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THE MEDIA, THE MEECH ACCORD & THE ATTEMPTED MANUFACTURE
OF CONSENT

James Winter
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Abstract. As is their wont, the media turned the reporting of Meech into a spectator sport. In the process, they fanned the flames of the differing nationalist sentiments of French and English Canada, and played an instrumental role in the impending fragmentation and breakup of the country, with the looming prospect of some form of sovereignty association with Quebec. If, as appears likely, in the near future Quebec becomes sovereign with some economic links to Canada, it will in large part be due to media portrayals and illusions, such as the Meech accord crisis of 1990. The failure of the Meech accord can in no way be seen as a rejection of Quebec by English Canada, which didn't understand the accord sufficiently to make an informed decision about it. Thus, Meech was not killed either by Clyde Wells or Elijah Harper, but by Brian Mulroney's dock strike negotiating tactics and deceitful manipulation of the premiers and the public, all played-out (albeit in the form of a sub-plot) in the national media.

In propagating the "Clyde Wells did it," or "Elijah Harper did it" scenarios, and absolving Mulroney of blame, the media followed their predilection to oversimplify and misinform, while simultaneously engaging in historical engineering for political ends. This is in keeping with their role as legitimators of state policy. Thus, despite the failure to manufacture consent for Meech, the media played their role to perfection: by portraying the Meech negotiations as a spectator sport and hence encouraging disempowerment of the public and discouraging our

involvement; through sensational coverage which magnified the two solitudes and further serves the 'divide and conquer' aims of transnational corporate culture; and finally by providing ostensibly innocuous 'infotainment,' which while attracting large audiences, serves to maintain a buying mood rather than engendering a serious or critical perspective.

Thus, the Meech accord debacle constitutes supportive evidence for Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, as it operates on a national level, within the Canadian context.

LES MEDIAS, L'ACCORD DU LAC MEECH ET LA PRODUCTION RATEE D'UN CONSENSUS. Selon leur habitude, les medias ont rapporte les evenements autour de l'Accord du Lac Meech comme s'il s'agissait d'un match sportif. Ce faisant, ils ont attise les flammes des nationalismes francophones et anglophones et ils ont joue un role d'instrument dans la fragmentation et la deconstruction du pays, et ce, alors que la perspective de la souverainete-association du Quebec devient de plus en plus reelle. Si, comme il semble probable dans un proche avenir, le Quebec devient souverain tout en conservant des liens economiques avec le Canada, ce sera en grande partie du aux images et aux illusions vehiculees par les medias dans des situations comme celles de l'Accord du Lac Meech. L'echec de l'Accord du Lac Meech ne peut aucunement etre interprete comme un rejet du Quebec par la Canada anglais car ce dernier ne disposait pas d'une connaissance suffisante pour arriver a une decision rationnelle. L'Accord du Lac Meech n'a pas ete tue par Clyde Wells ou Elija Harper mais par Bryan Mulroney et ses techniques brutales de negociations, sa manipulation frauduleuse des premiers ministres et du public, le tout mis en scene dans les medias nationaux.

En diffusant des scenarios ou Clyde Wells et Elija Harper etaient les coupables et en absolvant Bryan Mulroney, les medias ont maintenu leur tendance habituelle a sur-simplifier et a desinformer tout en tentant de pratiquer une gestion de l'histoire a des fins politiques. Ceci est conforme a leur fonction de legitimisation de la politique de l'Etat. Ainsi, malgre leur echec dans la production d'un consensus autour du Lac Meech, les medias ont parfaitement joue leur role en presentant les negociations comme un sport de spectacle, en favorisant l'impression de non-participation et la passivite du public, en exagerant, par une couverture sensationnaliste, l'ampleur du phenomene des "deux solitudes" (et ceci sert les interets des entreprises transnationales qui cherchent a diviser pour regner) et, finalement, en fournissant explicitement une information-spectacle banale qui, en attirant des auditoires importants, sert d'abord a maintenir les intentions d'achat plutt qu'a produire une perspective critique. Ainsi, la defaite de l'Accord du Lac Meech constitue, au niveau national canadien, une preuve de l'applicabilite du modele de la propagande de Herman et Chomsky.

Fragmented and unconnected media content mitigates against all but the most superficial thought processes. Rather than concerning themselves with substantive issues, in reporting on national affairs the media instead focus almost exclusively on "horse race" aspects such as: who is in front and by how much, what the strategies are, and how the strategies might affect the standings. Even with a crucial Canadian issue such as the Meech Lake constitutional accord, media content focused on these elements, presenting a battle between two opposing sides, with the media supposedly as neutral observers.

Focusing on the superficial serves numerous purposes. For example, with our minds 'dwelling in the shallows' we are more likely to be in a 'buying mood,' which is virtually the only mood advertisers will pay for. If programming or news content is critical or even serious in nature, audiences may apply some of the same criteria to the ads, whose purpose is to have us uncritically accept their premises and messages. At a minimum, serious content may alter our buying mood. To this end, it is an anathema to advertisers, who largely only support uncritical, innocuous programming.¹ Since all mainstream content (except on CBC radio) is advertising-supported, this virtually rules out critical or even serious material.

Failing to explore issues more deeply² further serves to prevent us from realistic comprehension of the issues themselves or of the interrelatedness of what might at first hand appear to be unrelated topics. These can extend from 'unrelated' industrial accidents, or environmental pollution, which have as their base a legislative and/or enforcement bias in favour of corporations as opposed to people and nature, to such economic topics as: trucking deregulation, the Goods and Services Tax (GST), the Free Trade Agreement, the Meech Lake accord, and so forth. All of these may be seen as integral to a broad neo-conservative agenda which is pervasive and yet goes virtually unreported in the mainstream press.³ Each item or event is reported in superficial isolated fragments which preclude the development of a cohesive picture, and comprehension itself.⁴ While the media can see the spider, they are unaware of its web.

Additionally and most importantly, mainstream media coverage, intentionally or not, is enabling. By this I mean that it serves the purpose of "manufacturing [public] consent," for policies which are ostensibly in the "national interest," but which actually serve the state, including its economic, political and ideological branches.⁵

By way of illustration we will look at the June 1990 first ministers' conference in Ottawa, supposedly held to "save the country from breakup" and to ensure passage of the 1987 Meech Lake Constitutional accord.

