

*The Constitution*

refreshing and welcome change to see this place used as it should be, and that is as an instrument for democratic representation.

By various means, a constituency-wide questionnaire and a series of public meetings over the recent recess, the constituents of Beaver River have voiced their opinions on every one of the 28 constitutional proposals put forward by the government. Many have suggested, however, that while they agree this round should in fact be a Canada round which attempts to satisfy all Canadians, the bulk of proposals are simply too large to deal with. The majority with whom I spoke in Beaver River feel that a constitutional agreement can never be reached with so many proposals on the table. I will therefore attempt to narrow the issues down to those that seem to be most prevalent in the minds of the constituents in Beaver River.

One of the most contentious and certainly the most salient proposal is that dealing with distinct society status for Quebec. In a special constitutional questionnaire I sent from my office to every household in Beaver River, I asked the question: "Should Quebec be recognized as a distinct society in the Constitution as defined by its French-speaking majority, unique culture and its civil law tradition?". The vast majority, 79 per cent, said no to recognition while only 21 per cent said yes.

Beaver Riverites, however, are not adverse to acknowledging that Quebec is really a distinct society. What they are adverse to is enshrining this principle in the Constitution. They worry that by doing so in the Constitution, Quebec will be granted not just a special status within Confederation, but in the final analysis, a superior status as well. Those in Beaver River agree and believe in equality. They believe in the equality of all provinces. They believe that their province is as equally distinct in terms of culture as is Quebec. Distinct society status for Quebec is therefore unacceptable to the people of Beaver River.

That is the symbolic part. The mechanical part is this. Although a distinct society has been defined since Meech Lake, it remains all-inclusive. Many commentators in the constituency have expressed concern over the aspect of culture as outlined in the new proposal. How would the word culture be interpreted in the courts? Leon Dion, a respected Laval political scientist, has expressed the opinion that in Quebec "one cannot separate culture and the economy". Thus, it seems to those people in Beaver River that this new definition

would be deficient in limiting the power a distinct society clause would have when applied to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Only by restricting the definition rather than making it inclusive might the people of Beaver River accept such a proposal.

Proposal 4 of the government's package deals with aboriginal self-government. This item is especially pertinent to my constituency as approximately 9 per cent of those residing in Beaver River are aboriginal peoples. At present, there appears to be a polarization of attitudes on this question. In my household survey, 49 per cent agree that the aboriginal population of Canada should have the right to self-government while 51 per cent disagreed. This close result seems to be the product of the absence of a concrete definition of what self-government is. As with the definition of distinct society, Beaver Riverites are weary of the broad parameters of the rights and jurisdictions that aboriginal governments might exercise.

One would surely not want to entrench the simple words self-government, leaving it entirely to judges to fill in its practical meaning. It is therefore difficult for the average citizen to comment on the substance of self-government until some actual details of the plan emerge.

Constituents through their letters to me have also expressed a reluctance to say yes to self-government without some prior agreement on taxation and spending measures. Many in Beaver River recognize the plight of the aboriginal peoples of Canada in their struggle for self-determination. They also recognize, however, that the politics of embedding specified cultural, ethnic or racial groups in the fabric of the Constitution is a dangerous game. It may inevitably lead to a competitive, antagonistic relationship between these different groups.

In perpetually exacerbating the differences among Canadians rather than outlining the similarities, many in Beaver River feel that the spiral of ethnic based politics will surely lead further down the road to disunity.

Of all the 28 proposals set down by the government, Senate reform is by far the most important to the people of Beaver River. Time and time again my constituents have implored that this country be given an equal, effective and elected Senate. Nothing short of the Triple-E model is acceptable. Eighty per cent of those who responded to my constitutional questionnaire indicated that elected and effective are not enough. Neither is a two and a half-E Senate enough, or a so-called