

We should also be careful about expanding the substantive agenda of constitutional reform. In the current charged climate, failure to reach consensus on issues will be regarded as yet another affront to dignity in some quarters: whether in Québec, the West, among Aboriginal Peoples or others. And Canadian history teaches that consensus on substantive constitutional reform will be notoriously hard to reach.

My prescription for getting out of the current constitutional impasse is to reach for consensus on a modest package of institutional reforms, to which are attached a bundle of low cost symbols, symbols which are not coupled to the power apparatus in a significant way. The negotiations should focus on trading off symbols. Particular symbols sought in different quarters are not mutually

exclusive. A package of symbols could be proclaimed together in a low cost preamble, or in other parts of the Constitution not significantly entwined with the power apparatus.

Of course, it is always difficult to go backwards in negotiations. Québec achieved a high cost symbol in the Meech Lake process. The "distinct society" recognition was coupled to the power apparatus, as it occurred in a interpretative provision. At least, this is how the recognition of Québec as a distinct society was ultimately perceived, within and without Québec. It is difficult to think that Québec's dignity can now be assuaged in any lower cost way. That is a likely result of the past four years, and it is a reality certain constitutional actors would do well to understand.

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The forum brought together about 20 academics from across the country, including 4 francophones and 1 anglophone from Québec, 1 Métis, 1 aboriginal, and other participants representing the different regions/provinces of English-speaking Canada. The group included supporters and opponents of the Meech Lake Accord, those looking for modest changes in existing federal arrangements, others convinced that only a more radical rearrangement of our constitutional landscape based upon some variant of a 2+ nation formula would do the trick.

The discussions were informal, helped by the fact that there were no papers to be presented and no attempt on the part of the organizers to force consensus on any of the issues that we face.

The most useful part of the get-together, from my point of view, was the chance it gave us to collectively think through the moves likely to come out of

the federal government in the coming months and the timetable for constitutional debates into 1992. The symposium also made it clear that our future thinking about Canada-Québec relations needs to be along two-track lines: 1) in the event that some new arrangement within an ongoing federal system can be worked out and sold to the Canadian people through referendum and the like; 2) in the event that we are heading toward a disentanglement in the Canada-Québec relationship. Each scenario has different implications for such questions as the use of constituent assemblies, Senate reform, or official language policy. In either case, scrupulous attention will have to be paid to aboriginal issues and to questions of minority language rights and the multicultural character of both Canada (outside Québec) and Québec. What must be avoided at all costs is the intolerance of ethnic nationalism of the sort we have been witnessing in the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia where multi-national federations are coming apart.