

Let me begin by expressing my thanks to the Manitoba Chamber of Commerce for giving me this opportunity to speak to you in Winnipeg. If you think you have heard too much about the Constitution, so, Lord knows, have I. Everyone has other issues we would rather discuss - but I asked to come here because I believe that we cannot get on to the achievement of our other goals unless we make progress on the Constitution. Moreover, I am genuinely alarmed about a distemper that is growing in Canada, in all parts of Canada, that could threaten our will to keep this remarkable country.

Differences are sharp on the question of the Meech Lake Accord, and some of you will be skeptical about the views, on that question, of any Minister of the Canadian Government. And certainly I am what I am - a Minister of that Government, a supporter of the Meech Lake Accord; and a Western Canadian who had the privilege of being elected Prime Minister of the country, and now has the responsibility, every day, of dealing with nations and peoples who profoundly envy the good fortune of Canada. I am a vigorous partisan (you can ask Nelson Riis) but I have tried, throughout my career, to put the larger interest ahead of my own, and it is in that spirit that I hope you will hear me today.

I want to make three points.

The first is that the issue raised by this controversy is about much more than the Meech Lake Accord. If the Accord is rejected, that will harm the unity and the reputation of all of Canada. People who contemplate rejecting Meech Lake should do so with their eyes open.

I will not get into the debate today about what the actual costs of rejection might be. No one can calculate that with certainty. I will make the case that, in my judgment, whatever the economic costs of rejection, we Canadians would pay an even higher price in the simple erosion of our will to live together.

On the other hand, in my view, if the Meech Lake Accord is approved by June 23rd, that will have its own symbolic importance, and will let us get on with other changes that would be impossible if Meech Lake fails. Of even more importance, it could cause Canadians, everywhere, to think and act more constructively about our whole country, as it is in 1990 and as it can become. The acceptance of the Meech Lake Accord must be seen, by all of us, as just the beginning of the renewal of this privileged, diverse and modern country.

My second point has to do with the practical options open to us in the 54 days between now and June 23rd.

Let me start with an option which some of you might favour, and tell you why I believe it is not available. That is the option of "scrapping" the Meech Lake Accord, and starting all over again. That sounds simple, straightforward, like the advice some of you wanted to give the Jets after they lost to the Oilers, or the advice I wanted to give to the Flames.