

The Committee's Mandate

Canada is in the midst of a political deadlock revolving around a package of Constitutional amendments known as the Meech Lake Accord. It was signed by the Prime Minister and Premiers of all ten provinces in 1987 but in order to become law it must be adopted in every legislature by June 23, 1990. Parliament and eight provincial legislatures subsequently adopted the Accord. In two provinces, New Brunswick and Manitoba, governments changed before ratification. The new Premiers expressed reservations about certain parts of the Accord. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the Accord had already been adopted, but following an election a new government also expressed reservations.

Discussions among First Ministers failed to produce a compromise. However, on March 21, 1990 Premier McKenna introduced in the New Brunswick Legislative Assembly two resolutions intended to break the deadlock. The first was the Meech Lake Accord (*Constitution Amendment, 1987*). The second, Premier McKenna referred to as a Companion Resolution. It proposed a number of additional Constitutional amendments to take effect after the Meech Lake Accord was proclaimed. Adoption of the Meech Lake Accord by New Brunswick was made conditional upon some progress towards adoption of the Companion Resolution by other legislatures and the Parliament of Canada.

On March 26 Prime Minister Mulroney requested time on national television to address the nation. He suggested the New Brunswick Companion Resolution be referred to a special Committee of the House of Commons. Leaders of the federal Liberal and New Democratic Parties agreed and a motion to this effect was adopted in the House of Commons the following day with instructions to report to the House by May 18, 1990.

On April 6, the Newfoundland and Labrador House of Assembly proceeded to revoke its approval of the Accord. The same day the Quebec National Assembly adopted a resolution reaffirming its desire that the Meech Lake Accord be ratified.

Thus at the moment your Committee began its work the political situation was very difficult. From the outset your Committee faced different sets of expectations. Some dismissed it as irrelevant to the process. Others expected it to solve a dilemma that had eluded both politicians and constitutional experts.

Your Committee was convinced that the solution began by listening. From April 9 to May 4, we heard some 160 witnesses in Yellowknife, Whitehorse, Vancouver, Winnipeg, St. John's and in the National Capital Region. Eight governments including five present and two former provincial premiers appeared as did constitutional experts, and representatives of aboriginal groups, business groups, women's groups, official language minority groups, multicultural groups, labour organizations, groups representing the disabled as well as other groups and interested citizens. Opinions ranged from unconditional support of