

Statement

Secretary of
State for
External Affairs



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NOTES FOR A LUNCHEON SPEECH

BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS,

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE JOE CLARK,

AT THE

WESTIN HOTEL, WINNIPEG

HOSTED BY THE MANITOBA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA

May 1, 1990.

Let me begin by expressing my thanks to the Manitoba Chamber of Commerce for giving me this opportunity to speak to you in Winnipeg. If you think you have heard too much about the Constitution, so, Lord knows, have I. Everyone has other issues we would rather discuss - but I asked to come here because I believe that we cannot get on to the achievement of our other goals unless we make progress on the Constitution. Moreover, I am genuinely alarmed about a distemper that is growing in Canada, in all parts of Canada, that could threaten our will to keep this remarkable country.

Differences are sharp on the question of the Meech Lake Accord, and some of you will be skeptical about the views, on that question, of any Minister of the Canadian Government. And certainly I am what I am - a Minister of that Government, a supporter of the Meech Lake Accord; and a Western Canadian who had the privilege of being elected Prime Minister of the country, and now has the responsibility, every day, of dealing with nations and peoples who profoundly envy the good fortune of Canada. I am a vigorous partisan (you can ask Nelson Riis) but I have tried, throughout my career, to put the larger interest ahead of my own, and it is in that spirit that I hope you will hear me today.

I want to make three points.

The first is that the issue raised by this controversy is about much more than the Meech Lake Accord. If the Accord is rejected, that will harm the unity and the reputation of all of Canada. People who contemplate rejecting Meech Lake should do so with their eyes open.

I will not get into the debate today about what the actual costs of rejection might be. No one can calculate that with certainty. I will make the case that, in my judgment, whatever the economic costs of rejection, we Canadians would pay an even higher price in the simple erosion of our will to live together.

On the other hand, in my view, if the Meech Lake Accord is approved by June 23rd, that will have its own symbolic importance, and will let us get on with other changes that would be impossible if Meech Lake fails. Of even more importance, it could cause Canadians, everywhere, to think and act more constructively about our whole country, as it is in 1990 and as it can become. The acceptance of the Meech Lake Accord must be seen, by all of us, as just the beginning of the renewal of this privileged, diverse and modern country.

My second point has to do with the practical options open to us in the 54 days between now and June 23rd.

Let me start with an option which some of you might favour, and tell you why I believe it is not available. That is the option of "scrapping" the Meech Lake Accord, and starting all over again. That sounds simple, straightforward, like the advice some of you wanted to give the Jets after they lost to the Oilers, or the advice I wanted to give to the Flames.

I am like Gary Filmon, and Gary Doer, and Sharon Carstairs, in that I was not in the room on that night at Meech Lake, or four weeks later in the Langevin Building, when eleven First Ministers agreed on the Accord. But I have been in rooms like that, as a First Minister, trying to get agreement on a difficult issue among Governments which, while all belonging to one country, are driven by different priorities and perspectives. And so I know how hard it is to get even majority agreement, let alone unanimity. The process fails much more than it succeeds - that is why there was such euphoria, everywhere in Canada, when that extraordinary Agreement was achieved.

Indeed, it was the failure to get that type of agreement, in 1982, that left us with the problem we are trying to resolve today. It is not stubbornness which produces reluctance to open the agreement already achieved; it is the virtual certainty that to reopen Meech is to unravel it, and therefore to destroy it.

That is where the initiative by Premier McKenna becomes so important. He, like everyone, recognizes that the Meech Lake Accord is not perfect, anymore than the British North America Act of 1867 was perfect, or the Statute of Westminster of 1931, or the Constitution Act of 1982.

Perfection is not available to mere mortals. But improvement is, and Premier McKenna has proposed an approach that allows an improvement of the Meech Lake Accord. He was the first Premier to oppose Meech Lake, and he considered all his options. He accepts that to reopen it is to kill it; and to kill it would have a high price for all of Canada. So, the New Brunswick Legislature introduced a companion Resolution to Meech Lake, which calls for additions to the Meech Lake Accord, additions which would repair some of the weaknesses of the original Accord. New Brunswick has asked other provinces to consider which of the McKenna proposals they could accept, which they could not, and what new proposals they might add as companion measures to the Meech Lake Accord.

