

Accept the challenge of Meech Mulroney urges all Canadians

This week has been described as the "boiling point" in the dramatic debate over the Meech Lake constitutional accord.

On Wednesday, New Brunswick Premier Frank McKenna outlined his proposals for additions to the accord. Yesterday, Newfoundland Premier Clyde Wells introduced a motion in his legislature to rescind that province's approval of the deal.

Last night, in a rare nationally televised address, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney made an impassioned plea for its acceptance, telling Canadians that they must "never forget that the accord strengthens all of Canada." The following is the text of Mulroney's speech.

I HAVE asked for television time to speak directly to you, the people of Canada, about the future of our country.

We are at a critical juncture in our history. The decisions we make in the next 90 days will profoundly affect our lives. This is not the first time that our will to live together has been challenged. But we have always met those challenges and emerged stronger than ever.

We can do so again. We are a people who have overcome climate and geography and isolation to build a great country. Though small in population, we have claimed half a continent. Though few in number, we have built an economy that ranks with the best in the world. And all the while, we fashioned our own values of freedom and fairness and tolerance and created unity out of our diversity.

More than a place on the map, Canada exists in the minds of Canadians. And more than in its institutions, Canada lives in the hearts of us all.

For more than 200 years, French- and English-speaking Canadians have worked together for a stronger country.

In 1867, our ancestors found the key to building a stronger country. It was Confederation: a strong central government able to act decisively for the common good; and, initially, four strong provinces — Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario — each able to protect its identity and to promote its particular interests.

Two languages were recognized. Minority rights were protected. And Quebec's distinctiveness was acknowledged and guaranteed. Confederation was an idea that allowed for diversity in our national unity. And what a creative and generous and successful idea it was.

Canada is unique. We Canadians tend, sometimes, to take our country for granted. But others don't. To others, Canada is the model of a successful, modern nation that is federal, bilingual, multicultural, diverse, prosperous, and at peace. People around the world admire and respect Canada — and are shocked that anyone would even contemplate abandoning this idea that has brought such benefits to all its people.

FOR 123 YEARS, our will to live together has never failed us. It has prevailed whenever tested. But much of Canada's promise is yet to be redeemed.

The descendants of the first Europeans who came here have yet to establish an acceptable and just relationship with the descendants of aboriginal peoples. Our Constitution will not nearly be complete until we have done so.

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms needs to be strengthened. The Territories are evolving toward provincehood. The Senate must be reformed. Minority language rights still need to be reinforced. All of these tasks await us. But first we have to resolve the impasse now surrounding the Meech Lake accord.

As Prime Minister of Canada, my most important obligation is to work

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unceasingly to give life to the intangible but indispensable concept of bringing Canada together. A Constitution endorsed by only nine provinces out of 10 clearly lacks the unifying vision and strength such a fundamental document must bring to the life and dreams of a nation.

It is important that Quebec sign the Canadian Constitution — and this we achieve with the Meech Lake accord. But we must never forget that the accord strengthens all of Canada. A strong federal government working with strong provinces is in fact what makes Canada work.

Meech Lake gives all provinces, big and small, an equal say in amendments to important national institutions. I think it is right that provinces should have a say in whom the federal government appoints to the Senate and the Supreme Court. I think it is appropriate in a country as large as Canada that provinces have a say in the development of new national shared-cost programs in areas of exclusive provincial jurisdiction. I think it is important for the Prime Minister and the premiers to meet annually to find ways to strengthen our economy and to increase prosperity for all Canadians.

The Meech Lake accord does all this — and renews our collective will to live together.

I know that Meech Lake is not perfect. But, it is an important instrument for good in Canada — it brings us all together on reasonable terms and makes us truly one Canada, again. That is an important legacy for our children because only together can we then work out solutions to all of the other problems that challenge us now and in the future.

In the three years since the accord

was endorsed by all 11 first ministers, circumstances have changed; new provincial governments have been elected and some Canadians have raised concerns during public hearings. Unfortunately, for some, Meech Lake has become a lightning rod for longstanding tensions in this country — tensions that once again are challenging our collective will to live together.

BUT NOW is the time for imagination and determination, for those in positions of responsibility to find the way forward. Because I am convinced, more than ever, that Meech Lake represents our best hope for unity.

New Brunswick was the first province to express reservations: it held public hearings and produced a legislative report with a number of recommendations.

Last Friday, Premier Frank McKenna wrote to inform me of his intention to improve on Meech Lake through a companion resolution that would add to but not subtract from the accord, and would address a number of concerns that have been raised.

Those concerns include equality of the sexes, aboriginal rights, northern interests, minority language rights, the commitments of governments to reduce regional disparities and public participation in constitutional reform.

This is not a take-it-or-leave-it proposition — but a number of amendments that all Canadians should examine seriously. I believe it is possible to extend a hand to Canadians who feel they were overlooked by the Meech Lake accord — aboriginal Canadians, northern Canadians, certain women's groups — without



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undermining the accord and the consensus it represents.

Meech Lake would become part of the Canadian Constitution by the June 23 deadline. And a companion resolution would follow. Premier McKenna has not closed any doors on the timing of the second resolution — nor on the range of amendments it would contain.

I have given careful consideration over the past several weeks to convincing the premiers to try to break the Meech Lake impasse. I have come to the conclusion, however, that doing so would not be helpful or appropriate at this particular moment. I believe that Canadians want to participate, themselves, in the resolution of this great national issue. Accordingly, I have decided to introduce Premier McKenna's companion resolution to the House of Commons next week and immediately refer it to a Special Committee of the House.

The committee will begin public hearings on the resolution at the earliest possible moment. Once the resolution has been given a full hearing, it will be brought to Parliament for a vote — with whatever suggestions for further improvements that emerge from the hearings.

THE HOUSE of Commons, having already twice voted overwhelming support for the Meech Lake accord, can by such an initiative signal its desire to reach out to all Canadians to allay any concerns they may still have about the accord.

Crucial decisions await us all in the coming weeks. But I remain confident — because throughout our history, the Canadian way has been one of accommodation and reasonableness. These values have served Canada well.

I have travelled widely across the country recently, and I have been moved by what I saw and heard in many small communities across this great land. I have wanted to hear what Canadians had to say. If we listen with our hearts, we can hear, all across Canada, men and women saying in the language of their ancestors, with their particular accent and in the simple and evocative words of everyday life, how fortunate we are to live in a country such as ours.

I love Canada — all of Canada. When our ancestors looked at deep snow-covered forests, at prairies that stretched to the horizon, and at mountains that seemed to touch the sky, in their hearts they knew they had already seen a magnificent country.

Generations of Canadians have built better, even than they dared dream — from wilderness they formed civilization, from isolation they derived a sense of country and from each other they drew both family and spiritual commitment into a large and a generous definition of nationhood. In this simple and courageous way, they built Canada.

Today I ask all Canadians to look into their hearts, and see the magnificent country we have built together. All of us, English- and French-speaking alike, new Canadians and old from Newfoundland and Labrador to British Columbia — all of us without exception have been blessed by citizenship in this splendid land, our home.

This is not just a constitutional problem, nor is it a debate among politicians. This is above all a question of will — the national will to be true to the legacy of tolerance and generosity of spirit on which this country was built.

I urge all Canadians to summon the resolve to unify Canada. Let us come together to renew the strength of our nation. Let us join together and bring justified pride to all of our citizens, especially the youngest among us, to whom we, as Canadians, owe the legacy of a united and bountiful land.