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12 » 2006

Quebec's role will have limits

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CanWest News Service

Tuesday, April 11, 2006

OTTAWA -- Quebec will be consulted in international talks that touch provincial responsibilities, but won't be free to speak with its own voice in international forums, Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay said Monday.

"I can tell you that there will be one voice speaking for Canada and that voice will, of course, include Quebec," MacKay told reporters.

A deal formalizing Quebec's role in international forums that deal with areas of provincial jurisdiction like health and education is close to completion, he added.

"The talks are going very well. There has been a lot of progress made already. We hope to have an announcement at some point in the very near future."

MacKay's comments came as Bloc Quebecois Leader Gilles Duceppe moved to raise the stakes when it comes to an international role for Quebec -- a key Conservative election promise to the province that was reflected last week in the throne speech of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government.

During an election speech in Quebec City that many believe turned the tide for the Conservatives in Quebec, Harper promised the province a role in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) modeled on the role Quebec currently plays in the Francophonie. Quebec and New Brunswick are recognized as member governments in the Francophonie with their own seats, their own votes and their own rights to speak -- even if their positions differ from that of the federal government.

After the election, however, it came to light that UNESCO's rules do not permit provincial governments to have their own seats in the United Nations body. Last week's throne speech said Ottawa will invite Quebec to play a role in UNESCO. One report indicated that role could consist of allowing Quebec to station a civil servant in Canada's delegation to UNESCO.

Monday, Duceppe unveiled his own party's definition of what the Conservative commitment means. That definition would give Quebec an effective veto over Canada's vote in many international forums and provide for Quebec to voice its position on the international stage -- even when that position may contradict that of other provinces and the federal government.

Maintaining that he is asking for less than Harper promised during the election campaign, Duceppe said Canada should follow the example of Belgium and

agree to abstain from voting should Quebec disagree with the federal government's position. Canada can negotiate international treaties in areas of provincial jurisdiction such as education and health, but they will never become reality unless the provinces agree to implement them, he pointed out.

Asked whether Canada should also abstain should it be another province, such as Alberta or Ontario, which opposes the federal position, Duceppe said other provinces haven't sought that clout or been promised it.

Mackay, however, dismissed the Bloc's position.

"I think that there is some disappointment perhaps on the part of the Bloc for the progress that we're actually making. We're demonstrating that this federalist government can work co-operatively with the province of Quebec and meet some of those requests around their participation in UNESCO."

Liberal Jean Lapierre was also critical of Duceppe's position.

"I think Mr. Duceppe exceeds even the demands of the Quebec government. Mr. Duceppe shouldn't mistake himself for the government of Quebec and I prefer Mr. (Jean) Charest negotiates in the name of Quebec. He is the legitimate spokesman in that dossier."

Montreal Gazette

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