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Martin is endangering unity

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Has Prime Minister Paul Martin gone and done a Brian Mulroney? By his Meech Lake accord of 1987, Mulroney stirred up the Quebec nationalists who began demanding far more than just "distinct society" and stirred up equally a counter-nationalism — really a Canadianism — in the rest of the country.

The accord was eventually rejected in a national referendum.

The country's mood turned rancorous, cranky, and suspicious. Confederation itself was almost defeated in a referendum in Quebec. Canadians rejected Mulroney, and his Conservative party was almost pushed into oblivion by the new Reform party.

A decade-and-a-half later, there are some striking echoes of that era, including the odd coincidence that Mulroney and Martin should both be anglophone businessmen from Quebec and committed both to better relations with the provinces and better relations with the U.S.

As happened with the original Meech Lake pact, the health-care agreement that Martin pulled off last week has been generally applauded by the premiers, by opposition parties, by the media, with the public apparently mutely approving — less because of the content of the agreement, which few understand, than because peace now reigns in the land.

As was the case at this stage with Meech Lake, there have been, as yet, few dissenters to the medicare pact. Just a few mostly oldie Liberals, like former deputy prime minister John Manley and Senator Serge Joyal, and oldie commentators, like me.

Here, the differences over time start to become marked.

Unlike the 1980s, so many Canadians now regard government as ineffective that few are likely to be greatly concerned that the federal government has made itself much less powerful by handing over vast amounts of money to the provinces in return for virtually no accountability.

A key difference between present and past, and perhaps the single-most important, is that there is now no Pierre Trudeau to kick around those who would turn Canada into a "community of communities."

Not only is there today no champion for One Canada, but also there are lots of champions of a decentralized, fragmented Canada. Opposition leader Stephen Harper is a strong devolutionist. Indeed, he was a co-author of the "firewall" doctrine for Alberta. And there is, of course, the pro-separatist Bloc Québécois, with more than 50 MPs in Ottawa, which was not around in the 1980s.

Yet the parallels keep popping up.

Exactly as Mulroney rationalized his argument that making Quebec "distinct" didn't make it more special than any other province, so Martin is already having to argue that he hasn't weakened Confederation by the new doctrine of "asymmetric federalism" that he used to secure the medicare deal.

Except that, in the same way "distinct" either means special or it means nothing at all, so "asymmetric federalism" either means new special treatment for Quebec — why else would Premier Jean Charest have called it "an important precedent"? — or it means special treatment for everyone, a concession Alberta and B. C. claim they secured.

In which case, there's no One Canada anymore.

That Quebec is special has been a cardinal fact of Canadian life from its beginning.

But this specialness has just been widened significantly. Quebec has been granted a separate medicare funding agreement even though there's no cultural or linguistic issues involved in medicare.

Quebec now is special because, well, it is just special.

A realization of the implications of this has already begun in Quebec. Mario Dumont, leader of the Action démocratique party has just announced his policy now is to make Quebec "autonomous" within Canada, with its own, separate, constitution.

A new slogan, "autonomy-association" is about to enter the Canadian political vocabulary, along with the concept of "symmetrical asymmetry," which, in Martin's version, means or appears to mean, that whatever Quebec gets by way of special treatment all other provinces can, too.

Mulroney paid a high price for his "distinct society" initiative, but he did at least know what he was doing, and why. He was out to get Quebec to sign on to Trudeau's 1982 Constitution with its Charter of Rights of Freedoms.

By contrast, Martin's grasp of the subject seems decidedly uncertain. The federal paper explaining "asymmetric federalism" misspelled the word. And former Saskatchewan Premier Roy Romanow, whose report on medicare Martin was trying to implement at the conference, is now saying he fears asymmetric federalism could undermine Confederation.

What a pity Trudeau isn't around to talk scathingly about a "community of 10 autonomies."

Maybe Martin should have stuck to finance. He then really knew what he was doing.

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