

*The Constitution*

[*Translation*]

Finally I believed that the new climate might bring us to the day when Quebec would regain its place within Canada's constitutional forums. All those who, like myself, responded to the Prime Minister's appeal also believed in this change. Men and women in Quebec put their faith in us because they were convinced we would succeed in making this great change. This faith in the possibility of changing things has never been a blind faith. The man who is now Prime Minister then made a firm commitment to Quebec.

As he said in August 1984, all Quebecers love Quebec and are proud of Canada, but they also love Canada and are proud of Quebec. Their heart is big enough for both allegiances. He said that Canada offers plenty of room for the affirmation of all identities, the respect for all aspirations, and the quest for all ideals.

To heal the wounds of 1982, for wounds had indeed been inflicted to Quebec, he had solemnly pledged to do everything possible to convince the National Assembly to accept the new Constitution with honour and enthusiasm. Well, on April 30, something extraordinary happened, because his commitment to Quebec was not restricted to a single election campaign, or a vague promise to win over part of the nationalist electorate. This commitment is part of his vision of Canada and Canadians based on fairness, equity and generosity.

The Prime Minister has always appealed to the noblest and highest values held by Canadian men and women to defend the rights of minorities, linguistic and otherwise, and to defend the people and the regions of our country. He has always believed that it is through respect for our differences that we shall find new strength to stay together.

It is with enthusiasm that I came to Ottawa to defend the interests, first of Quebec, and also of the rest of Canada, but I came also because our new Prime Minister had promised us to do everything to restore Quebec to its rightful place within Confederation.

Today, Mr. Speaker, this major task is well on its way towards accomplishment.

[*English*]

The Prime Minister of Canada, the Premier of Quebec, along with the other Premiers have agreed in principle, which will permit the Province of Quebec to join the constitutional family and permit Quebecers to be true Canadians.

[*Translation*]

This is indeed important: To be a true French Canadian, it is necessary, in my opinion, for me to be a Canadian.

[*English*]

I am also proud of what has been accomplished at Meech Lake. It is not to be perceived as being a gesture of favour to Quebec, because it was a gesture of favour to all provinces.

They have also agreed to include in the Constitution an aspect of utmost importance to our national identity.

[*Translation*]

The Constitutional Act of 1982 was to a great extent a description of the characteristics which make Canada unique. Yet, there was no mention anywhere in the Constitution of Quebec's distinct society or the existence in Canada of francophone and anglophone communities.

In the absence of these two basic realities, how was our commitment to linguistic minority rights to be interpreted? How else were we to show respect for Quebecers' desire to affirm themselves proudly as full partners in our national design, as partners equal but different through their history and institutions? I suggest that the Prime Minister was well aware that there was an important gap to be filled, and he appealed to the open mind and generosity of his counterparts to ensure a successful conclusion to the Meech Lake exercise. This was a necessary gamble, because solving this problem did not depend entirely on the Government of Canada, but also on the Governments of Quebec and the other provinces.

All the provinces, therefore, had to participate in the development of a new Constitutional consensus which would take into account the legitimate aspirations of Quebecers, but also the basic interests of all other Canadians. The Prime Minister felt also that, to be fair, any agreement would have to take place within the context of a true federalism. The support of all Governments was necessary, the opinion of each had to be taken into account. The country had suffered enough from partisan agreements, behind-the-scene maneuvers, deals negotiated with no real consensus.

[*English*]

All Premiers were aware of the damages that would result from another failure. No one placed himself into an irrevocable position. Quebec was also just and generous. When it asked that its distinct character be recognized, it did not do so with a desire for isolation. It could have, but it did not. On the contrary, Quebec insisted that its specificity be recognized for a broader reality: one of existence of a francophone Canada, concentrated and not limited to Quebec, and one of an anglophone Canada, concentrated in the rest of the country but present in Quebec.

[*Translation*]

That is the essence of the agreement, is it not? The recognition of the existence of French-speaking Canada centred in but not limited to Quebec, and that of English-speaking Canada concentrated in the rest of the country but also highly present in Quebec.

Therefore, the First Ministers agreed to enshrine this fundamental characteristic of the federation into the Constitution. That simple recognition has already allowed Quebecers to stand proud, and that is what we achieved on the evening of April 30, to the surprise of everyone.