Summit is in the area of French language software. The dominance of English in software markets is well-known and translations or clumsy adaptations for French-speaking users are common. Our concern is to select promising market sectors to ensure that software continues to be developed in French. Incidentally one of the areas in which we in Quebec specialize is the development in French of software whose internal structure is conceived for multilingual adaptation. In both of these priority areas, where the cultural stakes are high, we recognize that government initiative is necessary, that new technology offers us opportunities as well as problems, and that neither initiative will succeed unless it is capable of meeting the test of markets in the medium term. Here, we see clearly the tripartite
logic of culture, economy and technology which underlies our commitment to the Summit.

Postscript

In conclusion, perhaps you will permit me a brief postscript of a personal nature. The premise of a Francophone Summit is the premise of a culture based on language. This culture is being eroded by a popular culture based on the image and the tune. But isn't the case of the French-speaking nations in this regard simply a special case of a problem facing all western cultures? Isn't the problem of the quality of language a universal one? He who thinks well speaks well. The impoverishment of a language leads to the impoverishment of the civilization of which it is the vehicle. It seems to me that we are being seduced by the electronic media and by the images and tunes they purvey.

The hegemony of the image and the tunes erodes language. Their passive consumption truncates cultures. Perhaps the analysis of those of us who have a special commitment to the French language may not be without interest to those of you who are beneficiaries in good standing of the cultural metropolis. English is also vulnerable. In any event, I find an unlikely but very distinguished ally in Stephen Spielberg. In his recent Oscar acceptance speech, he said:

*Most of my life has been spent in the dark, watching movies. Movies have been the literature of my life. The literature of Irwin Thalberg's generation was books and plays: they read the great words of great minds. And I think that, in our romance with technology and our excitement at exploring all the possibilities of film and video, we have partially lost something that we now have to reclaim. I think it is time to renew our romance with the word. I am as culpable as anyone at having exalted the image at the expense of the word. But only a generation of readers will spawn a generation of writers.*

I think there is matter here for reflection for all of us.