



Assemblée des Premières Nations Québec–Labrador

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Sovereignty will indeed be on the next government's agenda: First Nations sovereignty!

The vote that may usher in a new provincial government is less than a week away. Yet, I am unimpressed by the parties so far. Even when they pretend to recognize First Nations interests, they minimize our reality and rights. The leaders' cavalier response to First Nations priorities gives us with no other choice but to tell the next government that sovereignty will indeed be on their agenda: First Nation sovereignty.

Only one party recognizes the evidence of our nations' rights. When questioned about the borders of an independent Quebec, Québec Solidaire co-spokeswoman Manon Massé stated, "We'll start off with the current divisions of Quebec, and then we'll go talk with our Indigenous brothers and sisters." Former Parti Québécois Minister Joseph Facal criticized this declaration in the Journal de Montréal, stating that "Indigenous peoples' current rights, whether territorial rights or their status as nations or as minorities, do not encompass any 'right' to separation." He neglects, however, to mention that Indigenous peoples hold the right to self-determination! Under this right and the status as government, our peoples do indeed have the right to determine their political status and choose, if they so desire, whether they will remain in Canada if Quebec decides to separate. Manon Massé is correct in saying that the territory of a future independent Quebec will be negotiated with the First Nations governments.

The pre-existing sovereignty of First Peoples

In a recent public statement, I indicated that the next government must entirely revisit the political relationship between the Quebec and First Nations governments. Given party leaders' reactions, the political establishment has obviously not understood or – worse - scoffs at the very underpinnings that should guide a sustained and, most of all, productive dialogue with First Peoples.

Facts speak for themselves: Quebec is unceded Indigenous territory and First Nations have Aboriginal Title and Treaty Rights that are protected by the Constitution, the very document that recognizes our right to self-government. The Supreme Court of Canada has repeatedly reminded governments of their obligations, especially of their duty to reconcile Crown responsibilities with First Nations' pre-existing sovereignty.

Not only were our peoples sovereign before the arrival of European settlers, they never relinquished their independence. *This fact must be recognized.*

Reviewing the past four weeks, I can confidently affirm that if it hadn't been for the issue of immigration, which allowed us to find our way into the campaign (our greatly unemployed populations are an easy solution for the labour shortage), First Nations would have once again been invisible. First Nations' priorities are totally absent from the political radar—as if the issues raised by the fundamental relationship between the state and our peoples were incidental, even insignificant.

Enough is enough! We refuse to be spectators while the Quebec government continues to deny us our fundamental rights, especially to our territories and resources. How many times must we repeat it? The Quebec to which every party claims ownership is, in fact, land tied by ancestral title. Forget your discoveries and your conquests! These colonial knee-jerks isolate Quebec in its past.

Starting October 1st, First Nations sovereignty will most certainly be on the agenda.

Ghislain Picard
Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Québec-Labrador