

COALITION FOR QUÉBEC'S FUTURE

While we come from various directions and belong to different political groups, we all share a common belief: Québec can and must do better.

We see Quebec hesitate and stand around, getting increasingly stuck, unable to face the challenges at the onset of this new millennium. Of course, some Quebec entrepreneurs, artists and scientists are successful around the planet. However, it is here, at home, collectively, that we must rekindle our desire to move forward. Our nation cannot afford to allow the current situation to fester, a sure way to emphasize the slow decline already showing in Quebec.

Our current problems are well documented and have been widely discussed: excessive high school dropout rates, especially among boys, collective wealth below the North American average, overwhelmed public services, increasing difficulty in integrating immigrants, only to mention a few. We've stopped counting the reports suggesting solutions, but the will and courage to implement them never seem to show up.

This situation has contributed to spreading gloom and a certain amount of defeatism in our society, along with a clear lack of interest in the public thing. Mistrust and cynicism towards our institutions then settled in, fed by a tenacious impression that the system does not work in the public interest. Nothing solid can be built on such foundations.

The turnaround must start with a return of confidence; trust in ourselves and in our future, in our capacity to change the course of things. Our turnaround also requires an accurate assessment of the situation. While we have our share of problems, we also hold substantial assets. In the past, we have shown to what extent Quebec can evolve quickly when the vision is clear and everyone pitches in.

Nostalgia, however, leads nowhere. We need to face the music: the situation in Québec and our challenges – social, economic, cultural or environmental – are different from those we faced 50 years ago, at the onset of the Quiet Revolution. The old ways, even if they generally served us well then, do not fit current needs. We must implement solutions that are better adapted to today's reality to put Québec back on track, to regain the collective impetus to move forward and give our society the spark needed to reach its full potential.

Our leaders must act boldly and courageously to trigger the needed changes. To do so, our elected representatives must regain the ability to work together, with mutual respect and civility, to convince our fellow citizens that the public debate is not only a sterile chaos of altercation.

By taking the floor, we wish to convince Quebecers about the urgent need to act and participate in the outlining of solutions to implement. Other documents, more detailed, will follow this one. We wish to open a dialogue among the population. If we have some ideas about the direction to take, we are far from holding all the answers. This is why a web site is being launched today. It will allow the webcasting of our ideas in order to invite discussion. We also hope to meet those who wish to do so in the coming months.

Two main objectives guide our approach.

First objective: solidify the foundations of our society

Despite the remarkable success of a large number of citizens, the Quebec society has lost its landmarks and self-confidence. How did we get to this point? Among the various reasons, our lack of ability in finding a rallying solution for the national issue has played a major role. After many years, our society is still affected by this fracture that weakens us as a whole. However, a fact remains: above the division between sovereignists and federalists, Quebecers are nationalists in great majority. They are deeply attached to the singular destiny of their homeland, this Québec, rooted here for more than four centuries, having overcome so many hardships. It is on this basis that we believe it is possible to rally Quebecers.

We must walk away from denial and really assess the grounds at the constitutional level. Unless unexpected events occur, neither a constitutional renewal that would satisfy a majority of Quebecers, nor sovereignty will come true in a foreseeable future. This being said, even if the constitutional status of a State is important, it is not the only determining factor in our future. The national issue's dead-end must therefore not prevent us from offering those who will follow us a dynamic and prosperous Québec, always master of its destiny.

Québec is a nation made up of all those who choose to live here, whatever community they come from. Events that have shaped our history and are engraved in our collective memory have nevertheless contributed to the creation of a strong shared identity, the blossoming of characteristic values and culture. Like all nations, ours is thereby the product of its inhabitants and its history.

The presence for more than 400 years of a Francophone majority on our territory makes Québec a unique nation in America. We can't deny the fundamental character of the French language in the definition of our society. It brings us together and differentiates us. It must be the cornerstone on which to build our common identity and the central element of our community. Without denying the priceless value of mastering other languages, using French must be encouraged and valued; immigrants must learn it to fit in.

The role of citizens in our society must also invite collective reflection. We are all responsible, individually and collectively, for the future of Québec. In our daily actions, each one of us must be aware of the importance of one's contribution, balance personal and common interest, and not hesitate to invest some effort for the benefit of future generations.

At the same time, it will be necessary to offer citizens a guarantee that their government is taking the interest of the people at heart rather than that of special interest groups. The trust we referred to earlier relies on this, and it is imperative to regain it. This will be achieved not only through the elected and their work, but also through the appreciation of the public service. As for the leaders in our society, whether actively engaged in political, economic, scientific, cultural or community environments, their role must extend beyond recognizing the status of the Quebec situation. They must act with the interest of the Quebec society strongly in mind.