POLITICS AS A SPECTATOR SPORT

If, as Harold Innis indicated, the media are only capable of reporting adequately on a sporting event, then it behooves them to turn everything into a game. With a June 23, 1990 deadline for ratification of Meech, the meetings were held off until the very last possible moment. We were already effectively into "overtime." Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and his emissaries such as Senator Lowell Murray conducted behind the scenes

negotiations, while publicly denouncing the three "holdout" premiers, Gary Filmon of Manitoba, Clyde Wells of Newfoundland, and Frank McKenna of New Brunswick, who, we were told, were "failing to honour the Meech accord," signed by predecessor governments. No mention here about how Mulroney 'failed to honour' legislation by the previous federal government, including that pertaining to the Foreign Investment Review Agency, Air Canada, the Unemployment Insurance Act, federal transfer payments to the provinces, and so forth.

Meanwhile, dire warnings were made about the necessity of Meech to the future of the country, all dutifully relayed by the media, and climaxing with the resignation of separatist environment minister Lucien Bouchard from the federal cabinet. Nationalist heart strings were tugged to the extent that: the money markets reflected a concern over the breakup of the country and a loss of faith in the "Northern Peso;" a group of ministers from Brockville, Ontario, scene of the earlier Quebec flag-stomping ceremony, travelled to Montreal to apologize to Quebecers; after watching a dramatic overview on CBC TV's The Journal, the mayor and a citizens' group in London, Ont. organized a parade and "link hands for Canada" day; Globe columnist Jeffrey Simpson castigated academics and nationalist groups such as the Council of Canadians, for taking part in the free trade debate but remaining "curiously quiet" on Meech and "the possible disintegration of Canada;" a Toronto group, Friends Within Canada, frustrated with not being able to express their views and wanting to show Quebec "that we care," took out \$60,000 in ads in an attempt to influence the first ministers to arrive at a settlement.

Having thus successfully fanned the flames of the differing nationalist sentiments of English and French Canada, in the eleventh hour, according to plan, Mulroney summoned the first ministers to Ottawa, and from Sunday June 3rd to Saturday June 9th, the nation was subjected to the spectacle of a live circus, in and around the National Conference Centre in Ottawa. Mulroney's brand of brinkmanship applied heat to a constitutional pressure-cooker, held, appropriately enough, in a converted railway station. Mulroney, the dismantler of railway lines and former anti-labour negotiator, brought to bear all of the old negotiating techniques he learned as a management lawyer in Quebec, before becoming President of the Iron Ore Company of Canada. He used a modified version of the techniques used by the early fur traders with the Natives, which went: 'Let 'em have all the firewater they want, then start to negotiate.' In the modern version, the most successful bargaining is done in the early hours of the morning, preferably after days of intense pressure and sleepless nights. If you lock people up behind closed doors for long enough, eventually, of course, they'll come to an agreement. It worked in 1987, why not in 1990? Of course, police are not allowed to use such techniques to extract confessions from suspected criminals.

One of the most disturbing elements in all of this is that while Mulroney assured the premiers and the country that delays in meeting were a result of the difficult search for "common ground" among participants, and he wanted to be assured an agreement could potentially be reached before meeting, he has since admitted the meeting was deliberately timed to bring the impasse down to 11th-hour negotiations.⁶ More on this later.

Knowingly or unknowingly in step with the plan, the

national media converged, desperately swooping in to clutch every available "sound bite" proffered by the first ministers: either on their way into or out of meetings, or when they left for a meal or to stretch their legs. The process became a giant game, with media experts offering colour commentary, and as we were so often told, with "the future of the country," all the marbles, riding on the outcome. Mulroney told the House of Commons on the eve of negotiations: "What is really at stake is Canada." The Toronto Star dutifully repeated: "Canada's future as a nation may be at stake." 7 Likewise, the provinces which were listening to their constituents, Manitoba and Newfoundland, became "holdouts" in the press, which adopted the federal lingo. Why not "democrats" instead?8 What we have here is an example of the media "underwriting" the state by using its language. As Ericson et al. note:

The news media, within the prevailing terms of the state, are a key terrain for the negotiation of meanings for political purposes. ..the words chosen are also deeds, giving preference to particular meanings over others and ultimately presenting 'evaluative differences as differences in fact.' (emphasis in original)9

During negotiations, CBC TV's Don Newman told us "the game isn't over yet," and we waited. One moment they were optimistic, hotel reservations were not being extended and the dollar was up. The next day or perhaps by nightfall, they were pessimistic, Bourassa refused to negotiate the "distinct society" clause, Clyde Wells had been misled, and the dollar was down.

We had the equivalent of the second round draft choice, (the second round entry), Team Canada (the Canada clause, and "Captain Canada" David Peterson), live spectators and groupies, and gossip from Ontario Premier David Peterson about the appearance of (cheerleader) Wendy Mesley of CBC TV. We learned about the "key players," of course.

With the accord "signed," congratulations all around served as a signing bonus. The media now turned to "who won," and Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa was everyone's choice in English Canada because, Quebec separatists to the contrary, he stood his ground in the net and didn't give an inch. "Bourassa got his shutout," The Montreal Gazette informed us, "the way Patrick Roy defends the Montreal Canadians' net against opponents' shots."10 In another article, Terrance Wills of The Gazette told us: "Alberta Premier Don Getty, former quarterback of the Edmonton Eskimos, threw the block that won a reprieve for the Meech Lake constitutional accord." He wrote, "Getty's block gave Ontario Premier David Peterson time to throw his long-bomb pass for a touchdown."11 The Windsor Star referred to a "marathon constitutional wrestling match." To some, Wells and Filmon were heroes because they performed well under the excruciating pressure of the playoffs; to others they were failures as poor "team players."

It is this type of media coverage which qualifies for Marshall McLuhan's dictum that "the medium is the message." Audiences received form and process and virtually no content. For a week, the drama of the 1990 Meech Cup played itself out before the cameras, microphones and scribes. Every step was carefully orchestrated by Brian Mulroney, the erstwhile master

negotiator, and friend and student of Ronald Reagan, the "great communicator." For their part, the media had the requisite fodder for the daily news, replete with the intense drama, the clash of opposing forces, the colourful personalities, the array of expert witnesses, and entertainment or 'infotainment' at its best. As Neil Postman notes:

Television has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience.....Entertainment is the supraideology of all discourse on television.¹²

As a result, viewers are left to assume the appropriate role for any spectator sport: that of a couch potato, consuming spectacle and product equally.

BIAS AT THE CBC

We have to ask why it is that the media so readily played into Mulroney's hands. Oh, there was the usual hand-wringing to the effect that it was all elitist, it was only 11 men deciding Canada's fate, the public should have been consulted, and so forth. There were even a few echoes of: "We were duped," coming from the media, especially in light of the strategy document leaked from the Peterson government, which indicated that indeed, the media were duped. The Toronto Star reported:

According to the paper, outlining strategy for a first ministers' conference which is expected to be called this week, Peterson was to stick to the high road of preaching national unity. Meanwhile, Attorney-General Ian Scott and Ontario constitutional experts would use the media to fuel the sense of crisis, undermine the credibility of the holdouts, and ensure Quebec is not isolated. A prime target of manipulation was to be CBC television, which the paper describes as pro-Meech.¹³

Even so, this was quickly forgotten and it was on to the next (sports) extravaganza (in this case the Showdown at Oka, which itself was a prelude to the Gulf Showdown.) The media types get their paycheques,¹⁴ the advertisers get their content and happy customers, and the only losers are democracy, natives, Kurdish refugees, and so forth.

