

QUEBEC CITY AND THE SUMMITS OF 2001: PRIORITY ON PEOPLE, CONCERN FOR FREEDOMS



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While many police agencies have the high-profile task of protecting participants in multinational summits, officials with the host city must work with toward different priorities—minimizing the disruption the meetings cause in the daily lives of the city's population. Quebec City faced a particular challenge in ensuring the security and the liberties of its residents during the Summit of the Americas last year, given the violent nature of recent protests and a provocative security perimeter. Officials found a measure of success in working with activists to find a variety of means for dissenters to express their opinions; the city supported the alternative World Social Forum, and accommodated protestors of many different ideologies. These steps can be credited with offering many activists non-violent forums to express their opinions and averting the worst excesses of previous summits.

Tandis que les services policiers ont la tâche de protéger les participants aux sommets internationaux, les autorités de la ville hôte font face à d'autres priorités : faire en sorte que ces réunions dérangent le moins possible la vie quotidienne de la population. La ville de Québec avait un défi particulier à relever pour protéger la sécurité et les libertés de ses résidents lors du Sommet des Amériques l'an dernier, étant donné la violence des manifestations qui avaient marqué les sommets précédents et l'aspect provocateur de son périmètre de sécurité. La ville a eu l'heureuse idée de travailler de pair avec les activistes pour mettre à leur disposition divers moyens de s'exprimer; elle a appuyé la tenue du Forum social mondial et accommoder les protestataires de différentes idéologies. Ces démarches ont permis à bon nombre d'activistes de faire connaître leurs opinions dans un contexte de non-violence, en plus d'éviter les excès qui ont marqué les sommets antérieurs.

Do you remember 1987? That was the year when the Sommet de la Francophonie was held in Quebec City. Thirty-nine heads of state attended. The opening ceremony took place in a park in the middle of the city and the whole population was invited. And nothing happened! It was a real celebration, a show, almost a fair.

Unfortunately, times have changed. Fourteen years later, summits like the Summit of the Americas are marked by protest and violence. It is a worldwide phenomenon and the cities that are chosen by organizations to host these meetings have no choice but to deal with such protest and violence.

The City of Quebec was chosen to host the Summit of the Americas and decided to do its best to protect its population. With a controversial security perimeter, with serious restrictions on the movement of people, and with so many police officers in our calm and beautiful city, this was a real challenge. The residents were anxious and afraid. They were anxious because they are proud of their city, which is

known as a jewel and is listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, and they didn't want it to be ruined. They were afraid because they had seen what had happened in Seattle, Nice, Prague and Washington.

The City of Quebec also agreed to host the Peoples' Summit, an event that brought together organizations concerned about the adverse effects of globalization and who wished to voice their dissent during the Summit of the Americas.

From one year before the summits, we had a clear priority: the people of Quebec City. Our goal was to preserve their quality of life during this period and to protect and promote their fundamental freedoms. How did we succeed, as I believe we did, in protecting and promoting such freedoms during both the Summit of the Americas and the Peoples' Summit?

Our first challenge was to protect the fundamental freedoms of our citizens during the Summit of the Americas. We

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did this by keeping the population informed. We told our citizens as much as we could so they would know what was going on in their neighbourhood, in their streets and in their backyard.

In the fall of 2000, eight months before the Summit, we organized meetings with merchants' associations, citizens' councils and various committees. Two police officers were assigned to answer questions, solve problems, represent citizens before the security board of the Summit and minimize the inconvenience they would have to experience.

We kept up a dialogue with the police forces even though we did not share the same objectives and did not see things the same way. The summit security was made up of the RCMP, the Sûreté du Québec, and the police departments of the cities of Quebec and Sainte-Foy. We did not have much to say about their work. They were there primarily to protect the heads of state and government. We were there to protect our city and its citizens.

It is important to say that we did not question the necessity of that security perimeter. With streets as narrow as those in Old Quebec, we could not have the crowds, the protesters, the ambulances and the fire trucks at the same place at the same time. For security reasons, there had to be a perimeter. Some wanted it to be so large that it would include every major building in the city, while others did not want it at all. In the end, the police forces agreed on a perimeter of 3.8 kilometres.

We knew this would be a shock to Quebecers. Imagine a four-kilometre fence—three meters high—surrounding the busiest part of the city, stretching from the battlefields to the Château Frontenac, including Parliament Hill and the main tourist area. The restaurants, the bars, the hotels, the shops would not be open to the public. And the public felt trapped, imprisoned and deprived of its liberty!

Between security demands and people's freedoms, we had to find a kind of balance. This was not easy. For example, the police forces did not really want to tell the public where the security perimeter would be before its installation. We did not agree—again, because our priorities were the security and convenience of our citizens. We had to tell them about parking restrictions, changes in public transport routes and rules covering traffic flow within the perimeter. Because we respected our citizens, we did not want to do this at the last minute.