That was a constructive initiative by one political leader, who used both compromise and creativity to help move this process and country forward. Other political leaders have responded. Nova Scotia has endorsed the McKenna companion Resolution. Significantly, Quebec has not ruled out the McKenna additions. The Parliament of Canada has approved the McKenna approach, and all-party hearings were held here, and elsewhere in Canada, by a Committee which will report to Parliament on May 18th.

An important aspect of the McKenna approach is that it invites other creative proposals by other legislatures, legislatures which have concerns about Meech Lake, but who want the country to move forward. In my view, as one Western Canadian, it provides a particular opportunity to Manitoba to propose positive additions that reflect the priorities of this Province and region.

We started with Meech. Now we have McKenna. I think the formula of Meech-McKenna-Manitoba could turn this crisis into a real step forward for Canada. One way or the other, Manitoba can make the difference.

Finally, on this point, let me deal with the argument that, before Manitoba takes an initiative, Quebec must move some more. While I believe that all Provinces will have to move if there is to be real progress, I share Roland Penner's view that the next move is up to Manitoba.

First, as I will argue in a minute, I believe that constitutional reform is at least as important to Western Canada as it is to Quebec, and that solving the present constitutional deadlock is the only way we can move on to the reforms this region wants.

But, I also think it important to recognize that the only reason we have the possibility of progress now is that Quebec has already moved. Quebec was shut out in 1982. Pierre Trudeau and the other Premiers made a deal, and did not tell the Premier of Quebec. He read about it the next morning in the newspapers. That exclusion created deep resentment in Quebec, as it would have created resentment here had Manitoba been the Province that was shut out. Quebecers realized that their exclusion in 1982 created a major problem for the rest of the country - a problem the rest of the country wanted resolved. A constitution does not work if one Province, representing almost 25 per cent of Canada's population, is not part of the process. So, some Quebecers wanted that Province to set a very high price before they would agree to make the Canadian Constitution work again. That is why the Parti Québécois put forward twenty-two proposals.

During the 1985 Provincial election in Quebec, M. Bourassa proposed a more moderate approach. It set forth five principles which were approved first, by the voters of Quebec, and then, in Edmonton in 1986, as a basis for negotiation, by all the Premiers of Canada. The Honourable Jack Pickersgill, a Manitoban who became one of the most powerful Liberals of our history, said of this process: "If Quebec is rebuffed, if this accord becomes discord, and the opportunity is lost to get the acquiescence of the constitutional authorities in Quebec, my guess is that it probably will not arise again for another generation and never again on such reasonable terms". Most students of the Canadian Constitution agree. So Quebec has already moved.

Part of the concern in Manitoba, of course, focusses on actions by Quebec that have nothing to do with Meech Lake - the passage of the sign law and the use of the notwithstanding clause. I understand that concern, as I understand the concern in Quebec about actions taken by other provinces in fields that also have nothing to do with Meech Lake. But the Quebec sign law happened without Meech Lake. So did the use of the notwithstanding clause, by Quebec, and for that matter by Saskatchewan.

Adopting Meech Lake does not affect those measures, but rejecting Meech Lake, particularly if that is portrayed as an act against Quebec, virtually eliminates any possibility that Quebec would soften its position on the language law, or on the notwithstanding clause. If you want people to be flexible, bring them in, do not shut them out.

My final point has to do with who benefits from the adoption of the Meech Lake Accord. Some critics argue that this is an "Accord for Quebec". To be more accurate, it is an "Accord for Canada" - and yes, I believe that is in Quebec's interest, but it is also in Manitoba's interest, and in Alberta's, and in Canada's. For several reasons.

First, the exclusion of any Province from the Nation's constitution is a symbol of disunity; when that province has an "indépendantiste" tradition, it can become an invitation to separation.

Second, as a practical matter, leaving Quebec out prevents constitutional reform. That was demonstrated respecting aboriginal title. Quebec was out of the Constitution, so stayed away from the Constitutional Conferences on aboriginal title between 1983 and 1987. Its absence helped prevent reform. Quebec will continue to stay away from Constitutional Conferences so long as it is outside the amending formula. So would Manitoba, if Manitoba were the province left out. And, on many constitutional questions, the other provinces, even if they could mount a majority of seven provinces and fifty per cent of the population, would act without Quebec only at great peril to the country. So they would not act.

