

By Lawrence Kootnikoff

MONTREAL

## Canada's war of words heats up over Meech Lake

**D**URING HIS 16 YEARS AS LIBERAL PRIME MINISTER, Pierre Trudeau dominated Canada's political landscape. From 1968 to 1984, he was the sworn enemy of the Quebec independence movement and the visionary champion of Canadian unity and bilingualism.

By 1984, Quebec separatism seemed dead. Trudeau retired to practice law and live quietly in Montreal. But six years later a constitutional crisis has brought Canada closer to dissolution than ever before. Trudeau, now 70, has broken his silence. His target: an amendment to the Canadian constitution known as the Meech Lake Accord.

The accord recognizes Quebec as a "distinct society" and allots more legislative powers to all of Canada's 10 provinces. Opponents have criticized the undemocratic process by which the accord was reached and charge that it further weakens the federal government of what is already one of the most decentralized federal states in the world.

**A tongue for a tongue:** In Canada, "constitutional argument" is code for the often-bitter French-English struggle that has marked the country's history the way racial conflict has marked that of the U.S. Governing Canada has always required maintaining a delicate balancing act between the two language groups. Almost all of Canada's 6 million francophones—out of a population of 25 million—live in Quebec.

Canada's current prime minister, Conservative Brian Mulroney, dismisses Trudeau as "yesterday's man with yesterday's ideas." Mulroney says he's trying to clean up the mess Trudeau created when he reformed Canada's Constitution in 1982. But the Meech Lake Accord has created an even bigger mess that threatens to tear the country apart.

In 1982, the government of Quebec was the only provincial government out of Canada's 10 to reject Trudeau's constitutional reform. Mulroney, a Quebecer like Trudeau, came to power in Ottawa in 1984 promising to "reintegrate Quebec into the Canadian family." During an all-night bargaining session in 1987 at the Meech Lake government retreat north of Ottawa, ex-labor negotiator Mulroney twisted some arms and got all 10 provincial premiers to sign.

Three years later, unanimity has dissolved into bitter wrangling. To become law, the accord must be adopted by all 11 federal and provincial legislatures before June 23. With less than 90 days before the deadline, two provinces—Manitoba and New Brunswick—are refusing to ratify the agreement. Newfoundland also is moving to revoke its ratification.

Opponents of the accord were unable to rally support until Mulroney won a mandate for his free-trade agreement with the U.S. during the November 1988 federal election. The Quebec government's decision to override the Charter of Rights to preserve French-only sign laws in the province also helped to garner support and sparked a vicious circle of action and reaction that could result in Quebec's secession from Canada. Canadians are "sleepwalking toward disaster," according to a prominent Quebec businessman.

The English Canadian left and nationalist groups turned the fight against free trade into a patriotic crusade during the 1988 elec-

tions, asserting the deal—which most English-speaking Canadians voted against—would lead to political as well as economic

dians oppose it as well.

Not surprisingly, some of the opposition has racist undertones. The Association for the Preservation of English in Canada (APEC) sees the accord as a dark plot by communists and francophones to take over the country and force everyone to speak French—APEC spokespersons compare French to the AIDS virus. While APEC is known as an extremist organization, it has successfully lobbied more than 30 municipalities and cities in Ontario in an effort to declare them unilingually English.

This backlash has surprised Quebecers who have rallied around Meech Lake. The accord itself has become a symbol of English Canada's willingness to accept Quebec and its cultural distinctiveness. According to a recent editorial in Montreal's *La Presse*, Quebecers said "yes" to Canada in 1980 when they defeated a separatist referendum. "[Quebeckers] ask themselves when Canada is going to say 'yes' to Quebec," continues the editorial.

Canadians now seem almost resigned to

the prospect of the country's dismemberment. Record numbers of Quebecers say they support independence, and many Quebec business people—once staunch federalists—now say an independent Quebec can go it alone. Several studies, including one by Merrill-Lynch of New York, have reached the same conclusion.

**Mulroney's box and Trudeau's book:**

Mulroney must accept much of the responsibility for the current impasse. Many question his wisdom in reopening the Pandora's box of constitutional reform. After 20 years of worrying about Quebec separatism, Canadians are weary of constitutional amendments and language debates. Mulroney's free-trade deal drove a wedge between English Canadian progressives and Quebecers, and his often exaggerated Meech Lake rhetoric has raised the stakes and created an atmosphere of national crisis. Mulroney himself is suffering from 17 percent unpopularity, according to the most recent Gallup poll.

For months provincial officials from New Brunswick have been working with the federal government on a compromise—a separate "parallel" accord which would address the concerns of Meech Lake's opponents. While the New Brunswick proposal offers hope, both sides are so entrenched in the battle that compromise now seems impossible.

"Reason over passion" has always been Trudeau's motto. The former prime minister still has the magic touch—he is cool, witty, urbane, arrogant, handsome, perfectly bilingual and aristocratic—qualities Canadians loved to hate. But as of late, Trudeau has used the launching of his new book, *Toward a Just Society: The Trudeau Years*, as a platform for a passionate attack on the accord and its architects. Ironically, Trudeau may give a boost to the accord by raising the tone of the debate. He also may remind both anglophone and francophone Canadians what they love most about the country. "In a world of civil wars, famine and brutality," wrote columnist Lysianne Cagnon of *La Presse*, "is it so bad to live in a country where the biggest problems are 'notwithstanding' clauses and constitutional preambles?"

