

Opinion/Letters

Spring brings a thaw in the constitutional arena



**NORTHERN
INSIGHTS**

by Larry Sanders



It was the third day of spring. There was still a nip of winter in the air, but the sun was shining warm enough to do more damage to the snow piles.

Inside the Seminar Centre at Confederation College, 18 people had decided to pass up the call of Nature and take up the invitation from Thunder Bay-Atikokan MP Iain Angus to assemble, one more time, and talk about the Canadian Constitution.

The atmosphere inside was much like the weather—still a bit of chill in the air, but warming to spring.

The gathering was the reconvening of Angus's Constituent Assembly on the Constitution—an undertaking similar to ones convened by other members of Parliament, designed to take the constitutional discussion out of closed rooms and into our hearts and minds.

When Angus's first Assembly was held in January, the 40 or so participants at the time drew up a list of what they wanted—and didn't want—in a constitutional package.

This reconvened meeting in March was held to discuss the Beaudoin-Dobbie Report, officially known as the Report of the Special Joint Committee on a Renewed Canada.

Angus and his staff had prepared a list of what the January Assembly had "won" (points of agreement with Beaudoin-Dobbie) plus what they had "lost" (points where the Joint Parliamentary-Senate Committee either ignored or differed with what the Assembly had asked for).

More agreement than disagreement

Surprisingly, the list of "winners" was longer than the points of disagreement. Beaudoin-Dobbie accepted and the Assembly agreed on:

- a reformed, elected Senate with proportional representation.
- seats for aboriginal representatives at the constitutional table, and in a reformed Senate.
- more devolution of powers from Ottawa to the provinces.
- a Social Covenant (formerly the Social Charter) respecting, but not necessarily guaranteeing, Canadians' rights to things like a minimum standard of living, decent health care, education, full employment, collective bargaining through unions, and clean air and water.
- bilingualism
- multiculturalism

The Constituent Assembly had asked for recognition of sexual equality rights, proportional representation in the House of Commons, aboriginal seats in the House of Commons, a recall procedure for MP's, enshrinement of Constituent Assemblies for future constitutional discussions, and national referendum. Beaudoin-Dobbie either left out those concepts or recommended they be deferred for later discussion.

In the first Assembly, Angus stood in the back and took notes. In this one, he was front and centre. As a senior member of the NDP caucus, he had been part of the wheeling and dealing at the eleventh hour that led to the Beaudoin-Dobbie compromise. As a result, Angus spent much of the time at his four-hour Assembly defending Beaudoin-Dobbie.

Promising news

The process from here on will be much the same, with federal politicians, premiers and aboriginal leaders hammering out compromises which people like Angus may end up having to defend to his constituents.

The promising news from the Assembly was a greater willingness to compromise.

Despite strong feelings against principles like recognizing Quebec as a distinct society, or dissatisfaction over the exclusion of any special sexual equality provisions, a survey completed by participants after the event indicated a willingness (by a three to one ratio) to allow points like that to be included or excluded from the final constitutional package, if that's what it takes to make a deal.

One participant even joked, as she was leaving, "perhaps we'll see each other in a month or so, for more talk like this."

In other words, there's greater willingness—at least by some—to take the time to hear everyone's point of view in this round of constitution-making.

The inauspicious news from this Assembly was the waning of participation and an underlying tone of frustration.

One participant probably spoke for hundreds who weren't there when he complained, "people are out of work. They're fed up with all this constitutional talk. They want to see some action on the economy."

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Discussion paper examines the Canadian forest industry

The following are excerpts from a discussion paper on the Canadian Forest Industry prepared by the Liberal National Caucus.

Canada's Forest Industry

Forestry is Canada's largest industry, accounting for 18 per cent of manufactured goods shipments. In 1989, the value of industry shipments—primarily pulp, paper and lumber—amounted to \$49 billion, contributing \$19.5 billion to Canada's trade balance; more than that of agriculture, fisheries, energy and mining combined. The forest industry accounts for 900,000 direct and indirect jobs in Canada, with almost 350 communities dependent on the industry.

Today, the industry is in jeopardy. As it loses foreign markets, thousands of forest-related jobs across Canada are being lost, and obsolete mills are being closed or are struggling to return to profitability.

Environmental issues will be a major consideration of future forest policies. The industry must adapt to the environmental perspectives of buyer nations, and to the stresses such as acid rain and global warming.

Canadian Timber Supply

Forests are renewable resources, restocked through a process of regeneration. Canada's forests have unfortunately undergone significant depletion during this century, having been harvested more rapidly than they could regenerate through natural and artificial processes.

Ten US states have introduced laws requiring the use of recycled fibre, and 11 states have adopted voluntary programs. With 57 per cent of US newsprint consumption supplied from Canadian sources (84 per cent of Canadian shipments), the most important consideration is an early entry into the recycled-paper market. Canada will lose critical markets if we fail to adapt.

Trade in forest products

The Canadian forest industry has long played a substantial role in the domestic and global marketplace, holding 21 per cent (as of 1988) of the world forest product exports.

The forest industry worldwide is being disrupted by the entry of new and significant competitors. The plantation forests of the southern hemisphere pose a serious competitive threat to Canada's established firms.

Non-tariff barriers are a clear example of government action affecting trade patterns. Technical standards, such as building codes, can exclude certain products from a market. Non-tariff barriers can be averted if Canada can meet market demand, thus creating the possibility for valuable sales opportunities.

While some sectors of the Canadian forest industry have capitalized on competitive opportunities, Canada still lags behind other countries. International forest trade and competitiveness demand much more investment in the field of applied research and development, if Canada is to overcome the scientific and technological challenges of the future.

Bilateral Trade

Trade in forest products between Canada and the US is a nearly one-way flow. For example, in 1989, Canadian exports of softwood lumber amounted to roughly \$3.4 billion, whereas imports from the US to Canada totalled only \$0.2 billion. For pulp and paper products, the total value of exports was \$9.8 billion, while imports from the US to Canada was \$1.1 billion.

The forest product trade relationship between Canada and the US is not without its political difficulties, as evidenced by the trade in cedar shakes and shingles, softwood lumber and plywood.

Under the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), most existing tariffs applicable to the trade of forest products began declining in 1989 and should be reduced to zero by 1998. The duties on forest products entering the US prior to the introduction of the FTA, with the exception of plywood, were already quite low.

The competitive positions of both Canada and the US will determine whose exports will take a larger share of the American or Canadian markets respectively, as tariffs are cut.

The questions remains whether or not the US will agree to a subsidy definition which would reduce Canadian susceptibility to adverse actions of the US forest industry or the American Congress.

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