There are, of course, differing views on all of this. The Meisel article in this volume is an example. Another was provided by Trina McQueen, director of CBC TV news and current affairs. In a Toronto Star article, McQueen defended the CBC from criticism, and described viewers as "participating in a democratic experience." Like Meisel, McQueen argues that the CBC bent over backwards to provide coverage for opponents of Meech. "Between January and June, Clyde Wells appeared on The National and The Journal 69 times..." McQueen wrote. This was "well ahead of the second most interviewed leader, Robert Bourassa, who was on 45 times."¹⁵

There are two problems with this defense. First, she fails to compare the really meaningful statistics: what was the total number of appearances for the pro- side, vs. the anti- side? Given that the "holdout" premiers were outnumbered 8 to 3, and later 9 to 2, it's

inconceivable that there was any real balance in interviews. So, McQueen's statistics were selective. Second, McQueen evidently subscribes to the outdated view that: 'any exposure is good exposure,' in just citing the quantitative. Rather than simply counting the 69 appearances by Clyde Wells, we must look at the treatment accorded to Wells in those appearances. Barbara Frum of The Journal, for example, was as hostile to Filmon and Wells¹⁶ as she had been earlier to Pierre Trudeau.

When [Frum] interviewed the week's designated villains -Premiers Filmon and Wells - she struck a tone rather different from the one she took with pro-deal premiers or, later, the PM. To Filmon: "I wish you'd help me understand what you just said. I heard you say it when you came out of the afternoon session. I don't know what it means." Filmon, who'd been clear if not profound, stumbled, unsure whether to repeat himself. "Go on," interrupted Frum. "Go on." To Wells: "Premier Wells, I guess if I sat and pumped the well, I wouldn't get very much with you."¹⁷

I'll return to premier Wells in a moment. First, a look back at Frum's interview with Trudeau in March of 1990, with the release of his book, Towards a Just Society, co-edited with Tom Axworthy. Frum's lead-in to the interview, written afterwards, said the book's "prime target...is the Meech Lake accord," although Trudeau twice had pointed out to her in the interview that only "four or five pages" in the book dealt with Meech. She also intoned in her voice-over that the book was "A savage attack on [Trudeau's] successor, Brian Mulroney." Having set up her straw man, Frum set about trying to knock him down.

At one point she interrupted him with, "Let's leave aside whether life is ever clear. It's only maybe clear after we're dead." Whatever that means. She then went on to ask, regarding the Notwithstanding clause, "One wonders if what you are so upset about is that you, Pierre Trudeau gave Quebec the very mechanism, the very instrument to undo your vision?" Trudeau patiently explained the difference between the Notwithstanding clause and the Distinct Society clause. Frum shot back, "I don't see why when you make compromises that's o.k., and when the next guy makes compromises that's not o.k."

Next, Frum threw out: "Gordon Robertson, your former Privy Council chief [who] sees himself as your friend, says he sees a lot of nits being picked by people who should know better." Soon afterwards, Trudeau, who had been a model of patience, became somewhat testy in response to her goading and blatantly antagonistic questions, silencing one interruption with "Let me finish!"

Contrast this with Frum's interview with Ontario Premier David Peterson, held soon after the Trudeau interview. Mulroney picked up on a suggestion for legislative "add-ons" made by New Brunswick premier and erstwhile "holdout" Frank McKenna. Frum first interviewed McKenna, who was clearly identified and treated as one of the 'in crowd.' Then she moved on to two academics and federal justice minister Kim Campbell. Next came the smiling Peterson.

"Premier Peterson, my hunch is you've been a big behind-the-scenes player for weeks and probably months. Is this a good day for you? Has something changed today?"

Peterson responded, "It's a great day for Canada..." Verbally cosying up with her questions, Frum went on, "What role have you been playing with Quebec, because Premier Bourassa could have been extremely negative tonight and could have derailed this entirely, couldn't he? Have you been the go-between?" Lobbing this softball question allowed Peterson to 'humbly' respond: "I'm just one of eleven. I'm struggling like the rest of my colleagues..."

Now comes the bad guy, Wells. Wells had announced that the Newfoundland legislature would rescind its previous passing of Meech. Clearly taking the side of the PM, Frum said: "The Prime Minister has offered you a bridge to continue the process now of accommodation and compromise that you spoke about all afternoon when you announced your rescission move." Wells started to answer, but Frum interrupted him. "And you say what to that? You say what? What do you do now?"

Following Well's response, Frum continued to promote Mulroney's position: "Well, I think [Mulroney] was saying [that] what happened to Quebec, he will not do to you. He wants to make you a full partner and I want to know what your response is to him tonight."

She went on: "Premier Wells, all day today you've been giving very mixed signals as though you really are glad to be out of isolation and you are talking as though you'd like to keep talking. Now what do you want to keep talking about? Because you've just finished saying you're not going to pass Meech by June 23 if all your objections [only] get dealt with later. So what's your compromise about?" Wells responded that Newfoundlanders can't be full partners if they're being told to "take it or leave it." He went on to mention certain "concerns," and Frum jumped in, interrupting him.

"And you don't think these concerns can be satisfied with all the freedom you would have to make all your additions? You don't think he's made a commitment to you that your concerns can be met later? You don't think your concerns can be met later? Is that what you are saying?" She concluded, "...I want to make sure I understand. If this is the deal, is Newfoundland saying 'No' tonight?"

Despite the numbers cited by McQueen, a Journal appearance is not a Journal appearance.

Obviously this represents only a small 'sample' of all the interviews on The Journal and CBC TV. But it must be clear even to the casual observer, that Frum 'went after' Trudeau, Wells and other Meech opponents in her interviews. As Salutin notes,

Barbara Frum of The Journal, for all her professionalism, has never developed the ability, or perhaps desire, to hide her biases.¹⁸

When it came to the pro-Meech faction, as we saw with Peterson, the questions were cosy and 'on-side' to the point where they were really public relations 'lobballs.' Similarly, while she challenged Trudeau at every opportunity, as demonstrated above, when it came to her post-Meech interview with Mulroney, she was positively fawning. "This must be terribly frustrating," she intoned, sounding, as Salutin says, for all the world like his therapist. She failed to challenge his most outrageous statements ("You had some two per cent of the population doing [Meech] in"); she set up Mulroney's attacks on Wells, let him ramble without interruption, handed him cues, and flattered him.¹⁹

As for CBC TV news, it described Wells as, "emotionally distraught."²⁰ Trina McQueen's defense notwithstanding, even national news anchor Peter Mansbridge admitted while the coverage was still going on, that they had failed.

