Charlottetown Accord

What led to the Charlottetown Accord?

Following the failure of the Meech Lake Accord in 1990, a series of public consultations took place on the constitutional future of Canada, including three large-scale federal initiatives (the Spicer Commission, the Beaudoin-Edwards Committee, and the Beaudoin-Dobbie Committee) and two major initiatives in Quebec (the Allaire Committee and the Belanger-Campeau Commission).

In March 1992, in the wake of these consultations, a new round of intergovernmental negotiations over the Constitution ensued between the federal government, the provincial governments (including Quebec in the latter stages of negotiations), the then-two territorial governments, and representatives from the Assembly of First Nations, the Native Council of Canada, the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada and the Métis National Council. These negotiations resulted in a unanimous deal on what is now referred to as the Charlottetown Accord.

What was in the Accord?

The Accord dealt with a vast spectrum of constitutional issues. Most notably, it purported to:

1. Recognize the inherent right of Aboriginal self-government, and the status of Indigenous governments as the "third order of government" in Canada;
2. Reform the Senate to make it an elected body, and to guarantee the equal representation of each province;
3. Make numerous changes to the division of powers between the federal and provincial governments, e.g. providing for exclusive provincial jurisdiction over forestry, mining, and some other areas.
4. Add a non-justiciable social charter to the Constitution to promote rights to healthcare, education, and a clean environment;
5. Create a constitutional "Canada Clause" that set out to define Canada's founding values, including through the recognition of Quebec's status as a distinct society within Canada.

What happened to the Accord?

To determine whether to proceed with legislative ratification of the Accord, an advisory national referendum was called (Canada's first *national* referendum on major constitutional reform). On October 26, 1992, Canadians went to the polls to answer the question: “Do you agree that the Constitution of Canada should be renewed on the basis of the agreement reached on August 28, 1992 [i.e. the Charlottetown Accord]?”

Nationally, fifty-four percent of the votes cast opposed the Accord. It did, however, receive approval in New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, the Northwest Territories and, by the narrowest of margins, Ontario. In the end, it would seem that after the failure of the Meech Lake Accord, Canadians again could not reach a national consensus on their collective, constitutional future.

For more info

To learn more about the Charlottetown Accord and the debates that led up to it, check out our podcast, *Charlottetown*. The first episode is available directly above, and the rest of the series can be accessed here: Charlottetown | a podcast by Centre for Constitutional Studies (podbean.com).