Second objective: propose a rallying plan of action

The challenge in Québec to complete major projects or reforms has been highlighted many times. When a daring idea is put forward, doubt, mistrust and hostile reactions are prominent. It is true that what is offered to Quebecers is not always within a global and coherent plan of governance. It is difficult to convince fellow citizens to accept demanding objectives without a shared vision and ambition.

We have identified four major fields of action that, in our opinion, would allow us to rally a majority of Quebecers and move our nation forward. We will share our ideas in more detail later, but we already wish to outline a few leading points.

1) Our absolute priority: education

Upgrading the quality of the education must be THE priority in coming years, fearless before the radical turnaround and changed that must be adopted. A quality education is not only a powerful tool of individual development, but also a guarantee and condition for collective success in today's world.

It is not the number of workers or the low-cost manpower that will allow a society like ours to compete internationally. If Québec is to maintain its position among nations with a good standard of living, it will be because of the quality of training of its citizens, their creative genius, and their aptitude to adapt to constant evolution in the world.

Québec's language, culture and identity will also be ensured by the quality of the education. Schools may certainly be an important tool for individual development, but it is especially a powerful factor for strengthening the social fabric. It is therefore capital to give our schools the means to play their critical role.

The education project we wish for Québec has a double objective: develop a solid general culture for all citizens, and train a labour force well equipped to succeed in the new world context. Measures must be adopted to return to the essence of the act of teaching, giving back to the acquisition of knowledge the first place for young Quebecers. We have to focus on what they will need their entire life, forgotten for too long: reading, writing, counting, etc. We should not be afraid to insist on effort, perseverance and respect, without which true learning is impossible.

We believe that one of the keys to success in this area can be found in giving more value to the teaching profession. As much for the knowledge and skills they impart to our children as for their role as guides or models, teachers play a major role in the development of our children. Parents need to acknowledge the importance of this role and allow teachers to play it.

We must also recognize that the salaries available for teachers do not match the importance of their responsibilities, which can only dampen their motivation and make recruiting the best candidates harder. Salary adjustments are therefore necessary, especially in demanding environments where recruiting and retaining the best teachers is harder than elsewhere. We must make the teaching profession one that is respected, enviable and attractive for the best of our students, since it is a motivating factor.

In our universities, we will have to put value into social and technological innovation to attract leading edge researchers so that we can mark our spot on the world scene and promote excellence. Our ability to distinguish ourselves in human sciences as well as life sciences, health and engineering exists. However, international competition is getting more ferocious and Québec is not spared. Universities in Québec have also become indispensable regional development poles that create quality jobs and specific territorial value. We must bank on these strong development forces and invest more in research to support the creative genius, thereby identifying solutions to the numerous challenges of our society.

Therefore, we will have to reach a global and equitable agreement for the recurring issue of under-financing for our universities. This problem won't be solved without additional funding, divided fairly between the State and the students. Graduates and businesses must also support our universities more generously.

2) Ensure the vitality of our culture

Culture is the soul of a nation. It builds our collective identity due to its rallying force, a source of development and pride. Through the words, music, drama or pieces they create, our artists open our minds to our world and to ourselves. When they draw attention beyond our borders, they also put the spotlight on Québec in a brilliant manner. We must continue to support our artists and foster even more the development of cultural enterprises that contribute powerfully to the development of our culture and our economy.

French is the cornerstone of this exceptionally creative culture. In order to reach our objective of making French the link between all Quebecers, we cannot exclude *a priori* any legislative or legal avenue. The insecurity of using French due to its minuscule presence in North America forces us to devote more energy to respecting the *Charte de la langue française*.

Québec has been welcoming immigrants for more than 400 years, but the Canadian multicultural policy has become, in the past few decades, an obstacle for Québec in its attempt to have its language and values prevail among new immigrants. We must put an end to the contradictory signals that encourage doubt in the mind of too many people. We must make clear to the newcomers the expectations of the society that is welcoming them. We must also be proactive. A community of 7 million Francophones immersed in a continent of several hundred million Anglophones cannot expect to integrate immigrants into French without using incentives and a strong pedagogical approach. More resources and effort must be allocated to the francization of new Quebecers.

3) Increase the performance of our public services

Quebecers can be proud of the progress accomplished since the Quiet Revolution through the incredible collective leverage of the State. Our public education and health networks are however finding it increasingly hard to satisfy the growing demand. There is no doubt about the good will and competence of hundreds of thousands of people who work in these networks. But we must acknowledge that work organization and the allocation of responsibilities are often problematic. We need to turn this around to overcome the trust crisis growing towards them. A maximum of resources must be directed to the services provided directly to the users. To achieve this, we must not hesitate to question the current actions in order to optimize the structure of our networks and ensure service efficiency.