News is news: it's what happens that day. It's what's different; it's what's changed. It's not a backgrounder on constitutional matters.²¹

Perhaps even more revealing was his candid characterization of Meech near the end of January, 1990:

There may be no other issue more important...the future of the country is at stake...The prime minister suggests Quebec may want to separate if Meech dies; some of the premiers feel the country will disintegrate if Meech passes.²²

From the reported text of his speech, Mansbridge did not quote Trudeau, or Wells, or any of the anti-Meech people: only the pro-Meech side. As Andrew Nikiforuk of Equinox magazine summed it up: "Just when the Canadian people needed a voice, the CBC passed the microphone to the prime minister and his dicemen...A co-opted press is judged by the company or government it keeps."²³

Another point that is lost on McQueen in her defense of the CBC is its admitted use of what Ericson et al. term, "elite authorized knowers."²⁴ Journalists go where the power is. They choose to interview those best placed to provide accounts which have been politically and bureaucratically authorized.²⁵ Hence, Wells was interviewed 69 times on CBC TV and The Journal; Bourassa 45 times. For McQueen and the CBC, this constitutes "balance." In part, this relates to the attempt by the media to simplify issues, and to obtain 'both sides.' The notion that there could be more than two sides; that important and valid perspectives are omitted because 'it's simply too complex,' or the people involved are not "authorized knowers," appears lost on newswriters. Thus women, natives and northerners, for example, were marginalized in the Meech debate.

THE BOUNDS OF THE EXPRESSIBLE

Perhaps we can better understand the context of this debate by looking outside of that context to the example of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Noam Chomsky has provided extensive reviews on this topic, stretching back over the past twenty years.²⁶ Chomsky has perfected the technique of using international examples to highlight American national problems related to the media, in order to better overcome the blinders of the propaganda system he describes. Recently, with professor Edward Herman, he elaborated a Propaganda Model for the media, which describes: how media function, how media performance is discussed and evaluated, and reactions to studies of media performance.²⁷

Chomsky quotes from The New York Times' analysis of the debate over the Vietnam War, which stated:

There are those Americans who believe that the war to preserve a non-Communist, independent South Vietnam could have been waged differently. There are other Americans who

believe that a viable, non-Communist South Vietnam was always a myth...A decade of fierce polemics has failed to resolve this ongoing quarrel.²⁸

So, the hawks allege that the U.S. could have won, while the doves say victory was always beyond their grasp. What's missing, says Chomsky, is a third position: "...the United States simply had no legal or moral right to intervene in the internal affairs of Vietnam in the first place." The third position exceeds what Chomsky calls, "The Bounds of the Expressible," and illustrates the genius of "brainwashing under freedom."

In a totalitarian system, it is required only that official doctrine be obeyed. In the democratic systems of thought control, it is deemed necessary to take over the entire spectrum of discussion: nothing must remain thinkable apart from the Party Line. State propaganda is often not expressed, merely presupposed as the framework for discussion among right-minded people. The debate, therefore, must be between the 'doves' and 'hawks,' the Schlesingers and the Alsops. The position that the US is engaged in aggression, and that such aggression is wrong, must remain unthinkable and unexpressed...²⁹

One could update Chomsky's example by looking at U.S. press reaction to the failed Panamanian coup in October 1989, prior to the U.S. invasion of Panama in December 1989. With the former, discussion consisted solely of whether U.S. President George Bush was a wimp, or whether he exercised what The New York Times called "sensible restraint," in not backing the attempted coup d'etat on Panamanian "military strongman," General Manuel Noriega.³⁰ The major fears were that either: the coup would fail, or the U.S. would wind up simply backing "an unknown new strongman." These are the reservations which prevented Bush from eliminating what The Times called, "the humiliating Noriega problem." Gradually, Bush aides admitted to "bad handling" of the failed coup, and members of Congress charged that "confusion among officials cost the United States an opportunity to capture" Noriega.³¹

The author searched in vain through the failed Panamanian coup coverage in The Times, the newspaper which Jeffrey Simpson of The Globe has called "the English-speaking world's best newspaper,"³² to find any indication of a third argument. Again, the bounds of the expressible were: the hawks said Bush the wimp should have provided military support for the coup attempt, the doves said it was bad timing, it might have failed or not improved matters (from the U.S. perspective.) We did not find the position that the U.S. had no legal or moral right to interfere in Panama. Two months later, with the above reservations apparently overcome, the U.S. invaded and overthrew the Noriega government. Noriega himself was eventually kidnapped and brought to the U.S. to face American charges. The bounds remain clearly delineated, and inviolate.

Other examples include: the war in the Persian Gulf, the U.S. invasion of Grenada (where 6000 U.S. troops earned 8000 medals), the U.S.-backed Contra war against Nicaragua, and the bombing of Tripoli.

As with the Free Trade Agreement before it, coverage

of the Meech accord gave short shrift to opponents. Particularly conspicuous by its absence was the argument that the decentralizing properties of Meech would mean the weakening of the Canadian welfare state, moving Canada inexorable closer to a 'level playing field' with the U.S. Greater provincial autonomy in the form of the "opting out" clause, it may be argued, could bring an end to future national social programs. University of Manitoba law professor Jack London raised a new danger: the Meech accord's wording could be used by the provinces to challenge Ottawa's ability to undertake social spending of any kind, even when no provincial money is involved.³³ In strengthening the provinces and weakening the federal role, it can be argued that Meech was meeting the neo-conservative agenda for lessened federal opposition to initiatives by multinational corporations, such as free trade.

In what appears to be "pervasive" coverage of the Meech Lake meetings and their background in the mainstream press, we may search in vain for adequate reporting of these perspectives.³⁴ Generally, no causes, no patterns may be discerned amidst seemingly random events. Thus, Jeffrey Simpson of The Globe could write:

Meech Lake, then, is a way-station for a country in the throes of profound change, the future direction of which remains unclear.³⁵

For Simpson, thought by some to be the preeminent political observer in the country, as for the media generally, "profound change" consists entirely of "Senate reform, sexual-equality rights, minority-language rights, aboriginal issues," debated in willy-nilly fashion by "regions, governments and interest groups [which] jockey for power," with their "different, and sometimes contradictory, visions and premises." Although such machinations occur within a broader context which includes, "the challenges of free trade, global change, and the fiscal weakness of the federal government," the events are unrelated. Simpson's vision is severely circumscribed.³⁶

It is thus that we become "Meeched-out," without gaining any real understanding. It's not part of the game plan.

