

Separatists will use gas hike as issue

by **PETER COWAN**
Southam News
QUEBEC CITY — Federal Finance Minister John Crosbie, by raising the price of gasoline in Tuesday's federal budget, has handed the Parti Quebecois government an issue to use in promoting Quebec independence.

Quebec Finance Minister Jacques Parizeau has served notice he will "milk" the 18-cent a gallon increase in federal excise tax on gas in order to discredit the federal system and build support for a yes vote in next spring's sovereignty referendum.

Yesterday, after attacking the budget in the National Assembly, Parizeau was asked by reporters to what extent he would use the gas tax to illustrate his claim that independence would allow Quebec to practise better fiscal management.

"Oh," said Parizeau, "I don't know how many times a day I will be saying that, but surely several."

For Premier Rene Levesque's administration, which has gone through a series of political problems and public sector labor disturbances, the issue is timely.

Support for the government and sovereignty-association, meaning an independent Quebec in a common market and monetary union with Canada, is down.

The budget gives the government something it can use to seek confrontation with Prime

Minister Joe Clark's government which, so far, has ducked fights with Quebec.

Parizeau's immediate goal is quite clear: To convince Quebecers that the gasoline price increase obviates federal subsidies for imported gasoline and that the money, in provincial hands, could benefit Quebec.

He told the assembly that of the \$2.5 billion which Ottawa will collect from the gas tax to lower its deficit, \$600 million will come from Quebec.

That, said Parizeau, is just about equal to federal subsidies on imported fuel which have often been used as an argument in support of Canadian federalism.

He promised the assembly would debate to have Ottawa withdraw from raising the new tax in Quebec and turn it over to the PQ government which would apply it in its place, and "redistribute it to the public completely."

"For example," said Parizeau, "we could reduce the general sales tax from eight to five per cent. Or, we could reduce our personal income tax by 12 per cent. Or, we could reduce property taxes by nearly 25 per cent. Such reductions would ensure the Quebec economy's expansion, despite the hindrances which Ottawa wants to impose on it."

It remains to be seen how much support Parizeau's motion will receive. Liberal leader Claude Ryan has not

said how his party will vote on it and the Union Nationale will oppose it.

Ryan, however, did express reservations about the budget and said the gas tax could "unbalance" Canada's tax system.

Parizeau said Crosbie should reduce Ottawa's \$10 billion deficit, but not until after 1980 because economic growth next year will be nil.

Later, he told reporters that when the economy is slowing, "it is no time to put on the brakes" and suggested Crosbie might "wreck" the economy by using the increased revenues to cut the deficit rather than stimulate the economy by redistributing it.

He added that if reduced gas consumption was part of the government's goal, his own approach would achieve that while stimulating growth.

Parizeau said the budget provided him with a chance to demonstrate what an independent Quebec could do.

"Politically," he said, "It's a very remarkable opportunity that we've got on this specific case that everyone will understand by the time he pays four or five bucks more for a tank full of gas to understand what we've been talking about."

The situation brings to mind the sales tax battle of two years ago when Parizeau

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