

*Constitution Amendment, 1987*

I also wish to comment on the witnesses who appeared before us. There is nothing like a constitutional debate to bring out people with strong viewpoints, impressive arguments, clearly defined ideas, and an ability to present their case. That certainly was the case in this particular committee. We had experts come forward, and as is usually the case when dealing with experts, they were divided on the manner in which they viewed the Accord. Nevertheless, the arguments placed before the committee were fascinating, well thought out, and they certainly helped each of us to look at the Accord, gain insight into it, and find a perspective. After hearing the arguments, we were able to reach individual and collective decisions.

Today I wish to address three things on the Meech Lake Accord. First, I wish to look at the Accord from the perspective of my own home Province of Alberta and how the Accord affects them. Second, I wish to spend a little time on the process by which this constitutional agreement was reached. Third, I wish briefly to touch on the future constitutional process in this country, how we must examine that, and the importance of the role it will play in Canada in the future.

Let me begin by looking at the Meech Lake agreement from the perspective of Alberta. There are several items we must look at to gain an insight into the manner in which Albertans may respond to the Accord. First, we must look at the question of federal-provincial powers, the distinct society clause, the issue of Senate reform, and in any discussions of Alberta's perspective, we must look at the question of the veto, the unanimity on the amendments to the federal institutions.

First, I wish to look at the area of provincial powers. Several critics of the Accord have stated that the federal Government has sold out the shop and given the powers away to the provinces. Now the provinces are supreme, they will control the national agenda, and the federal Government's hands are tied. In hearing the witnesses, looking at the Accord, and spending time on this particular issue and others, it was obvious to me and to other members of the committee that that is clearly not the case.

I feel very strongly that the federal Government now works within a parameter that defines its powers in areas of provincial jurisdiction. It cannot holus-bolus move into an area of provincial jurisdiction and stomp on provincial interests. In fact, now there is the ability to draw a consensus, get the various levels of Government to work together, not only to the good of the various provinces and regions, but also to the good of the national Government.

I think back to some of the areas on which Albertans would have reacted angrily if the federal Government had moved in. Albertans would be very angry if the federal Government were to move in with a national program in areas of energy, as was done by a previous Government with the National Energy Program, or in the area of education. They would respond to that in a most negative and critical manner. After the Meech Lake Accord, Albertans have the opportunity to take a look at federal concerns and decisions that may be forthcoming in

those particular areas; they have an opportunity to participate in those discussions. But they also have an assurance that they cannot have their area of jurisdiction over-examined or controlled by a federal Government.

● (1250)

I also want to look at the area of distinct society. When the Meech Lake Accord was first signed, many Albertans were concerned and said: "We as Albertans are also distinct. Why don't we have a constitutional definition or description which declares Albertans to be distinct as well?"

I spent some time looking at the Accord, and I think it accepts or acknowledges a fact of Canada—the fact that the Province of Quebec is distinct. It is distinct in its language, and it is distinct in its culture. It has a distinctness long recognized by Canadians from coast to coast. What the Meech Lake Accord has done is taken that distinctness, which we accept as a fact, placed it in our Constitution, and described it as such.

In a number of rulings on areas dealing with the Province of Quebec, the Supreme Court has already made reference to the fact that Quebec is a distinct society. We are not charting new ground, and I do not feel that Albertans have to be concerned. The fact is that Quebec is distinct. It is a unique and wonderful part of Canada. Through the Meech Lake Accord and through the description of Quebec as a distinct society, I see Quebec now as a full partner in Canada and a full participant in our Constitution. That in itself strengthens all Canada. It strengthens Alberta and it strengthens Quebec. It builds the kind of nation which all Canadians really want.

There is no way that I could look at the Meech Lake Accord and not talk for a few moments about Senate reform. It is probably one of the most important issues to Albertans today. Certainly it was one of the most important parts of the Meech Lake Accord which attracted the attention of Albertans.

Many have said that Senate reform is now more difficult as a result of the Accord. People such as Dr. Elton of the Canada West Foundation appeared before us as witnesses and argued that, as did other witnesses. However, there were several other witnesses with whom I am inclined to agree who said that that was not the case. They did not see Senate reform as being more difficult now than it was prior to the Meech Lake Accord.

I agree for the following reasons. As the Constitution of Canada presently exists, with Quebec being outside the constitutional framework, not legally or technically but in spirit, the Province of Ontario virtually has a sole veto or automatic veto. Therefore, Senate reform at the beginning of the process was in a very difficult position. With the present amending formula of seven out of 10 provinces and 50 per cent of the population agreeing to any amendment, Ontario is in a very unique spot about which I as an Albertan was very much concerned.