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

How might the media have contextualized the Meech accord, aside from the perhaps more cynical view of Mulroney's machinations? The "differing vision," and "profound changes" underway in Canada and to which Jeffrey Simpson and the mainstream media by and large are oblivious, are part and parcel of the neo-conservative agenda; Canada's version of Thatcherism and Reaganism. As mentioned, Meech represents a weakening of the federal government and the social welfare structure, bringing Canada more in line with the U.S. model of teeming social disparity, with all of the accompanying ills. This despite American rhetoric about a "kinder, gentler" society. Obviously, this serves the small group featured on "Entertainment Tonight" and "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," very well. Meech weakens the federal government, and multinational corporations enjoy dealing with weak governments. They also enjoy "level playing fields" such as that brought on by free trade, and the flexibility to rationalize and move manufacturing industries to areas where labour is cheap, such as the

Maquiladora sector of northern Mexico.

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) fits in here as well. Millions of dollars in lost duty revenue resulted from the Free Trade Agreement, which has to be recovered somehow: enter the GST. But as well, the FTA has resulted in a dramatic loss of jobs in the manufacturing sector, and a consequent (further) shift to a service sector economy. Because the old Manufacturer's Sales Tax left large areas of the service sector untaxed, federally, there is an additional need for the GST, to recover lost revenues. In this respect it may be said that the FTA brought about the GST. Finally, the GST fits into the broader picture of the neo-conservative agenda as it is a regressive tax, applied equally to people of all incomes, although following public outcry the Tories have instituted a temporary income tax rebate for low income families.

The picture gets broader and more complex as we draw in deregulation in the trucking industry, which has had a similar effect to the FTA in the manufacturing sector, leading to massive layoffs of Canadians and company closings. These culminated in what may be described as a general strike by Canadian truckers, blocking entry to and from the U.S., in the late spring of 1990, just before the Meech Lake debate heated up. Chronological juxtaposition of events, however, is no reason for the mainstream press to relate them in any fashion, blind as it is to the neo-conservative agenda, which also includes: axing VIA Rail, changes to the Unemployment Insurance Act, privatization of the economy, cutbacks to the CBC, de-regulating the telephone industry, and other measures.

To return to the question of why the Meech debate was so constricted, and decontextualized, we again quote Chomsky:

Democracy permits the voice of the people to be heard, and it is the task of the intellectual to ensure that this voice endorses what far-sighted leaders know to be the right course. Propaganda is to democracy what violence is to totalitarianism. The techniques have been honed to a high art, far beyond anything that Orwell dreamt of.³⁷

To "intellectual" in this quote, we must add other elements of the legitimization system, including the mass media. In their editorial, analytical, news, entertainment and advertising content, the media stand foursquare behind what Chomsky has termed, the "national interest." As such, they are opposed to "special interest groups" such as: farmers, labour, women, nationalists, northerners, maritimers, people from the west, youth, the elderly, minorities, in short, the general population. On the political right, "the perception is that democracy is threatened by the organizing efforts" of these groups.

Putting it in plain terms, the general public must be reduced to its traditional apathy and obedience, and driven from the arena of political debate and action, if democracy is to survive.³⁸

Conspicuous in its absence from the above list is the group which supported Meech, the FTA, the GST, and other neo-conservative initiatives: the repository for the "national interest," otherwise known as big business,

including the consciousness industries (media).

Let's discuss yet another alternate view to that found, by and large, in the mainstream media. The Meech accord "crisis" was fabricated by the Mulroney government, a remarkably effective ruse to enable Brian Mulroney to obtain his coveted page in the history books and to "one-up" his hated arch-rival Pierre Trudeau.³⁹ In a front page article The Globe's Susan Delacourt and Graham Fraser reported on an interview with Mulroney. Perhaps owing to the immediate post-Meech signing euphoria, Mulroney brazenly admitted delaying the first ministers' conference until the last minute. "I told [my advisers] a month ago when we were going to [meet]. It's like an election campaign; you count backward. [I said], 'That's the day we're going to roll the dice.'" This revelation opened Mulroney up to criticism as it contradicted his earlier position that delay in calling the conference was due to the difficult search for "common ground" among the first ministers, rather than being part of a deliberately planned political strategy. In this stunning, some would say foolish admission, Mulroney owned up to having orchestrated the last minute timing and crisis atmosphere of the meetings, all the while having told the first ministers and the country the delay was due to a "lack of common ground." The Globe and Mail, for its part, after revealing Mulroney's admissions and precipitating a tremendous furore on June 12, ("Marathon talks were all part of plan, PM says,") had by June 16 returned to its customary sycophantic position both editorially, ("It's all in the timing,") and in the news columns ("PM's method part of tradition").⁴⁰ Thus, having reported this on June 12, The Globe backtracked four days later, on June 16, in an editorial which stated: "Given the inflexible positions adopted by Manitoba and Newfoundland to the Meech Lake accord, Brian Mulroney had his reasons for holding off on calling the recent marathon conference of first ministers..."⁴¹

On that same day, Graham Fraser, who unlike Delacourt is said to have favoured the Meech accord,⁴² wrote a page 3 article in The Globe which said: "...Mr. Mulroney behaved like a conciliator, but inevitably a participant-conciliator." Fraser justified Mulroney's actions on the basis of the prime minister's belief in the maxims of the management lawyer in labour negotiations. We can only assume that the damage control unit of Mulroney's press office was working overtime, and succeeded in foisting this particular "spin" on Fraser, if not Delacourt. "For a veteran of multi-union negotiations, the context seemed self-evident," Fraser wrote, in apologizing for the prime minister's behaviour. "In that context, June 23 represented...a fundamental and essential deadline."⁴³

The very survival of Mulroney's government and his political career appeared at stake if the Meech accord failed. With two Alberta and three former Tory Quebec MPs sitting as independents already, the failure of Meech could have meant a dozen or more additional defections, and an end to his shaky coalition in Quebec. Thus, when Mulroney said, "What is really at stake is Canada," in the language of a megalomaniac, he meant that his own political career was at stake. And he brought all of this on himself by portraying Meech as a question of whether English Canada wanted Quebec, and representing critics of Meech as rejecting French Canada, in what Jeffrey Simpson of The Globe described as "a months-long process of bidding up the ante surrounding Meech Lake."⁴⁴

Although scattered elements of this analysis are to

be found in the coverage, this is not the picture played up in the mainstream press. After describing Clyde Wells as a "loose cannon," awash in "indecision," "obstinacy" and "intractability," The Windsor Star went on to rave about Mulroney:

the country owes the prime minister a tremendous debt of gratitude for the uncanny patience and determination he displayed...If the accord meets its June 23 ratification deadline, it will have been the unselfish leadership that Mulroney exhibited during the past week that provided the foundation for success. The prime minister obviously excels as a shrewd negotiator when brinkmanship is involved...It was Mulroney who stroked egos when sensibilities were hurt; it was Mulroney who downplayed his own contributions and unabashedly credited others for the roles they played in reaching Saturday's consensus.⁴⁵

Others differed in their view of Mulroney's role. Newfoundland Premier Clyde Wells said the final straw was Mulroney's eleventh hour attempt to get the Supreme Court to extend the June 23 deadline for Manitoba, but only if Newfoundland approved the deal. NDP leader Audrey McLaughlin and Manitoba Liberal leader Sharon Carstairs promptly called for Mulroney to resign over his role in the affair.