The police finally agreed to go public and held a press conference on March 29. We wrote to our citizens within and around the perimeter the next day, March 30, and gave a press conference regarding the municipal services that would be provided during the summit. We later organized another meeting with the merchants.

Ten days before the summit, we published two brochures for distribution to every household; one for residents inside the perimeter and one for those outside the perimeter, with all the information they needed to feel secure, including a phone number that could be used 24 hours a day to obtain information from the City. An ad was published in the weekly newspapers with the same information.

From the calls received, we heard a great number of complaints about the plastic bullets and the tear gas used by the police forces. But not one single complaint was filed about municipal services and measures taken by the City. This shows clearly that our concern for our citizens was greatly appreciated.

The Quebec City Summit is now recognized as a turning point. I think there are two reasons for that. The first relates to the fact that our citizens were part of the process, and the second is the fact that some allowance was made for democratic expression.

Democracy is something that the municipal council and administration of Quebec City greatly cherish. We took a number of decisions to ensure that democratic principles would be respected during the event. The mayor and city councillors decided, from the very beginning, to work with the Peoples' Summit in order to make it a success.

Our other great challenge was to promote the fundamental freedoms of our citizens in the context of the Peoples' Summit. The subjects and topics of the debates were important to our people. The environment, public consultation, quality of life, the fight against poverty, the distribution of wealth, social inclusion...these issues are part of our day-to-day work at city hall.

We always want to improve the quality of life in our city. We endeavour to consult the citizens on everything that matters and to listen to their concerns—we also have our problems of social inclusion and poverty that we would like to resolve. In this way, the Peoples' Summit was more important to us than the Summit of the Americas. That is where the real issues were to be discussed.

So we gave the organizers of the Peoples' Summit financial and technical support, as well as moral support. We asked our citizens to listen

to the debates and to take part in the March of the People organized on the Saturday. During the march, 50,000 people walked peacefully through the city and there were no confrontations or injuries. It was a happy protest march—the nicest event of the weekend!

Some weeks before both summits, we realized that there were other groups, like OQP 2001, ATTAC and SAL-AMI that had something to say but no place to express themselves freely. They were not welcome at the official summit and were not really at home at the parallel summit either. We negotiated with the Port Authority for them to use one of the wharfs to install their kiosks and distribute their pamphlets and brochures. They spent the opening day there, discussing, debating and celebrating democracy and freedom.

In addition to the Summit of the Americas, the Peoples' Summit and the "fair" in the old port, the City provided one more platform—the steps of city hall became a "speakers' corner." It was one block from the famous fence. On one side of the street you could hear a right-wing speech, on the other a left-wing one. People came to the "speakers' corner" all day long to discuss and debate issues. When the activist José Bové and the author Naomi Klein came to speak, for example, there were about 200 people in the street to listen to them calmly and respectfully. We wanted to tell the people what we believed in so we erected a giant banner at the entrance to city hall that read "Welcome to the peoples of the Americas... Another world is possible"—the exact words that were used at the First World Social Forum in Porto Alegre a few weeks before.

The exercise of authority certainly is not synonymous with repression. It can entail understanding and cooperation. Because of the choices we made in Quebec City, union members, social workers, activists and politicians,

among others, were all given a place to express their views on globalization. And since they could express such views freely, why would they fight and protest, or resort to violence?

There was some violence. On TV, one saw recurrent images of fences being pulled down, of projectiles being thrown by both police officers and demonstrators. But this was nothing in comparison with what had happened a few months before in Seattle and Washington. Above all, during this Summit of the Americas there was more than just fighting, protests and violence. There were a variety of forums and room for a variety of opinions and ideas.

Let me emphasize the view we hold in Quebec City: that events like the summits of the spring of 2001 need not be violent and that there is no need for the repression of democracy. On the contrary, we should celebrate and strengthen our democracy.

During a conversation several months after the events, the organizers of the Summit of the Americas acknowledged that there had been no real disorder because of all the forums which took place around the summit. The ministers of finance of the G8 who gathered in New York instead of Davos this past February also declared that they would pay attention to the debate taking place in Porto Alegre.

Is this because of what happened in Quebec City? Some people say that the opening march of the Second World Social Forum resembled the march in which the participants at the Quebec Peoples' Summit took part. I would like to believe that we, in Quebec City, had a modest role in opening the eyes of world leaders and that we have helped them believe that indeed "another world is possible."

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Books received—Livres reçus

Robert CAMPBELL *The Politics of Postal Transformation* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002)

G. Bruce DOERN and Richard LEVESQUE *The National Research Council in the Innovation Policy Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002)

Lawrie McFARLANE and Carlos PRADO *The Best-Laid Plans: Health Care's Problems and Prospects* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002)

Julie R. WATTS *Immigration Policy and the Challenge of Globalization: Unions and Employers in Unlikely Alliance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002)