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# *What it Means to be Canadian*

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by Hon. John A. Fraser

*The constitutional debate has legal, political and economic dimensions. But ultimately it is a matter of national will. On November 25, 1991 the Speaker of the House of Commons delivered an address to the Rotary Club of Ottawa. His comments dealt with both decorum in the House and the national unity issue. The part of his speech calling for a resolution to the present constitutional impasse is reprinted below.*

**I**t is fashionable nowadays to say that Canada began on a sunny July 1 in 1867. That is a convenient date and it marks a constitutional bringing together of the people that lived in British North America, or at least a lot of them. But it is folly to say it was the beginning of the country because people who speak English and people who speak French had lived together for several hundred years. In addition, our aboriginal peoples were here. Surely, looking back on it now, we must confess that they should have been included in 1867 and it is to our shame that they were not. It is our hope now that they will be included. But the reality of life in Canada is that we did live together for a long time. We lived together with certain understandings.

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*John A. Fraser has been a member of the House of Commons since 1972. He was elected Speaker of the House of Commons in 1986 and re-elected in 1988.*



(Photo credit: John Evans, Ottawa)

Let me take you back a little bit in history. We cannot go back far enough with accuracy on the aboriginal history of our country, but we can remember when our French speaking citizens came to North America. We can also remember that in those days the relationship between the Europeans when they got here and our own native people was one of friendship. We have to go on a bit and remember the British conquest of Quebec in 1759, not because we want to open old wounds, but because we want to remember what happened after 1759. The British in their wisdom at that time guaranteed to our French speaking citizens on the St. Lawrence their language, religion (and religion was a much bigger thing then than it is today) the education of their children and the civil law. I am not here to debate the semantics of the words "distinct society". But most certainly that was the beginning of it.

One can say, "Well, so what?" Let us take a look at 1776, the start of the American Revolution. Does anybody really believe that British North America could have

survived that enormous upheaval if the French in the St. Lawrence had decided to join that revolution?

Let us come a little farther along to the war of 1812. It is a war that Americans do not like to remember because they lost it! We ought to remember it because we won. But can anybody really believe that if our French speaking citizens had not stayed loyal we would have been able to turn back the American armies coming up into Canada? Have we forgotten Chateauguay where a British commander with 500 British troops turned back an army of 7,000 Americans. Of the 500 British troops, 90% were French speaking. Have we forgotten so quickly the rebellions of 1837 and 1838? If those rebellions had the full support of our French speaking citizens in the St. Lawrence, does anybody really believe that by 1867 we would have put together, a constitution that brought together most of the English speaking and most of the French speaking people in Canada?

I could go on. We went through World War I with difficulty. There were great strains on this country but there were not sufficient strains to break it apart, as fragile as some historians have said our unity was.

My father enlisted in World War I. Before he became a pilot he was a stretcher bearer in a unit called the Fourth Field Ambulance in the Canadian Army. The first two days he was in action in 1915 he was on the right flank of a French speaking Canadian infantry regiment. He said, "600 of them went into the line and 300 came back and I carried half of them out."

Consider the depression; consider the fact that we came through that together; consider also World War II and the number of people in this country that took on our obligations to meet the terror, the anger and the awesome force of Nazism. We did it together. Have we forgotten so quickly that we put nearly a million men and women in arms? Have we forgotten the reasons for it?

I saw a text on current world history a few weeks ago when I was hunting in Alberta. I was hunting with a young lad who said this is the book he was studying in school. It was written by Americans and published in the United States. It had a comment in it that it had been adjusted for Canadian schools. There was a one page insert on the whole of World War I.

It is because we are forgetting our history that when we have difficulties now we have nothing to turn to. We do not have the memory of what we have done together, how brave our people have been, how remarkably unselfish, and how wise at times.

One can carry on after World War II. We met the challenge of the Korean conflict, 25,000 Canadians served there. If my memory is correct, the enlistment rate for the forces in Korea were higher on a per capita basis out of the province of Quebec than any other province. I served

modestly in the armed forces at that time. Of the officer cadets and later officers that I served with, one third were French speaking. We went through all of the difficulties, the changes in Quebec and then the changes in Canada. We brought hundreds and thousands of people here from all over the world and we found a way to live together, and for the most part to leave our resentments behind. After many years of hard work and unselfishness on both sides, both English speaking and French speaking, we had the referendum of nearly ten years ago in which Quebec voted 60% to stay with the country.

Yet we are told by some people, including historians and others, that the only hope for Canada is to split up. It seems to me a very strange way to talk about the future when you consider what we have done together and what we still have to do together.