On issues where Quebec has an established veto - as many of us believe it does on Senate Reform - nothing would move so long as Quebec were outside the Constitution.

If you kill Meech Lake, you kiss good-bye to progress on Senate Reform, and on other issues where the country has to play with a full deck.

The third cost of rejecting Meech I referred to earlier. No one can quantify their reaction, but investors, domestic or foreign, would change their assessment of Canada if we revived the divisions of a decade and more ago.

Our ability to work for creative compromise in the wider world would inevitably suffer, if we had fundamental fissures at home.

The attentions of our governments would be diverted to problems of holding the country together, rather than reaching out to Canada's extraordinary opportunities in a world in transformation.

And no one should underestimate the reaction in Quebec to a rejection of Meech Lake. I come from High River, but I consider it part of my obligation as a Canadian to learn something about nos compatriotes du Quebec, who were Canadians before we were. During the referendum campaign, I was the only English speaking Canadian, from outside Quebec, invited to come into the Province to campaign against sovereignty-association. One of the reasons Canada won that vote, and sovereignty-association lost, was because Pierre Trudeau promised, invoking my name and those of others, that there would be real constitutional change, to take account of the legitimate concerns of Quebecers who believe in Canada. The Constitutional Agreement of 1982 broke that promise, and caused many of those Quebec federalists to reassess their commitment to Canada.

Quebecers who have confidence in Canada believe the Meech Lake Accord is an action to respect the promise that let Canada win the Referendum debate. If Meech Lake is rejected, whatever the motive in Winnipeg or in Saint John's, many reasonable Quebecers will inevitably conclude that Canada does not want Quebec. And maybe there are some Canadians who don't - but there are millions more who do. We must understand - and not underestimate - the implications of our actions on Meech Lake.

None of this is said as a threat. You, Manitobans, will make your own decision. But I think I owe you my assessment of the stakes.

Let me conclude on a much more positive note, about where Meech-McKenna-Manitoba can lead us.

The country and the world are changing dramatically - indeed change is a constant in international affairs. A year ago, no one would have predicted the crumbling of the Berlin wall; or discussions of the end of apartheid between Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk; or the relatively new strength of international organizations, like the UN.

Those changes hold two broad implications for Canada. One is that they will inevitably require us to change our own behaviour - as new trading opportunities arise; as new environmental agreements require all nations to surrender some of their sovereignty; perhaps as the need for peacekeeping enlarges.

The other is that there are extraordinary opportunities for a country like ours - widely respected, both for our diplomacy, and for the way we marry a market economy with social justice; a country that is a model of tolerance and accomplishment. Those changes in the world, exciting in themselves, offer a particular promise to Canada. But we can take advantage of that only if we are working together, not pulling apart.

At the same time, within this country, there is a natural movement of population and power which is of particular interest to Western Canadians. A growing share of Canada's population lives in Western Canada. A dramatic growth of Asian and American markets means that trend will continue. The regional economy is diversifying, and the share of national head offices located in Western Canada is growing steadily.

We used to call the Prairies "next year country". But, to an increasing degree, next year is now. And those changes in the natural dynamics of the country will require changes in our institutions, maybe in our Constitution. The demand for Senate Reform is stronger here, and there will almost certainly be other changes proposed to take account of the new role of Western Canada. My point is that, in the next phase of constitutional change, the West may seek more movement than anyone else. We, particularly, will want a constitutional system that works, rather than one that is both incomplete and embittered by failure.

By almost any standards, we Canadians are the luckiest people in the world. We have freedom, and wealth, and the highest standards of social justice. But there is nothing automatic about our good luck. No one here can guarantee that our children will inherit a kingdom so peaceable as that in which we grew up. The world has known other serene communities that came apart when anger and antagonism became contagious. But it has also known communities that saw the danger of division, and found the imagination and the compromising spirit to grow stronger. I am sure that is what we Canadians will do, and I welcome the opportunity to speak to you today.