
The Future of Federalism

by Hon. Jean J. Charest, MP

The failure of the Meech Lake Accord marked a turning point in the development of federalism in Canada. We came upon a fork in the road which offered two choices – Meech or an alternate and unknown route. We chose the latter direction (or perhaps the choice was made for us). The road on which we are now travelling is a bumpy one to say the least with an uncertain destination. I wish to share with you what I see appearing on the horizon of this road travelled by a country that has put its very existence in question.

What I see first as I turn my attention towards the province of Quebec is a strong consensus that the road taken must lead Quebec and the Québécois in one direction – it must lead toward a more autonomous government. The question in Quebec is one of degree, with total independence being the extreme limit.

If I then turn my attention elsewhere outside of Quebec I find it difficult to get a clear picture of the rest of Canada. There is not, as far as I can tell, a consensus in the rest of the country. I do not see that Canada outside of Quebec has developed a sense of where it wants the country to go. This lack of a consensus can be explained. That which we call English Canada is not one homogeneous whole. Rather, what some people refer to as English Canada is a mixture of diverse regions, provinces and territories and varying economic situations.

Nonetheless there are some tendencies that are clearly discernible. For the sake of simplification I think it would be safe to assume that Canada's three most western provinces, British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan, have all taken positions in favour of a more decentralized federation. Other provinces, including Ontario, have mostly taken positions that are variations on the theme of a centralized federation.

In a few words what we now have since the demise of the Meech Lake Accord is Quebec clearly going in one direction and on the other hand the rest of Canada going in many directions.

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I think it important to underscore that in this context every option is open. I mean to say that Quebec will certainly seek to meet its concerns, within or without of Canada.

I believe that every option should be open, and considered, since it is the only way to have the full debate that this country must have if it is to survive and re-create itself into a meaningful entity for all of its people.

While we are making these observations I think it important to note that for more than 25 years, ever since the Laurendeau-Dunton Royal Commission on bilingualism and biculturalism, we have examined our existence as a country mostly from the angle of Francophone-Anglophone relations without ever finding the definite answers we were seeking. During this same period, our country has continued to mature and change. We have enriched our population with people from all over the world and have become a multi-ethnic, pluralistic society. More recently, we have witnessed the affirmation of Canada's native peoples who are seeking to take a place that should rightfully be theirs.

These new realities have added to the complexity of our national being. It is not enough for us to analyze our country under the light of Francophone-Anglophone relations. We must now factor in, among other considerations, our multicultural diversity and the heritage of our First Peoples. And, as you well know, any serious consideration of what Canada's future is, must deal with the grievances of western Canada. As we examine federal institutions, we must take these changes into account.

Some of those differences are what distinguish us in a fundamental way from other countries. For example, in the United States, there is a common link between individual citizens and their country expressed among other things through a common history, common ideals and a commonality of rights.

Canada is quite different. For example, Quebec has a different history, different symbols and a different perception of individual and collective rights. The same applies in a different way for native Canadians as well. Western Canada has its own set of unique characteristics. The reality of Alberta, for example, is quite different from

that of Nova Scotia just as southern Ontario is vastly different from Yukon.

These differences have not been, in the view of many Canadians, adequately reflected in federal institutions. The Canada we may seek to create tomorrow must take these differences and adapt federal institutions to them. But we must also go one step further – we must build on the diversity, use it to our own advantage and ensure that Canadian citizens see themselves reflected in the Canadian mythology.

For example, might we consider allocating, in both the federal House of Commons and in the provincial and territorial legislatures, a number of seats for aboriginal Canadians. This is done in the State of Maine, and elsewhere in the world, and seems to allow for native peoples in that state to raise concerns and issues before they reach crisis proportions.

Our challenge is not only to adapt, not only to be responsive to legitimate concerns and aspirations, but also to be creative. We cannot limit ourselves in terms of how we re-create Canada. We must be willing to ask all of the pertinent questions and consider all of the viable answers.

As I look forward in time, we know that the Bélanger-Campeau Commission is scheduled to table its report in the month of March, 1991. A few months later, the Spicer Commission will table its report, on the first day of July, 1991. The combined effect of these two reports, as well as others from other provinces, will be to force all Canadians into a collective debate at the end of which we will find out whether Canada will or will not continue to exist in its present form.

I want to be very clear on what is at stake. We are talking about the very existence of Canada, the Canada we know. Repairs to the current system will not suffice. We have moved way beyond any notion of what was once called "renewed federalism". Canadians must prepare for what will be, one way or another, a radical re-making of the whole Canadian structure of government and the country.

I expect that every aspect of Canadian life will be part of that debate, that every corner of the country will be involved, and that every Canadian will be moved by the seriousness of the discussion, the passion of the views expressed and the importance of its outcome.

Canadians interested in the future of Canada must actively seek out, identify and promote the common denominators upon which we can build this country. There are a few of these common denominators that are relatively easy to identify. First, there is geography. Whatever the political structures we establish, we will always be neighbours. We will always have to co-exist.

Constitutions do not by themselves regulate social and economic relationships that exist by the simple fact that we live together.

Secondly, our history has consistently been dominated by one common trait: the rejection of the American option. Whether in Quebec or outside of Quebec, Canadians do not want to be part of the United States. In this respect federal politicians know all too well that Canada's relationship with its southern neighbour is a matter of constant attention and debate.

Third, we have recognized and accommodated diversity in our political structures. Indeed a federal system of government is exactly that: an accommodation of diversity. But in our federation this accommodation is rather passive. The future may require a more dynamic expression of our diversity. The genius of Meech was that it recognized the distinct characteristics of Quebec, included them within our national constitution and thus became a bridge, an essential link, between Quebec and the rest of Canada.

Fourth, Canadians want the government to take a distinctive role in providing services to its people. The obvious example here is our health care system. I believe Canadians want this to continue in many areas of national interest.

I have named four common denominators, there are others. But as we examine our common traits I want to also stress that all Canadians must recognize and accept a range of *global trends* that affect the decisions and the ultimate choices we are about to make. The strength of recent global trends, including the explosion in the area of communications, the diminishing role of the superpowers and the emergence of middle power countries such as Canada, may have a decisive impact on the debate about our future. I suspect that these global trends will be a positive element favourable to those who want Canada to stay together.

A made-in-Canada federalism that reflects the diversity of Canada is now the new challenge. We can develop a Canada in which regional aspirations are included, in which linguistic and cultural differences are included, in which the concerns of all individual Canadians are also included. We need federal institutions which take into account both the shared values which distinguish us as Canadians and also those regional characteristics which we cherish and which Canada allows us to retain, promote and develop.

My worry is not whether we can do this, it is whether we are willing to do it. The people of Quebec have been seriously considering this matter, the structure of Canada, for over thirty years. Is the rest of the country ready to make a future for federalism? Is the rest of the country willing to make a future for Canada?*