I have been running, with a lot of help, a Parliamentary Exchange Program, bringing into Canada Members of Parliament from the Eastern and Central European countries, including the Soviet Union, I have just come back from Czechoslovakia. I have been in Poland and Hungary and the Soviet Union. And of course they are interested in the constitutional debate which we are having amongst ourselves. But wherever you go in those countries they will tell you the same thing. They will say, "We will trade our problems for yours any day. How could it be a people who have done so much and are still so favoured could put their country at risk?" Perhaps some of us have had it too good, but a lot of us have not. Perhaps some people over the past decades have lost track of how hard so many of us worked and so many of our ancestors worked to build the country. It was not done by defeatism. It was not done by meanness. It was done by generosity. It was done because people believed in something and they believed in each other.

I sometimes say to people, look around you. Look at each other. You know each other. You know what you believe in. You know what you all believe in. Every poll seems to show that if one can get off the particular annoyance or grievance, most Canadians want to keep this country together. But it cannot be done by just complaining. It cannot be done just by finding fault with everyone and everything about this place. It is astonishing to me that even in the political sphere, and here I have to tread cautiously, there are politicians who seem to think that the only purpose for electing a person is to represent that particular riding or that particular region. If that is the only purpose for electing anybody to the national House of Commons, then one may as well send a delegate.

The task of government in our democratic system is greater than that. Because when we are elected to the House of Commons, yes we have to represent our riding

and yes we have to represent the views of the people in our region, and most of us understand that and most of us have done it again and again. But we also, in doing that duty, have to look after, or have to worry about the public interest of people in St. John's, Toronto and Ottawa, Mississauga, Montreal, Trois Rivières, Regina, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Yukon and the Northwest Territories. This is something that the best people that you send to the House of Commons learn. Most learn it pretty rapidly. Most try very hard at it. But it is just not enough to do it in the House of Commons. As citizens we have to be able to think that way also, that it is not just the grievance of our own backyard that must take up all our time and our attention, and sometimes our vocal annoyance. We have to think in terms of each other. If we do we suddenly see an extra dimension to being Canadian.

Anybody could do a bookkeeping account of this country. It would not be very difficult to find accountants and learned men and women who have given different versions over the last couple of months about what might happen if this country broke up. It is not very difficult to get economists to give different versions about what is going to happen to the country if it stays together. As a matter of fact I once took economics and I have never really trusted economists ever since. But that is another matter.

My point is if we want to save this country, and I think most of us do, we have got to start remembering our history, remembering what we have done together and remembering that what brought us together is that we did care for each other and that we thought it was better to be together than to be separate and apart. It is important that all of us say this. It is not enough just to argue about the different constitutional proposals that are floating about the country. The question that has to be asked is to what degree will they maintain our unity? To what degree will they make sure that all Canadians are cared for, and to what degree will they secure our future? If anybody thinks that anyone is going to come up with an absolutely perfect set of constitutional proposals then they are living in an academic dreamland.

The *British North America Act* was not perfect, but it served us very well. The British do not even have a written constitution. We have to remember that the Lord put us imperfect into an imperfect world. We have to get enough down and on paper that we can agree on. There may be some things we will have to agree on later. But nobody should be approaching this on the basis of it is "either/or" because, after all, if that is what my ancestors and some of yours had in mind, we would have never

put the country together in the first place. We have to think of this country in terms that make us realize how intensely fortunate we really are. One could say that does not sound so complicated. It is not complicated. But it is a matter of spirit, not just academic or intellectual nitpicking. What it amounts to is saying, "Yes, we are Canadians. We have been Canadians a long time. We know why we are Canadians. We know how lucky we are to be Canadians. We are not going to let it slip between our fingers and we are not going to let anybody talk us into having it slip between our fingers."

***Sir John A. Macdonald once said: "We are a great country and shall become one of the greatest in the world if we preserve it. We shall sink into insignificance and adversity if we suffer it be broken."***

Sir George-Étienne Cartier said in 1867 when Canadian Confederation was achieved, "All it took was fairness, justice and some compromise on both sides." Then he said, "I hope that if it" (meaning the *British North America Act*) "must be amended, it will not be to narrow the principles of fairness on which it is founded, but rather to enlarge them even more."

Surely that is our task. There are people who have been left out. It is now time to bring them in. There were things that were not put in the original *British North America Act*. It is time to include them. There are aspects of life today that were not thought about a hundred and twenty-five years ago, or in some respects even ten or eleven years ago when we had our last round at the Constitution. These things should be considered. But always they must be considered on the basis that we have a country we are proud of, that has been a model to most of the world, that has defied all the prognostications of failure which met its early beginnings and which can be maintained if we remember what put us together in the first place.

There are the faint of heart; you have heard them and so have I. They say it is not worth it and cannot be done. There will always be those people. But they are not the people to take counsel from at this time in our nation's history.

It will take courage and, at times, a lot of courage. But let us remember what Churchill said, when he was asked "What is the greatest quality a person can have?". He said, "Courage, because it secures all others."