

## The Rights of Minorities

Speech by The Right Honourable Joe Clark,  
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It is a great pleasure for me to be with you, and to join in your consideration of the rights of minorities. At other times in our recent past, I have spoken of minority rights in Canada. I remember vividly one particular occasion at this University, with the support of Le Devoir, when I proposed some changes that could have allowed Québec to join with honour in the constitutional accord. That experience serves to emphasize that for Canadians, questions of minority rights are not academic matters. They are issues as old as our country, and as fresh as last week. Just eight days ago, the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs introduced a bill to end finally discrimination against certain women under our Indian Act. That very bill is being criticized by some spokesmen of the Indian community, who claim the action by Parliament infringes on their collective rights as aboriginal people. Such are the complexities of questions of rights, and for Canadians they are domestic complexities as well as international.

Indeed in Canada, we have considerable experience with the rights of minorities. By the standards of the day, a rather inflammatory situation was created when protestant England took possession of a colony that was not only Catholic in religion, but French in language. That was also a time when the British colonies to the south were already restless, and any attempt to enforce radical change in Québec would not have been wise. Accommodation in matters of language and religion was essential.

I have made the point before that we Canadians, having started with such clear differences, had no alternative to tolerance. Of course, our history is full of evidence of goodwill and generosity of spirit, and those are genuine and valuable characteristics. But there was more than goodwill. The diverse nature of Canadians forces us to respect and accommodate genuine differences.