THE ASSIGNMENT OF BLAME

For his part, Mulroney made an address to the nation after the expiry of the Meech accord on June 23, a speech which Carol Goar of The Toronto Star wrote was characterized by "restraint and dignity," and an "honest admission of failure." But was it?

Let's take a look at his speech. Beforehand, he had his Meech point man, Senator Lowell Murray, and External Affairs Minister Joe Clark, lay the blame squarely on Clyde Wells' shoulders.

Then in his address, he reaffirmed this, telling us that "The last remaining hope (for Meech) was dashed by Newfoundland," which "chose to rescind (its) approval."

The prime minister then went on to blame Pierre Trudeau, who offered Quebecers a renewed federalism after the 1980 referendum, only to have the 1982 Constitution fail to "respond to the expectations raised."

Mulroney then blamed all those who used Meech as a "lightning rod for discontent" about budgets, taxes, free trade, and "linguistic tensions," when the accord was only designed to "bring Quebec back into the constitutional family."

Finally, he again by inference blamed Trudeau for the "failure of the (1982) constitutional amending procedures," which were responsible for the lack of public participation and secrecy surrounding the Meech negotiations.

Thus, the culprits Mulroney identified are: Clyde Wells, Pierre Trudeau, members of the public unhappy about Meech, and Pierre Trudeau again.

As for his own role, the prime minister said he achieved the approval of eight provinces, with 94 percent of the population, and the approval of the three party leaders of the ninth province, Manitoba. Unlike the last time in 1982, he said, "Quebec was never isolated."

Aside from listing his own accomplishments and the "honest admission" of the failures of others, his major sentiment was one of disappointment.

"I don't hide from you my great disappointment at the setback we have suffered today," he said. But he personally had done nothing wrong. "There is no dishonour in trying to overcome a serious threat to our unity."

"To govern is to choose. And to lead is to run the risk of failure. But I would rather have failed, trying to advance the cause of Canada's unity, than to have...done nothing." Many now wish he had.

As Manitoba Premier Gary Filmon noted in a far more statesman-like address afterwards, "There is blame enough for everyone who was a part of (Meech)...Everybody involved has to take some responsibility. But now is not the time to attribute blame or to point fingers..."

Brian Mulroney was wearing out his pointing finger, and appeared incapable of accepting his considerable share of responsibility for:

- o Delaying a three-year process to the last possible minute. Meeting in secret with ten other men, to decide a matter of national significance via executive federalism.
- o Ignoring the concerns of natives, women, northerners, and the public at large.
- o Browbeating the two premiers who tried to listen to their constituents' concerns.
- o Using dock strike negotiating techniques.
- o Fanning the flames of national hysteria over Meech, to exaggerate his own importance.

Interviewed by Barbara Frum on The Journal, Mulroney held out the Meech document, with Wells' signature. Ignoring the asterisk beside Wells' name, he said, "This is his signature. This is the Meech Lake accord...He cancelled the most fundamental and noble dimension of a democracy." Moments later, Mulroney said, "I haven't a word of criticism of him." As Salutin notes, "Frum didn't even twitch."⁴⁶

There is a different interpretation of Wells' actions. Having taken a principled stand on the Meech accord, approved by the government of his Conservative predecessor Brian Peckford, Wells was subjected to months of pressure tactics leading up to Mulroney's grand finale. In the last week, the pressure intensified. "It's an unacceptable approach, totally unacceptable," Wells said of Mulroney's brand of executive federalism. Visibly upset, Wells finally signed, but with an asterisk beside his name. His agreement was conditional on the approval of the Newfoundland legislature. He commented:

I felt so uncomfortable all week. I've been reluctantly agreeing to compromise against my stated principles...and what's worse, I have great difficulty understanding how I could allow myself to be taken in and kept on that vortex without being able to get out of it.⁴⁷

In short, he felt manipulated, as though even as an insider and participant, his consent was being manufactured. Next came Mulroney's "rolling the dice" interview, which exacerbated the problem. "It gives the impression that we're being manipulated," Wells told The Globe.

The final straw came when Federal-Provincial Relations Minister Senator Lowell Murray tried to swing

one final deal with Manitoba: he would go to the Supreme Court to try to get more time for Manitoba to hold its public hearings, but only if Newfoundland passed the accord. Of course, this was seen in Newfoundland as more pressure tactics. Wells was furious. All along the dissenting provinces were told that June 23 was the final, inflexible deadline. No extensions. This was the final manipulation, and Wells heard about it from the media rather than Lowell Murray, who hadn't returned Wells' phone call. In fact, it appeared that Murray went to the media intentionally, before returning Wells' call, although this may simply have been a communication failure.

With this apparent addition of insult to injury, on Wells' advice the Newfoundland Legislature chose not to vote on the accord. This scenario makes it quite difficult to blame Clyde Wells, especially in view of Elijah Harper's actions in the Manitoba Legislature. Harper consistently refused the unanimous consent required to allow the accord to be debated, despite promises from Mulroney which included a royal commission into native affairs. The Manitoba chiefs felt Mulroney was trying to bribe them, and they too felt insulted and manipulated. Naturally, like Wells they stood on principle and rejected Mulroney's offers, or attempts at manipulation, depending on your perspective. In his role as management negotiator and his seemingly endless attempts to sweeten the pot to get his way, Mulroney soured the deal.

Additionally, however, it was unclear that Meech would even pass the Manitoba legislature, just as it was unclear what would happen in Newfoundland. Gary Filmon's Conservative government was in a minority, dependent on the support of Sharon Carstairs' Liberals or Gary Doer's NDP. This was the reason why both opposition leaders were in attendance and were consulted during negotiations in Ottawa.

