

Opinion

A Meech primer: some options

Meech me. (me' ch / me) Colloquial. Orig. Cdn. 1987 constitutional conference at Meech Lake, Quebec. A derisive remark which sarcastically implores one to take advantage of the speaker. Meech mol. Fr. Cdn. To ignore, to judge against despite protestations.

The story so far:
At a government retreat at Meech Lake in 1987, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney worked out a set of amendments to Pierre Trudeau's 1982 Canadian Constitution, which replaced the British North America Act (BNA). The BNA was created by the British Parliament and laid out the rules for governing Canada.

Quebec did not sign the 1982 Constitution, but agreed to do so with the 1987 amendments in place. Each of the provinces was to approve the amendments within three years — by June 29, 1990 — or the accord would die.

Among other things the agreement called for an elected Senate, rather than the lifetime appointments senators now enjoy, and a clause which recognized Quebec as a "distinct society", and allowed it certain rights beyond the Constitution.

Canada is a loosely federated group of provinces. Each province has primary control over its affairs and wields much more clout than an American state, for instance. Quebec, by way of several French only language laws passed since the late 1970s, has changed its orientation from a bilingual province to a unilingual French one.

Awash in a sea of English North Americans, Quebec is trying to legislate its cultural survival. Business must be conducted in French, children must be educated in French and signs must be in French. All this makes the substantial English population there second class citizens because their language rights are ignored.

This doesn't bother the French, who for generations formed the working class while the English ran the economy. To them, turn-about is fair play.



Reaume With a View
with BRAD REAUME

With the failure of the Meech Lake Accord Quebec feels English Canada has denied recognition of what has already been legislated within Quebec's borders. English Canada perceives La Belle Province as having more rights than the others. As well, it is upset with the lack of accommodation for English speaking Quebecers.

And while it's true only Newfoundland turned down the amendments, other provincial premiers admitted they supported Meech Lake in the name of national unity, otherwise known as the status quo.

Now we are at a crossroads. Canada must decide between a new federalism, an attempted maintenance of the status quo, or a divorce.

A new federalism could mean a stronger central government and a major loss of authority for the provinces. Maintenance of the status quo could mean debate is allowed to fade, and Quebec remains in control of much of its destiny through its many and wide provincial powers — perhaps even through an expansion of those powers.

The other option is a separation. That would require much more than a simple declaration. Borders, apportioning the national debt and other matters would have to be resolved.

One possibility remains unmentioned. English Canada could go to war, a civil war to hold the country together. The United States fought such a war to keep its union together. Battles raged over secession, not over slavery. The latter was a side issue, entangled with the causes of the war but not its main concern.



A terribly flawed process

To say that nothing has changed in Canada is to profoundly misunderstand the failure of the Meech Lake Accord. But regardless of how one feels about the outcome, the terribly flawed process virtually guaranteed a harrowing experience for all concerned. Much of the bitterness, anger and divisiveness in the country can be laid right at its doorstep.

When the original Meech Lake Accord was reached three years ago, the news was sprung upon the country following a closed-door meeting of all the premiers and Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. There was absolutely no understanding at the time, except among a small group of insiders, of what had been discussed and what the Accord was all about.

And for many months to come, Canadians were kept on the outside looking in while politicians burned up telephone lines with private chats and public warnings that the country would break up if the Accord didn't go through.

The rhetoric became more threatening as the new premiers of Manitoba, New Brunswick and Newfoundland announced their reluctance to go along with the original Accord. The federal government stated repeatedly that rejection of the Meech Lake Accord would spell disaster for the country.

As the constitutional clock ticked away, the public got caught in the doomsday scenario predicted by its political leaders. Quebecers increasingly believed a rejection of the Accord was a rejection of Quebec by English Canada. In other parts of the country, there was a feeling that ratification of the Accord would be submitting to the interests of Quebec against the good of the nation as a whole. Perception replaced fact at an alarming rate and stirred



Mainstream Canada
with TERRY O'SHAUGHNESSY

regional resentments from coast to coast.

The process did nothing to help the general public better understand the complexity of the Accord and the various arguments on all sides. It did nothing to build trust in the political representatives who were the key players in the negotiations. It did nothing to reduce the divisiveness and rancor within the country, and it did nothing to reassure foreign investors and the world at large that Canada is a stable country in full control of its destiny.

So the question begs, what have we learned from all this?

For starters, our political leaders, and especially the federal government, should learn that they must never again put the country through such turmoil as was guaranteed by public exclusion from process.

They should learn that constitutional reform is closer to brain surgery than it is to cutting beef in a butcher shop. They must learn that it requires more than deal making and high pressure tactics to gain public endorsement and support.

Certainly the hard lessons of Meech have just begun. But one lesson should have been self-evident: A roll of the dice was no way to deal with such a matter. Constitutional reform is not a craps game.

What about a chinchilla pet?

Remember the cartoons from years ago? I'm thinking in particular of the ones concerning Sylvester the cat.

He always makes me laugh, but the funniest of all his cartoons featured an escaped baby kangaroo who was terrorizing the neighbourhood.

When Sylvester first laid eyes on it, his eyes grew round, and he said in amazement, "Gee, that's the biggest mouth I've ever seen!"

These same words tripped easily off my tongue the first time I saw a chinchilla. It looked for all the world like a huge, stuffed toy mouse — with battery-powered whiskers twitching constantly at warp speed.

The chinchilla and I looked at each other in silence. He had large, soft brown eyes through which he regarded me with curiosity tinged by something like amusement.

His silver-grey fur looked so invitingly soft that I reached my hand up to the cage to touch it. You can imagine my laughter when he gave an effortless hop, reminiscent of the baby kangaroo, and sat watching me from the top of an eight inch platform in his cage.

My laughter seemed to irritate him, and he showed his disgust by brushing his front paws repeatedly through his whiskers, then turning his back on me to indicate that the audience was over.

Completely taken by the entertaining personality of this creature, I decided to do a little research.

The chinchilla is in fact a charming animal with a gentle disposition. He weighs surprisingly little for his size, and his coat is even softer than it looks. (I hold the belief that warm soft fur on a living creature is infinitely preferable to dead animals stretched over a human being, but I realize not everyone shares this view.)

It costs very little to feed a chinchilla; the pellets are readily available at your pet store. The



Pets & You
with ANNE NORMAN

price of any required vitamin supplements is also low, and the same goes for the water bottle you'll need to keep fresh clean water on hand at all times.

A cage may often be picked up second hand, at a fraction the cost of a new one. Yard sales can sometimes be virtual gold mines for items such as cages and accessories.

If you do purchase a used cage, make sure you scrub it out well, then remove all traces of soap or cleanser by rinsing with very hot water.


Wood chips make the best bedding. Pine chips are cheaper than cedar and may be used almost exclusively, as chinchillas have very little odor.

Another big plus, according to several chinchilla owners, is that these little critters are very clean and easily house trained.

When you add to this the quiet and affectionate nature of chinchillas, you come up with an extremely likeable pet.

Now for the price. Many people roll their eyes heavenward at the mere thought of paying close to \$100 for a small pet. You should take into account that a chinchilla will easily live 10 years, maybe longer. This makes your initial investment a very small amount indeed.

There you go, something to consider when your child wants a pet (or when you do). Remember Sylvester's words, and check out "the big mouth at your pet thtore." It might be fun.



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