Montreal, Canada—Without the cold breath of ideological hostility between blocs, ethnic nationalism reminiscent of Central Europe before Yalta or the Soviet Union before 1917 is again beginning to smolder. From Georgia and Azerbaijan to Lithuania and Russia, from the new Czech and Slovak Federal Republic to Hungary and Romania, from Germany to Quebec, the approaching 21st century is beginning to look alarmingly like the nineteenth.

At such a pivotal moment in history, it seems oddly necessary to restate the modern, liberal principles of statehood once so widely accepted in the West—principles which led us away from the bloody disasters of nationalistic and ethnic-based politics of the past.

As the prime minister who successfully pressed for the enactment of the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982, which eschewed “distinct society” status for Quebec (subsequently granted by the Meech Lake Accord of 1987 and which now threatens to balkanize Canada) in favor of a federalist solution, I think there is universal value in the Canadian experience for all states grappling with the re-emergent issue of ethnic-based nationalism. For, if six million Canadians of French origin cannot manage to share their national sovereignty with 20 million Canadians of British and other origins, there is very little hope for far less privileged regions of the world such as Nagorno-Karabakh, where deprivation fuels age-old enmities.

Throughout history, when a state has taken an exclusive and intolerant idea such as religion or ethnicity as its cornerstone, this idea has more often than not been the very mainspring of violence and war. In days gone by, religion had to be displaced as the basis of the state before frightful religious wars came to an end. And there will be little hope of putting an end to wars between nations until in some similar fashion the “nation” in ethnic terms ceases to be the basis of a state.

Whether we look at Nazi Germany, Fascist Japan or Islamic Iran, a state that defines its function essentially in terms of ethnic or religious attributes inevitably becomes chauvinistic and intolerant. Nationalists, whether of the left or right, are politically reactionary because they are led to define the common good as a function of an ethnic group or religious ideal rather than in terms of “all the people” regardless of individual characteristics. This is why a nationalistic government is by nature intolerant, discriminatory and, when all is said and done, totalitarian.

As Lord Acton wrote as early as 1862, the nation as an ideal unit founded on race “overrules the rights and wishes of its inhabitants, absorbing their divergent interests in a fictitious unity; sacrifices their inclinations and duties to the higher claim of nationality, and crushes all natural rights and all established liberties for the purpose of vindicating itself. Whenever a single definite object is made the supreme end of the State, the State becomes for the time being inevitably absolute.”
Thus, a truly democratic government—whether provincial or federal—cannot be “nationalist” because it must pursue the good of all its citizens regardless of sex, color, race, religious belief or ethnic origin. Democratic government stands for good citizenship, never nationalism.

This is not to say that the state must disregard cultural or linguistic values. Among the many values that a political society must protect and develop, these have high priority. It is therefore entirely desirable that a state ensure, through its Constitution and legislation, the protection of such values.

Moreover, it is inevitable that its policies will serve the interests of ethnic groups, and especially of the majority group; but this will happen as a natural consequence of the equality of all its citizens, not as a special privilege—such as “a distinct society” ---of the largest group in a given territory.

I entered federal politics in Canada precisely for the purpose of carrying out these principles in practice. I believed strongly then, as I do now, that federalism is a superior form of government by definition because it is more pluralist than monolithic and therefore respects diversity among people and groups. In general, freedom has a firmer foundation under federalism than in any kind of unitary nation-state.

This is especially true in Canada, where the die is firmly cast: there are two main ethnic and linguistic groups; each is too strong and too deeply rooted in the past, too firmly bound to a mother-culture, to be able to engulf the other. I have always believed that if these two groups could collaborate at the hub of a truly pluralistic state, Canada could become the envied seat of a form of federalism that could become a brilliant prototype for the molding of tomorrow’s poly-ethnic civilization, a better model even that the American melting pot. Rather than forging a new alloy, the Canadian model would preserve the characteristics of each group in a mosaic of cultural coexistence.

The Constitution Act of 1982 declared equal economic opportunity under which “the government of Canada and the provincial governments undertake to promote equal opportunities for the well being of all Canadians.” Furthermore, the Act embraced the principle of equality of French and English in all domains of federal jurisdiction and guaranteed both francophones and anglophones the higher education in their own language in place in Canada.

But the essential principles so relevant to the upheaval of the 1990s were embraced in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms under the Act. In the grand tradition of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen and the 1791 Bill of Rights of the United States, the Canadian Charter implicitly established the primacy of the individual over the state and all government institutions, and in so doing, recognized that all sovereignty resides in the people.

In this respect, the Canadian Charter was a new beginning for the Canadian nation; it sought to strengthen the country’s unity by basing the sovereignty of the Canadian people...
on a set of values common to all, and in particular on the notion of equality among all Canadians.

Clearly, the very adoption of a constitutional charter is in keeping with the purest liberalism, according to which all members of a civil society enjoy certain fundamental, inalienable rights and cannot be deprived of them by any collectivity (nation, ethnic or religious group).

By this conception, all individual members of civil society are “human personalities” – that is, beings of a moral order, free and equal among themselves, each having absolute dignity and infinite value. As such, they transcend the accidents of place and time, and partake in the essence of universal Humanity. They are therefore not coercible by any ancestral tradition, being vassals neither to their race, nor to their religion, nor to their condition of birth, nor to their collective history.

It follows from this that only the individual, not the ethnic group, is the possessor of rights. A political collectivity can exercise only those rights it has received by delegation from its members. The spirit and substance of the Canadian Charter is thus clear: to protect the individual against not only the tyranny of the state but also any other tyranny to which the individual may be subjected by virtue of his belonging to a minority group.

Having reviewed these principles, it should be manifestly clear how the notion of Quebec as a “distinct society,” wherein individual rights are subordinated to collective rights, again opens up the dangerous doors of Canadian balkanization and threatens to undermine the very foundation of a liberal state.

Canada’s model federalist solution to Quebec nationalism once heralded a hope for mankind facing the rapid integration of a poly-ethnic and interdependent world. Now, I fear the balkanization of Canada may presage a return to pre-modern conflicts once thought to have passed into history.

If the 19th century is what awaits us at the opening of the 21st, it behooves us to listen once again to Lord Acton, one of the great thinkers of the 19th century, who described with extraordinarily prophetic insight the errors of nationalism which were to soak the 20th century with so much blood and acrimony:

“A great democracy must either sacrifice self-government to unity or preserve it by federalism. The coexistence of several nations under the same State is a test, as well as the best security of its freedom. It is also one of the chief instruments of civilization.........

“The combination of different nations in one State is as necessary a condition of civilized life as the combination of men in society. Where political and national boundaries coincide, society ceases to advance, and nations relapse into a condition corresponding to that of men who renounce intercourse with their fellow men....... A state which is incompetent to satisfy different races condemns itself; a State which labors to neutralize, to absorb, or to expel them is destitute of the chief basis of self-government. The theory of nationality, then, is a retrograde step in history.”