

# Canadian Unity: The Calgary Initiative

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“The Canadian Constitution can no longer be amended by the federal government alone. So we need the participation of the provinces, and they know it.” With this statement, made 10 days before the premiers’ meeting in Calgary, Alberta, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien gave his endorsement to the premiers’ discussion on Canadian unity. And so, nine of Canada’s premiers (Quebec’s Lucien Bouchard declined to attend) and its two territorial leaders engaged in 10 hours of debate September 14-15, 1997. What they ended up with was a short, precise document outlining a new framework for unity and a process for attaining public support and approval for this document.

Prior to the debate, the leaders were divided essentially into two differing opinion groups. For example, the Atlantic premiers and Saskatchewan’s Roy Romanow wanted to show Quebec that the rest of Canada was prepared to engage in constitutional change. British Columbia’s Glen Clark, Alberta’s Ralph Klein, and Ontario’s Mike Harris did not want to go beyond deciding how the consultation process would work. However, the first group pushed for a specific proposal, and it was this group that won. After agreement was reached, each promised to take it to their electorate for approval.

Initial reaction to the Calgary Declaration appeared to be positive, and Chrétien’s own advisers admitted to the media that the provinces would have a better chance of succeeding in finding unity agreement than would any initiative coming from Ottawa. However, some critics have argued that the entire process was nothing more than a public relations initiative. Whether or not the Declaration is approved by the Canadian people, it will have no legal bearing on constitutional amendments. And although it appeared to have resolved the concerns of the Western provinces and those of the federal Leader of the Opposition, Preston Manning—in terms of the “distinct society” clause that brought down the previous accords—Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard scoffed at the efforts of the leaders.

The process for approving this Declaration was different once again from the Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords. The 1987 Meech Lake needed ratification by each provincial legislature, and failed when the Newfoundland and Manitoba legislatures did not achieve ratification before the three-year deadline was up. The 1992 Charlottetown accord was put to the people of Canada in separate referendum votes held in Quebec and the rest of Canada in 1995. That accord failed when the results were a resounding “no.”

Each of the leaders appeared to have his own agenda. Some observers say that New Brunswick’s Frank McKenna—who recently retired from politics—and Saskatchewan’s Roy Romanow were followed by ghosts of previous constitutional talks. Both played important roles in previous talks, McKenna during Meech Lake and Romanow during the original repatriation of the Constitution in 1981. B.C.’s Glen Clark had to face an electorate that voted down the Charlottetown accord with a 68 per cent “no” vote.

Whatever the outcome of this latest round of constitutional talks, it is becoming more and more apparent that the debate of the last 10 years has evolved into much more than bringing Quebec back as an active member of the Canadian constitutional family. Indeed, the very framework for Canada’s federalism is now under scrutiny, and with the diversity of viewpoints from each of the players, it remains to be seen if another constitutional ghost will haunt the Canadian political scene.