When Carstairs and Doer were informed of the last-ditch attempt by Murray and Mulroney to tinker with the June 23 deadline, they announced that 'all deals were off,' evidently withdrawing their support for Meech. Without their support, Filmon would be unable to pass the accord, even if Elijah Harper had allowed it to go through. All of the above was reported in the mainstream media, although at times you had to dig for it, reading to the last paragraph, or ignoring that which was emphasized by the media. Enter the revisionists.

The evening the accord collapsed, Mulroney's Meech point-man Senator Lowell Murray held up the document, pointed to Wells' signature, and effectively said, 'Wells did it.' The next day in the Quebec National Assembly, Premier Robert Bourassa held up the document, pointed to Wells' signature, and said, "Premier Wells has decided not to respect his signature." Three days later the Canadian Press wire service ran a story about the Quebec PC caucus. Included was a brief paragraph providing historical background on Meech, which read as follows:

Despite last-minute attempts by Ottawa to save the deal, it died Friday - one day before the June 23 deadline - when Premier Clyde Wells refused to put a resolution to ratify Meech Lake to a vote in the Newfoundland legislature.⁴⁸

Whoever wrote that piece was suffering from historical amnesia, after only three days - proof that

while the manufacture of consent had fallen short, the Orwellian rewrite artists were hard at work putting the correct "spin" on events. They came up with what Chomsky terms, "...a more satisfactory version of history."⁴⁹ Missing was any indication of the instrumental role of Elijah Harper and his aboriginal supporters, or any of the complexity outlined above. Similarly with The Globe and Mail, which ran a front page banner headline on June 23 saying "Meech dies as Wells calls off vote." Of course some note was made of Harper's role. On page 6 a Globe story was titled, "Harper deals crushing blow to Meech deal." And on June 29 Globe columnist Jeffrey Simpson wrote: "The Crees of Manitoba (supported by natives everywhere) and the government of Newfoundland ultimately killed the Meech Lake accord..." So, the revisionism wasn't total. Still, the government emphasis on Wells eventually played out in media coverage, and became the "common sense" understanding of Meech, as witnessed by the CP backgrounder.

The CP backgrounder might have read as follows:

Last-minute attempts by Ottawa to further manipulate the Manitoba Cree and the Newfoundland government led to the rejection of the Meech accord by two out of ten provinces, whereas unanimous approval was required.

Of course, dozens of variations are possible, all of which could be more plausible than the CP version of 'instant history.'

Similarly with the post-Meech Barbara Frum interview on The Journal, referred to earlier. Here's another example of the 'hard-hitting' questions she asked Mulroney:

You really suffered throughout this. But people saw your face and you looked pretty grim, pretty dispirited. ...What did that do to you?⁵⁰

Why did she not challenge Mulroney, as she had Trudeau and Wells? Didn't Mulroney's Machiavellian methods and self-puffery at least warrant some tough questioning?

A QUESTION OF EMPOWERMENT: MULRONEY AND NATIVES

In contrast, not only could you find a differing perspective in the alternative media, but an explanation of why Mulroney and others put the blame on Wells. Writing in Canadian Dimension, for example, Tanya Lester said "Elijah Harper...ensured the Meech Lake accord's demise...Harper...used legislative procedural tactics to defeat the accord." Lester quoted a native spokesperson who said:

...the prime minister feared he would empower aboriginals if he acknowledged Harper's major role in the accord's failure.⁵¹

Of course, Mulroney had no wish to empower anyone other than himself and his allies. Doubtless, recognizing Harper's role was not advantageous to Mulroney, especially when he could blame Wells, who is after all a friend to Trudeau, Mulroney's arch-rival. Nevertheless, lest the reader begin to form a picture of pluralist, competing politicians a la Mulroney and Wells, it should

be stressed that Wells (and Filmon et al.) was and would have gone along with Meech, despite the personality clash, except that Mulroney's strongarm tactics proved too much to bear. The diverse views here have a lot to do with gamesmanship, and less to do with substantive differences. If there were such diversity, the 1987 deal never would have been signed in the first place, and with or without an asterisk, Wells' signature never would have found its way onto the 1990 document, in view of the intense personal differences.

Similarly, the unpopularity of the accord with the English-speaking public had more to do with form and process than with substance and content. And herein lies the real tragedy of the media portrayal of Meech, which has led the Quebecois to see in its rejection, as Mulroney promised them, a rejection of Quebec itself. We will return to this matter momentarily, including a discussion of the substantive objections to Meech in English-speaking Canada, such as they were, after one last point about Elijah Harper.

While Harper, with the approval of the Manitoba Council of Chiefs, was demonstrating at the Manitoba Legislature with 5000 supporters, the CP wire was carrying a story saying Harper had been charged in the 1980s, while a Cabinet minister in the Pawley government, with refusing to take a breathalyser.⁵² To my knowledge, few mainstream media ever have alluded to Mulroney's own drinking problems, notorious in Ottawa circles.⁵³ However, recently Maclean's columnist Allan Fotheringham, in a column on the closing of a bar in Montreal's Ritz-Carleton Hotel, noted that in the past it was one of Mulroney's favourite haunts. "This was when the present Prime Minister was in his drinking days, a man who made an art out of the three-hour lunch,"⁵⁴ Fotheringham wrote.

As the days of Mulroney's candid interviews and braggadocio may be at an end, presuming his handlers keep him under tighter rein, we may never know to what extent his personal pique and revenge played a factor in sending the troops against the natives at Oka, Quebec, in the late summer of 1990. Amidst reports that he was suffering from depression and various other rumours following the demise of Meech, the prime minister was nowhere to be seen during long periods of this national crisis. Reputed to be vengeful and possessed of a long memory, Mulroney possibly may have left the Mohawks of Oka to twist in the wind in retaliation for the contribution by the Manitoba Cree to the death of Meech.

Of course, this suggestion is unsubstantiated by any evidence other than that which is prima facie. Despite blaming Liberal premier Clyde Wells for Meech's death, Mulroney did try to negotiate with the Manitoba Cree, and was rebuffed. With good reason: being principled people, they were offended by Mulroney's attempt to bribe them in return for the passage of Meech. From what we know of his sensitive nature, there is little reason to believe he would take this lightly. The Oka crisis was an opportunity to realize revenge on 'natives,' while appearing to do very little other than responding to Premier Bourassa's request for troops.

THE DISTINCT SOCIETY CLAUSE

As is pointed out by John Meisel in his article in this issue, English-speaking Canadians didn't understand what the Meech accord was all about. As such, it follows that their objections, and they did disapprove, primarily

were not substantive, but rather emotional. The reasons for this are doubtless as old as living memory of French-English relations in the country. In particular, they go back to Bill 101 and French-only sign laws in Quebec, with which the English-language media have had a field day. The fact that the English-speaking minority in Quebec has held, and continues to hold a privileged position relative to French-speaking minorities anywhere in Canada, is absent from English-language media and discourse. Instead, just as Quebec's negotiating positions are represented as "demands,"⁵⁵ in English-language media, so too is the position of Quebec on language and culture distorted out of all proportion. Hence, it's not surprising that English-Canadians have a distorted view of Quebec, and vice-versa.

