

*The Constitution*

At each of these four meetings I posed a question to the people attending: "If Canada did not exist today, would it be worth inventing?" My constituents were unanimous in responding with a very resounding yes. However, the Canada created might be different than the one we know now.

The meetings we held were highly charged and emotional. They included Cariboo—Chilcotins from all walks of life; ranchers, municipal leaders, natives and business people. A wide range of views were heard, both positive and negative. Basically, they all wanted the opportunity to speak and, more important, to be listened to.

It would be obvious to anyone attending these meetings that there was a great deal of anger toward certain topics in particular, and in particular, bilingualism. There is a perception that French is being forced down their throats. As one constituent stated: "We need language by choice, not by legislation". Why are they so angry? Most have never been exposed to French. They do not see it unless it is on the back of a cornflakes box. If you probe that anger, Madam Speaker, it comes down to what they see as a form of unfairness, a forced or legislated bilingual policy for some, and yet what they see as a denial of basic rights to a minority in Quebec as a result of the now infamous sign law. There is no question that this has become the lightning rod for their anger.

There is also concern about the cost of maintaining not only bilingualism but also multiculturalism. Why, they ask, should they pay for something they see as unnecessary? Why should they pay for something they believe creates irritation and division among Canadians? One Canadian, originally from Hungary, made this reasoned and somewhat passionate appeal: "Canada is a country that accepts and encourages Canadians from other countries to retain as much of their culture and heritage as they want. However, we run into problems when we start creating government departments and funding whose sole goal is to encourage immigrants to live among themselves and to amplify their differences".

This anger I am reporting on is an honest anger and it is deep-rooted. They are very leery of special status Canadians, or what some refer to as hyphenated Canadians. For some, anger and negative criticism was all they could offer. Yet for most there was a strong desire to focus on what will keep us together, and not what will

push us further apart. Most of the discussion on keeping us together focused on three issues, not surprisingly the same three issues most of the country focused on: Quebec as a distinct society, Senate reform, and aboriginal self-government.

A lot of the tension was focused on Quebec. However, the Quebec issue is one where I have noticed a real swing in opinion over the past year. This time around I got a real sense that they have come to accept, albeit somewhat begrudgingly for some, that Quebec is a distinct society: they have a different language and a different culture and therefore different needs and interest. As such, they can accept and accommodate Quebec into the country as a distinct society, but that acceptance is conditional. Distinctiveness can be accommodated, but it must be done with both fairness and honour for all other regions and provinces. As one constituent put it: "I have no problem giving Quebec what it wants, as long as it is done within the framework of Canada and as long as it does not weaken us as a nation".

The next issue I will address is that of Senate reform. As we all know, Senate reform is a hot topic in western Canada. The Cariboo is no exception. Everyone agreed that there is a need for a change. The difficulty was in deciding on what kind of change is needed. There was the expected support for a Triple-E version of the Senate, but there were also some who did not see this as a total solution. Others felt the Senate as a house of sober second thought is needed, but if it is to be truly functional, then its partisan nature must be reduced and minimized.

One suggestion was to restructure the process so that the Senate veto can be overruled only if it can command a two-third majority vote in the Commons. There were others who saw no need at all for the Senate, but they continued that if it does remain then the representation should be structured in such a way that costs are kept to a minimum.

While there was some disagreement as to what changes were needed, there was no disagreement on the desired result. If I may paraphrase a constituent, we have the House of Commons, an elected body representing the people. What we need out of the Senate is something that will adequately represent the regions while keeping in mind the best interests of the nation.