

But I do not believe the same people who delivered us into this mess can get us out of it.

Senator Frith: Well done!

[*Translation*]

Hon. Gérald-A. Beaudoin: Honourable senators, we are living historic times which are sad times for me. The death of Meech Lake is a very important event. You will allow a Quebec senator—Senator David is also from Quebec—to say a few words on the constitutional situation.

We have to remember that in 1867, one of the reasons, but not the only one, why Canada adopted the federal system was because Quebec had just adopted a civil code, because it was still of French language and French culture, in short, because Quebec was a distinct society. That is the main reason for Canadian federalism. Other provinces, the Maritimes, for instance, were favourable to federalism. The first Canadian constitutional crisis was not prompted by Quebec. It was induced by Nova Scotia who, in 1868, was not satisfied with Canadian federalism.

Sir John A. Macdonald solved the problem by rightly giving Nova Scotia what it was asking for. Later on, the Constitution was amended.

[*English*]

Senator Stewart: What was that amendment to which the honourable senator refers?

Senator Beaudoin: It has to do with the spending power, but I would like to respond to questions later, if you do not mind.

Senator Stewart: It certainly was not!

Senator Beaudoin: What do you mean when you say there was no amendment? The Constitution was amended later on, in 1907, for purposes of federal payments to the provinces, but I will return to that point later.

[*Translation*]

A federal system was chosen partly because of the distinct character of Quebec and also because the Maritimes wanted such a system. Then, and I think we owe it to the wisdom of Sir John A. Macdonald and Sir George-Étienne Cartier, that form of government allowed Canada, the small British colony lost in the north of the United States, to become, some 123 years later, the seventh industrialized power in the Western world.

I think that they were right, and there have been at least 23 amendments to the Canadian Constitution. I could come back on that point, but I do not intend to do so tonight. The Canadian federalism has changed considerably in time. Macdonald had dreamed of centralized federalism. Sir Wilfrid Laurier preferred a little less centralized version. At first, Mackenzie King wanted federalism to be somewhat decentralized, but he centralized it starting in 1935. Other Prime Ministers followed. That is to say that Canadian federalism has gone through phases, shifting toward centralization at times and toward decentralization at others. Hundreds of rulings were made regarding the legislative jurisdictions. Many constitutional conferences were held on the subject since

1907. The first one dealt with federal payments to the provinces.

The Canadian federalism has indeed evolved considerably. There were other constitutional crises—this was not the first—and we have resolved all of them. However, we have just witnessed the death of a very reasonable constitutional amendment which I think will have serious consequences. Never in our history has an amendment caused so much controversy. Some have said: “The process was undemocratic. The people were not involved. The talks took place behind closed doors.”

Senator Olson: In the middle of the night.

Senator Beaudoin: Senator Olson, I challenge you to find in the Canadian history one single case of an amendment which was discussed for three years and signed on three occasions by all First Ministers. There is none. Such a case does not exist. This constitutional amendment was debated at length and rejected. One could be for or against it. In this case, however, I am tempted to borrow from great French Minister Maurice de Talleyrand—Périgord an expression which he used when referring to an event during the French Empire: “It was more than a mishap, it was a mistake”.

Today, I feel that in the history of our country, a mistake was made. The Meech Lake Accord represented an acceptable form of federalism at a definite time in our history. It was consistent with our current requirements. It met the needs of the day. Yet, it happens sometimes in history that some men or women or political players do not realize the deep significance of some events. In my humble opinion—and I could be wrong—but this is what has just happened. History will identify those most responsible for this failure. Such is not my purpose today.

In one of his books, writer Stefan Zweig mentions the shining moments of human history. There is no doubt that we did not live through one of them. It was rather a dark moment. There is no doubt in my mind that we have just missed an appointment with destiny. We find ourselves today the way we were a few years ago. But in the meantime, Quebec has changed, as clearly evidenced by the events of these past few days.

I just cannot understand those who say that Quebec's five conditions were acceptable, but not the Accord itself. Such an attitude cannot withstand strict scrutiny. The Accord was signed on three occasions, analysed by experts for and against, and explained a hundred times. Personally, I wish that those who opposed the Meech Lake Accord, instead of wasting time, would have told us from the very beginning what they thought of this Accord. If the letter of this Accord is dead, we should at least try to preserve its spirit for tomorrow when we, as Francophones, Anglophones and Native Canadians, may try to resume the dialogue at the first opportunity.

I feel it is most unfair to blame this failure on the Prime Minister of Canada. I suggest that Prime Minister Mulroney and the ten Premiers who signed the Meech Lake Accord, who signed it again in June 1987, and who signed it once more at