

The Constitution

Soon after that, Canada repatriated her Constitution. And though it was no longer British law, deep down we all knew it would never be truly Canadian until Quebec had agreed to it. For the Constitution is more than a legal instrument; it enshrines a commitment of our hearts and minds to fundamental principles and aspirations. That's why I resolved to bring Quebec back into the Canadian constitutional family. For that to happen, there had to be changes, a new way of looking at things.

As I said at Sept-Îles: "If Quebec is weakened, then Canada is weakened. If Quebec is strong, then Canada is strong."

[English]

Yet we could not reopen the process, reopen the question, risking the consequences of another failure unless we were assured of some minimal conditions of success.

At Sept Îles I set for the Government the objective of convincing the Quebec National Assembly to give its consent to renewed federalism with honour and enthusiasm. I also stated that I would not undertake a constitutional path with ambiguity and improvisation. Once we had established the principles, we had to establish a process, one in which all partners in Confederation could feel that their interests were well served.

All provinces played an indispensable role in this regard. The Government of Quebec, led by Premier Robert Bourassa, drew up a five-point agenda based on its position paper, *maîtriser l'avenir*, which had been submitted to and powerfully endorsed by Quebecers in the 1985 provincial election.

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All provinces then agreed at Edmonton last summer that this agenda represented a reasonable basis for discussion, and further agreed with our suggestion that we should settle the Quebec question first.

Ministers and officials worked diligently over the autumn and the winter. In March, I concluded that this stage of the process had gone about as far as it could go without the involvement of First Ministers and, accordingly, I invited them to Meech Lake on April 30.

[Translation]

Our task was to reconcile Quebec's distinct needs with the interests of other provinces, and with the national interest. Any agreement had to be good for Quebec, good for the other provinces, and good for Canada. And it is, Mr. Speaker, the Meech Lake agreement is all of those things. It is consistent with the principles of Canadian federalism.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[English]

Mr. Mulroney: And it opens the door to a future in which Canadians are more united, in which we can address other concerns, such as Senate reform and fisheries, in a second round of constitutional negotiations. From a more unified

Canada, I am convinced we will achieve a more prosperous Canada.

In that spirit, First Ministers came to Meech Lake on April 30. There were just 11 elected representatives in that room, Mr. Speaker, but they represented the interests of all Canadians. Each represented his own province but all, in my judgment, were motivated by the national interest. The more we discussed, the more it became apparent that we could reach an agreement in principle, an agreement that would meet the test of fairness, an agreement that would stand the test of time, an agreement that would open the door to a new federalism based on reconciliation and mutual respect. To their very great credit, the Premiers were determined that this opportunity should not slip away for they knew another like it would not soon present itself again.

[Translation]

With the positive signals Quebecers have sent us in recent years and through the open-mindedness shown by the other provinces, the distinct nature of Quebec society within our Canadian Confederation is now acknowledged.

The dream of millions of Quebecers is becoming a reality.

The accord also clearly recognizes the existence of a francophone Canada centered in but not limited to Quebec, and an anglophone Canada based in the rest of the country, but also present in Quebec. Our linguistic minorities, wherever they live, can therefore count on the solemn commitment of the Parliament of Canada and every provincial legislature.

At the same time, federal-provincial relations will acquire a new degree of flexibility, making it possible to defuse pointless tensions and turn our Constitution into an inspiring, creative force.

In the area of immigration, federal-provincial agreements can be drawn up with provinces that ask for one. Once signed, they will be fully protected by the Constitution. These agreements should address the specific needs of the provinces that sign them, but the federal Government will remain ultimately responsible for setting national standards and objectives.

We have agreed to entrench the Supreme Court in the Constitution, which I believe Members will agree is appropriate, especially given the pre-eminent role of the High Court in interpreting the Charter.

The current legal requirement that three of the nine justices of the Supreme Court come from Quebec will also be entrenched in the Constitution.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Mulroney: And a joint procedure for nominating justices will ensure that they are acceptable both to the province involved and the federal Government, which I believe Members will agree conforms with the true spirit of federalism.