In the case of education, the State must establish general objectives while increasing the autonomy and responsibilities of school management and teachers. On the other hand, they must be more accountable for the success of our youth and must be evaluated. The selection and training of future teachers must also be more demanding. Therefore, it's a new pact with teachers we must work out in exchange for a revalorization of their profession.

As for the health network, family physicians must set up family medicine groups so that all Quebecers may have access to a family physician. Central authorities must also remove themselves from care production and micromanagement. They must focus on setting objectives and performance standards. Decision-making must be decentralized in exchange for a greater accountability of local actors. Institution managers must enjoy greater autonomy and be empowered to conclude individual agreements with physicians. In general, institutional revenues must be guaranteed on the basis of services provided rather than previously established budgets. Many of these changes are only possible with a new pact with physicians.

The State must be uncompromising with itself in terms of management. A much more rigorous management is possible, in the public networks and government corporations for instance. The Québec Government must clean up its public finances to allow future generations to make choices. This requires a credible debt-reduction plan.

It is imperative to shed light on the situation of corruption in the construction industry. Public trust depends on it. The granting procedure for government contracts, when it comes to major construction and infrastructure projects, needs to be much more transparent. While regaining confidence in our political institutions will not happen overnight, a slow turnaround can occur with clear good will gestures and meaningful results. The ability of Québec to carry out the reforms required for its development depends on this. These reforms will never be accepted by the population if trust in our institutions is not regained.

4) Create an economy of owners rather than branches

Québec is not as prosperous as it should be. Even if the wealth is more fairly distributed here than elsewhere, we still rank in the lowest positions in North America in too many areas economically. As far as this is concerned, we do not endorse the pessimism of some nor the accommodating attitude of others. We must adopt measures to allow us to gradually decrease the difference in prosperity that persists between Québec and its main competitors. Here again, important investments in education will make this possible.

The Québec State must also foster a truly favourable environment for private investments, particularly those related to innovation and creativity. To do so, we will have to review the way we tax businesses and individuals to encourage investment, productivity and saving. We will also need to encourage local entrepreneurship and the marketing of our products in new markets. All these changes will have to be made while taking into account the situation of the less favoured and maintaining a truly progressive taxation.

Furthermore, one the most important gains of the Quiet Revolution is the control Quebecers gained over the economy and the formation of what we called Quebec inc. But, over the past years, Québec has lost several important decision centres. It is undeniable that the presence of the head offices of large companies is crucial to our economic development. It is companies that create links and choose suppliers and professionals (lawyers, accountants, consultants, etc.) from Québec. It is also these firms that will most often complete their development projects in Québec and offer a wide range of stimulating and high-level jobs to our citizens. They also support a great number of philanthropic organizations that contribute to the social and cultural development of Québec. The government must therefore use all available leverages to keep these important decision centres here, while still encouraging the entrepreneurship required for the creation of tomorrow's economic leaders.

In a world of ferocious competition among major cities for brains and capital, Montréal must absolutely regain its dynamic energy. We must also sustain the growing influence of

Quebec, our national capital. Moreover, the contribution of each region must be acknowledged and encouraged, taking into account their special characteristics. The government must therefore avoid scattering, wall-to-wall options, and vigorously support the best projects. Each area, including Montréal and Québec City, represents a rich and diversified territory. A strong focus on the dynamic force of diversity, rather than permanent comparison, will certainly go a long way in achieving success for all.

Obviously, our economic development should not be achieved at the expense of our environment or that of our children. We must decidedly focus on sustainable development and fully take advantage of the innovation and growth opportunities it provides for an economy like ours. We must therefore ensure that the development of transportation systems and networks be more efficient and with lower carbon emissions, favour a healthier and more rational urban development, and make sure that our production and consumption of energy contribute to reducing air pollution and greenhouse gas emission in Québec and on the whole continent.

Putting Québec back in motion

Our message is aimed at all citizens of Québec – federalists or sovereignists, as well as those for whom these labels are not significant – and also to all leaders in their own fields. We are telling them that it is time to put Québec back in motion and we submit our point of view for discussion.

We have decided to bank on what can unite us rather than to stay stuck in what put us in opposing camps in the past. We have the intimate conviction that it is necessary and urgent to rally as many people as possible around the objectives we have outlined.

This first public gesture is the first step of many more. To all those who, like us, wish from the bottom of their heart, for Québec to regain its appetite for the future, we reach out in the hope that they will make the same bet as we do.

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Note: The people who sign this text do so, on a personal basis, not in the name of the organization where they work.