Trudeau is a classical liberal whose views have not changed since the '50s, when his brilliant essays galvanized a generation of reformist Quebec intellectuals. His vision of a bilingual country is grounded in the rights of both French- and English-speaking individuals to be able to use their language anywhere. Modeled after Belgium's "territorial model," which Trudeau has always rejected, the objective of the Meech Lake Accord is to recognize individual communities as well as Quebec as the homeland of Canada's French.

Trudeau's individualist vision still has tremendous appeal among English Canadians, but most francophone Quebecers have moved beyond it toward Meech Lake's more realistic view. While most Quebecers wish to remain within Canada, they won't shy away from independence if it's the only way to protect their identity.

"Quebec independence doesn't frighten me," Trudeau recently told a TV interviewer. "Quebec would survive, and the rest of Canada would probably survive. But we would be destroying a damned beautiful country."

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Former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau has returned to fight for Canadian unity.

### CANADA

integration with the U.S. But Quebecers voted massively for free trade, giving Mulroney's Conservatives a parliamentary majority and leaving English Canadian nationalists feeling betrayed.

**Sign of the times:** In December 1988 Canada's Supreme Court struck down provisions of Quebec's popular Bill 101, which banned commercial signs in languages other than French, ruling that the bill violated the right to freedom of expression. Faced with nationalist unrest, Premier Robert Bourassa used a constitutional "notwithstanding" clause to override those freedoms and preserve French-only signs.

Reaction in English Canada was swift. Manitoba's Premier Gary Filmon reversed his support of the Meech Lake Accord, and polls now show that a majority of English Cana-

**After 20 years of worrying about Quebec separatism, Canadians are weary of constitutional amendments and language debates.**



# BLOODLETTING in

# TRANSYLVANIA

Dictator Nicolae Ceausescu's legacy of hate lives on.



## Paul Hockenos

TIRGU MURES, ROMANIA

**T**HE VOLATILE NATIONALISM UNLEASHED BY the overthrow of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe has claimed its first casualties.

In Romania's western Carpathian mountains, the centuries-old cycle of ethnic violence has erupted again in Transylvania, between the Romanian majority and the 2-million-strong Hungarian minority. Only three months after President Nicolae Ceausescu's downfall, street battles here last month left three ethnic Hungarians dead and 300 people injured in the worst inter-ethnic violence since 1944. With tank regiments enforcing calm in the historic Transylvanian city, mob terror, backed by Romanian nationalist parties and semi-fascist organizations, continues unabated in the region.

The conflict exposes the Bucharest government's tenuous grip on power. Historical

powers from before the era of Communist rule, as well as elements displaced or still in place from the old dictatorship, have asserted themselves for the first time, casting an ominous shadow over the prospects for a peaceful transition to democracy in Romania.

Nationalism, which Ceausescu so effectively controlled with the mechanisms of the nation-state to undermine a popular resistance movement, has now exploded in a populist form. As the new national power bases become more clear, reactionary elements appear to have nationalism not only at their call but have also proved themselves as deft at its manipulation as the former ruler.

While the recent pogroms signal a sad future ahead for Transylvanian minorities, the likelihood of a peaceful European home in Central and Eastern Europe also appears increasingly utopian. Hostile exchanges be-

tween Budapest and Bucharest have put relations at an all-time low, irreparably damaging the neighbors' short-lived reconciliation. The inflamed nationalism on both sides has stirred new fears about the inviolability of the 1945 borders, raising the specter of a dangerous Balkanization throughout the region.

The recent bloodshed occurred against the backdrop of ethnic Hungarian-Romanian antagonisms that had mounted steadily since the euphoric days when the nationalities joined forces in last December's revolt. The culture of the Hungarian minority, a quarter of Transylvania's population, had been ruthlessly suppressed by Ceausescu and his orthodox Stalinist predecessor Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej in an attempt to assimilate the minorities into a homogeneous, implicitly Romanian identity. Schools and media were shut down, the language forbidden on the street and activists persecuted. For 25 years,

the discrimination set the two peoples against one another, thwarting collective action against the dictator.

The post-revolutionary solidarity of the popular front faded quickly. The hatred that Ceausescu had invoked against Hungarian "separatists" re-emerged, as Romanians, passively encouraged by the inaction of the ruling Front for National Salvation (FNS), blocked Hungarian demands for Hungarian schools, full minority rights and cultural freedom, and the re-establishment of the Bolyai University in Cluj, the center of Hungarian culture before its merger with the Romanian university. In February, thousands of Romanian demonstrators here, chanting anti-Hungarian slogans, countered the minority's protests for equal rights.

**The battle of Tirgu Mures:** On March 10, the confrontation took on new dimensions when Romanians, mostly from the anti-Hungarian National Peasants Party and the ultra-