

Those were heady days and optimistic times. They were full with pride. A pride born of consensus, of compromise. A pride that Canada was whole again.

How that elation has evaporated. How that euphoria has been forgotten. Two years ago, Meech Lake was a beacon for the future. Today, it is a lightning rod for every discontent in the land.

Nobody claimed - even in 1987 - that the Meech Lake Accord was perfect. Anymore than the British North America Act of 1867 was perfect. Or the Statute of Westminster of 1931. Or the Constitution Act of 1982. Constitutional reform and development will not stop with Meech Lake. Indeed, constitutional development will only proceed if Meech Lake is approved. Only then can we turn to other issues crucial to our future - Senate reform, aboriginal rights, the status of the Territories and enhancing the role of linguistic and cultural minorities in Canada.

In attacking Meech Lake, people seem to forget what went before. What went before was the election of a government in Quebec in 1976 that was dedicated to the disintegration of this country. What happened before was a referendum in that province in 1980 which said yes to Canada. What happened before was a promise to Quebec that if it stayed within the union, federalism would be renewed and the interests of Quebec - and the rest of the provinces - would be accommodated in a spirit of compromise and consensus.

What also happened was that in 1982 a Constitution was patriated and a Charter of Rights adopted without the agreement of Quebec. And every political party in Quebec said they would not accept that Constitution and that Quebec would cease to participate in the constitutional development of Canada until its legitimate interests were recognized.

That is why in August, 1986, the Premiers met in Edmonton with Premier Getty in the Chair and agreed unanimously that making the Canadian constitutional family whole again was the priority of every Premier and every province. The Premiers recognized at that historic meeting that other issues would not be resolved until the family was whole.

That meeting in Edmonton also agreed with Premier Bourassa that five issues should be dealt with in the course of completing the Constitution. Those issues constituted the shortest list and the most moderate requirements ever proposed by a Premier of Quebec. The Meech Lake Accord dealt with those issues after months of negotiation and give and take. It was an honourable and reasonable compromise.

Critics of Meech Lake forget history. They forget the very real threat to the fabric of Canada which existed in the 1970s. They forget the War Measures Act, the bombs, the kidnappings, the soldiers in the street. They forget the 20 years of constitutional impasse and frustrating failure. They forget that the Canadian Constitution - like any healthy constitution - grows and evolves. They forget that Meech Lake is not the last word but the first step. They forget that the future of this country will be frozen in failure if all the members of this federation do not share a common understanding of the Constitution of the country.