

It is natural that the constitutional priorities of various parts of the country should differ. They differ for reasons of history, of culture, of size and of economic development. Indeed, the purpose of the Constitution is to balance those priorities, reflect those various interests and to do so in a way which allows future evolution and future improvement.

Seen in this light, Meech Lake did not simply correct a glaring gap in the existing Constitution. It was not a constitutional package for Quebec. It was a constitutional package for the country. A constitutional package which, through embracing Quebec at last, allows the country as a whole to embrace the future and to finally shed the fundamental dissension and discord of the past.

Let's look at Senate reform in that context. Senate reform is politically impossible in the absence of Quebec's participation in the Constitution. It may also be legally impossible since Quebec's senatorial rights are embedded in the British North America Act. Meech Lake lets us move on to Senate reform. It also lets us move on to better Senate reform. Under the Constitution at present the Senate can be changed over the heads of Alberta or Atlantic Canada. The new constitutional package, with its requirement for consensus, ensures that no one province's interests will be ignored. Some have claimed that the unanimity requirement will prevent Senate reform forever. But the provinces that might exercise a veto on Senate reform already have it. If there is no progress on Meech Lake, they will show no interest in Senate reform. There will be no change. But if we establish an atmosphere of reform, rather than an atmosphere of rigidity, real change is possible.

So Meech Lake is not a barrier to change. It is the gateway to the future. It liberates the country by making it whole and by equipping it to go on and make more improvements.

The Premiers, pundits and prima donnas who would toss out this accomplishment have some fundamental questions to answer. How would they modify the Accord and still retain the consensus which is the essential purpose of a constitution? After all the promises we have made, why should Quebec trust us again if we renege on this deal as governments have reneged on promises in the past? What progress on Senate reform, on the status of the Territories, on aboriginal rights, on the rights of other minorities, on fisheries would be possible if we reject the very constitutional prerequisite for moving forward on these vital issues? What possible defence could be offered for snatching defeat from the jaws of victory and retreating to a small Canada, where nothing would be agreed.

Canada is more than a country. It is a concept. That concept is unique, as is the reality we have constructed since Confederation. It is a concept and a reality which say that different cultures, different regions and different interests can grow together if compromise and consensus is the code of conduct. It is a concept which says they can more than co-exist; they can thrive and prosper in community with diversity.