

Let me begin starkly. I have served in Parliament for 18 years, and in national politics longer than that. I was the first prime minister born in Western Canada, and the only leader from outside Quebec invited to come in to campaign against René Lévesque's referendum. For six years, as Minister for External Affairs, I have seen, first-hand, the respect in which Canada is held in the world. I think I know this country, and know its worth.

There has never been a time when I was less sure of what would become of Canada, or more aware that we could come apart. I believe there is a real danger that Canadians, through anger or misunderstanding, could risk the future of our own country.

There were a lot of lessons from Meech Lake, but what struck me most was how many Canadians, particularly in Western Canada, felt shut out of decisions about our country. There is real anger at politicians, at the media, at the civil service, at political institutions which seem to have stopped being a mirror for Canadians, and instead, became a wall. Yet there is also, I think, a deep love of Canada, and a desire to build a great country. We have to get beyond anger and identify what exactly is wrong and what practical things can be done to make it better. And the way to start is to provide Canadians with the direct opportunity -- and the personal challenge -- to say what kind of unity we want.

Anger is often a first step to change, but there have to be further steps -- serious, thoughtful steps. And that is what Canada needs now.

When I talked with Canadians after Meech Lake, it became clear that our existing institutions are not trusted enough to draw Canadians together. We need something new, some means by which Canadians from Edson and Chicoutimi and Yellowknife and Lunenburg can talk constructively together. Last week, the Prime Minister announced the creation of a Citizens' Forum, which is designed to give Canadians the opportunity to learn about, and talk about, and decide the future of Canada. It is not a constitutional exercise, limited to lawyers, or people who call themselves "experts." It is more basic. It is about the kind of country we want our Constitution to reflect.

I persuaded the Cabinet to create this Forum. But only you can make it work. The morning it was announced, Keith Spicer and I met for an hour and agreed on two essential elements -- first, that politicians of all kinds must leave the Forum free to do its