

EDITORIAL

The "disco-dancing" constitutional accord

by Allan Carter

Was the Charlottetown Accord a dead deal before the polls opened on Monday night? It was clear in only a matter of hours that the deal had been rejected by most of the provinces. Certainly, watching the defeat of the Charlottetown Accord on television Monday evening was not as stimulating as watching the victory of the Blue Jays over the weekend.

Predicting whether or not the Accord would succeed or fail was a tricky business. Unlike in an election, trying to determine how people are going to vote in a referendum (or a plebiscite) is a difficult process. Canadians had easy access to the text of the Accord. The problem which arose, however, was that after reading the text over carefully many Canadians still were not sure if they were going to vote yes or no. One individual remarked to me that: "I have read the draft text three times, the legal text once and I think I now will toss a coin to decide how I will vote."

It would appear that such confusion which this individual experienced was the downfall of the accord. I had the opportunity to speak to Dr. Dan Hurley from the UNB Law Faculty the other day who was a strong vocal supporter for the no side. Dr. Hurley feels that the referendum should have never been called and is not impressed with the government's handling of the constitution since 1982:

We are not very good at amending our constitution. We tried it in 1990 and screwed it up with Meech Lake and we have tried it now and we screwed it up in the same way. We used the same screw up formula.

Strong words indeed, but Dr. Hurley is making a point which many people have been making since the decision was made to

hold a national referendum. Even some of the yes supporters had misgivings over the fact that a referendum had been called. Furthermore, one woman on CBC radio the other day termed the deal as the "disco-dancing" constitution. In other words, the accord just simply tried to deal with too much in a very short time frame. The compromises which the yes supporters said had to be made were not acceptable. Many Canadians were happy with some parts of the deal, but at the same time they were not satisfied with other aspects of it. Thus, the no vote succeeded.

Furthermore, Quebec sovereigntists claimed that the no vote was another step towards Quebec's separation. However, they were careful not to suggest that a no to the Accord also meant a no to the rest of Canada and support for the Parti Quebecois. In the same manner, many argue that people voted no in New Brunswick because they are CoR supporters or that people in Alberta voted no because they favor the Reform party. While such statements may hold true for some of the population, one must keep in mind that division in these political parties was as evident as in any of the other parties. The media made it a point to illustrate that individuals such as Pierre Trudeau and Jacques Parizeau were essentially campaigning on the same side. Nevertheless, if one was to ask each of them what they disliked in the Accord, the answers would be very different. Such diversity, therefore, only added to the confusion. Suddenly, a large number of Canadians were not voting on the basis of what their traditional party supported.

Soon after it was evident that the Accord had died, the politicians sadly assumed that a no for the Accord meant a no for further constitutional talks. In fact, NB Premier Frank McKenna said that Canadians had made it clear that they want the governments to deal with economic issues. McKenna, however, was one of the few politicians, who suggested that negotiations should continue

on some of the issues dealt with in the Charlottetown Accord. Unfortunately, many of the other politicians and also Hugh Segal, chief aid to the prime minister, have read entirely too much into the no vote. Canadians are not saying that the issues dealt with in the Accord should be placed on the back burner. Granted, Canadians would like to see some concentration from both the Provincial and Federal governments on the Canadian economy. But as Audrey McLaughlin remarked, certainly politicians can deal with two things at once.

Moreover, the loss of the beneficial aspects of the Accord is unfortunate. For instance, Native self government appears to be a concept accepted by many Canadians. While some Canadians were doubtful over the fact that no real concrete process towards Native self-government had been outlined in the Accord, it was one aspect of the Accord which many Canadians favored. Yet, diversity even existed among the aboriginals on this issue, illustrating once more the confusion and strong convictions which were created over holding a national referendum on such a large range of issues.

It is difficult to determine what effects the refusal of the Accord will have on Canada. Jim McGee, former vice-president internal of the Student Union and a Yes supporter, notes that it will be interesting to observe what will now occur since Canadians have rejected the Accord. Alberta Premier Don Getty stated in a recent article that Canada may "drift apart." Whether Canada will stay together or eventually "drift apart" is a legitimate concern which all Canadians share right now. Nevertheless, such speculation should not prevent the politicians from continuing to negotiate over some of the issues which were dealt with in the Accord. While the Accord itself failed, many aspects of the Accord are too important to be lost in some people's attempts to read too much into a no vote.



the
brunswickan

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The Brunswickan, in its 126th year of publication, is Canada's oldest official student publication. The Brunswickan is generally published every Friday during the school year by Brunswickan Publishing Inc with a circulation of 10,000. Membership is open to all University of New Brunswick Fredericton students, but all members of the university community are encouraged to contribute.

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The Brunswickan is printed with flair by Maritime Web in Moncton, and impeccably delivered by Tiny.

Subscription rates are \$25 per year. Second class mail is in effect - #8120

National advertising rates are available from Campus Plus at (416) 362-6468.

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