

been marred by troubling and divisive linguistic disputes. We will not tell each other scare stories. These events did not just begin a few weeks ago, in northern Ontario. One has only to recall the controversy over the closing of Catholic schools in Manitoba in 1890, Regulation 17 in Ontario in 1912, which had a devastating effect on that province's francophone community, and the *Gens de l'Air* dispute of 1976.

In 1905, Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier decided that language rights in Alberta and Saskatchewan, in contrast to the situation in Quebec and Manitoba at that time, should not be entrenched in the Constitution but rather left within provincial legislative jurisdiction.

It was, Mr. Speaker, therefore open to Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1988 to override a Supreme Court decision and abolish certain language rights and obligations that they had inherited from the Northwest Territories.

[English]

But in 1981, another significant decision was taken, obviously not with this in mind. No one can foresee the future with accuracy, but another significant decision was taken. It was to entrench in the Constitution a notwithstanding clause which permits legislatures to override many of the basic rights and freedoms of Canadians. Because of that clause it was open to Quebec, in enacting Bill C-178 respecting external, commercial signs in 1988, to override freedom of expression provisions of the Canadian Charter.

In all three cases the provincial legislatures used existing powers to limit rights that had been confirmed by the Supreme Court of Canada. In each case the government and, I suppose, most if not all members of the House of Commons and I personally deeply deplore the actions taken. But as has happened over history, it is now left for another day to try and remedy the situation and improve upon minority rights and the status and the state of our bilingual nation and all of the challenges and opportunities it gives to all of us.

We need today through our attitudes, our statements and our actions to arrest this trend and to return to the fundamental concepts as best we can that built this nation.

Government Orders

[Translation]

Our country, which at various times in its history was thought to have been weakened by division and misunderstanding, was in fact strengthened by the common will which always arose at such times to overcome these threats to our unity. The forces of reason, fairness and generosity must again be mobilized. Let us do so always keeping in mind the future of young Canadians, our children. Our greatest responsibility is to leave them the united and prosperous country which our parents dreamed for us.

[English]

If there is an obligation, perhaps in a pyramid of obligations in this regard, that takes a predominant place, of all the obligations that we have, and we have many, surely few can be more compelling than to make sure as best we can that this country which we did not build—it was built for us, it was given to us—this magnificent, wealthy, prosperous, admired, envied nation which has made our lives so complete and so productive, surely our fundamental obligation must be to take every action we possibly can to pass this country on undiminished to our children and then to their children. That is what it is all about.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Mulroney: Mr. Speaker, I say, not in any argumentative way whatsoever, but simply because the reasons I have tried to explain, and as a fundamental bearing on the nature of linguistic duality in Canada and this matter before the House, that for this reason and this reason alone I submit respectfully that I believe in many ways, but not in any perfect way, that the Meech Lake Accord has an important role and that it fulfils many of these responsibilities. It reaffirms our national identity by recognizing in the Constitution Quebec's distinctiveness and Canada's linguistic duality.

In 1982, a similar recognition was properly given to our multicultural and aboriginal traditions. In the same way the courts were instructed to interpret the Charter in light of these provisions.

In the words of the joint parliamentary committee that carefully studied the accord, the addition of the linguistic duality and distinct society clause "will better reflect Canada as it is".