While the English-language media have played up the 'thought police' aspect of Quebecois informing on stores with English-language signs, the Quebec media have replayed ad nauseam, film footage of a group of seniors in Brockville, Ont., stomping on the Fleur-de-Lys. In Ontario, this 'knowledge through media sensationalism' led, in 1989-90 just as Meech was heating up, to one or two and then dozens of towns and cities passing municipal laws declaring themselves to be "officially unilingual." What towns as diverse as Thunder Bay and Essex Ont. meant by this is that they were not willing to spend money on French translations and bilingual capabilities. It didn't matter that no local monies were being spent, as this was part of a Provincial program, affecting only designated communities (which were not the ones declaring themselves unilingual in the first place!)

In short, it made no sense. It was an emotional reaction to perceived Quebecois intolerance for the English language, largely as invented by the Ontario media. Nonsensical or not, it happened, and in a snowballing effect, the Quebec media picked up on the unilingual laws in Ontario as evidence of English-Canadian intolerance for Quebecers. This in turn strengthened Quebec's resolve heading into the Meech negotiations, which meant that Bourassa was unable, politically, to make concessions on his five minimal proposals, including the distinct society clause. This meant that he was portrayed as inflexible by English-Canadian media, leading to a stiffening of resolve against Meech and Quebec.

Combined with Mulroney's machinations, and a growing personal dislike for Mulroney reflected by his low standing in the polls, this resulted in an English-Canadian opposition to Meech which was just about entirely process-related and media created. But there was some substance to the criticism, of course. The agonizing question for Anglophones was whether these shortcomings could be overlooked in order to please Quebec. Aboriginal peoples were left out of the process. Northerners were neither consulted nor pleased. Women's groups were aggrieved. Nationalists and federalists objected to the evident weakening of the central government. And the distinct society clause provided a focus for human rights advocates.

In March of 1990, in the process of promoting his new (co-edited) book, Pierre Trudeau took some time to once again speak out against the Meech accord. His specific target was the distinct society clause. In an interview with Barbara Frum on The Journal, described earlier, Trudeau distinguished between the 'notwithstanding' clause which he allowed to be negotiated into the Charter of Rights in 1982, and the distinct society

clause. "What does distinct society mean? Can you tell me what it means?" he asked Frum pointedly, and of course she couldn't. Trudeau went on to state that while he knew what he was negotiating in 1982, the distinct society clause was ambiguous and consequently very troubling. Since Trudeau still retains a significant following and considerable respect, this criticism continued to raise doubts in English Canada.

Toronto lawyer Clayton Ruby, writing prior to the deadline in June of 1990 in *The Globe and Mail*, argued that Quebec's distinct society clause meant it could pass laws infringing on individual human rights, and which would be struck down as unconstitutional anywhere else in Canada.⁵⁶ Hence, it would give to Quebec that which English Canada appeared to fear most: permission to discriminate against its English minority. "Distinct society" sounded like a euphemism for "special status;" a notion which made English-speaking Canadians blood boil.

The dean of law at Queen's University in Kingston intoned:

...despite the good reasons for the distinct-society clause, many thoughtful Canadians feel it should not come at the expense of fundamental human rights.⁵⁷

Thus did substance, replete with eminent authorities to back it up, come to be added to the objections over form and based on emotions.

Again, Mulroney's patchwork negotiations served only to exacerbate the problems. His solution was to have a letter appended to, and referred to, in the Meech agreement, which was signed by six erstwhile "constitutional experts." But even on *The Globe and Mail* opinion page, this was condemned as a "shabby innovation," representing "...casual opinions that have been given a thin veneer of official sanction." The letter was not adopted by the first ministers, and would not influence a court decision on interpretation of "distinct society." It was "simply opportunistic - designed to undercut criticism."

...the letter's sole purpose must be to convince those [who are] concerned that Canadians' rights will be diminished by the distinct-society clause that they really have nothing to fear. In this task, it fails completely.⁵⁸

The editorial position taken by *The Globe* the next day, typically supportive of the Mulroney government, did little to allay these fears ("The need to recognize Quebec's distinct society"). It merely stated, "Meech Lake gives Quebec no licence to savage the rights of its people."⁵⁹

CONCLUSION: THE PUBLIC AS VICTORS

To sum up, Anglophone opposition to Meech was complex, and based on historical and contextual factors. To begin with, the Meech accord was not killed by either Clyde Wells or Elijah Harper. Rather, it died owing to Mulroney's own dock strike negotiating tactics, and deceitful manipulation of the premiers and the public. Hence, the failure of the Meech accord can in no way be seen as a rejection of Quebec by English Canada. Even if

they had rejected it, which they didn't do, English Canadians simply did not understand the accord well enough to make a substantive judgement about it.

That is not to say there was no anti-French sentiment, or there were no substantive objections to Meech. However, the bigotry which surfaced was largely related to misunderstanding of other issues, in addition to Meech. The concern over the distinct society clause was very evident among those who were well informed, however it is important to remember that this is not what killed Meech: it died due to the offensive tactics of a man reputed to be a master negotiator. Indeed, if it were represented this way in the Quebec and English-Canadian media, it would have been much more difficult for Quebecers to express umbrage at the rejection of Meech, given that Mulroney has been seen as an ally in Quebec. (Certainly in comparison to Trudeau) As such, this represents a monumental failure on the part of Brian Mulroney, both tactically and morally. It represents a condemnation of the backroom negotiating tactics, the distribution of largesse, the bribery, manipulation and ultimately the attempted manufacture of consent.

As such, the death of Meech is a victory for the Canadian people, including the Quebecois, who also have been subject to attempts to manufacture consent, through manipulation by and of, the media. This is ironic in view of the national angst brought on by the release of the Allaire Report in Quebec, and the inevitable shifting of the burden of guilt to the victims.⁶⁰

Like the free trade agreement (FTA) before it, for whatever reasons, Meech was unpopular outside of Quebec. The FTA was portrayed and sold as an economic panacea, but to all appearances is solely benefitting the "national [corporate] interest." As discussed, past examples show that the public interest and this "national" interest are in opposition.

Whereas the Tories managed to get elected in 1988, and have since implemented the FTA, their attempt to engineer consent for Meech failed, spoiling a track record which is as oppressive as it is successful. In addition to the FTA, the Tories have manufactured at least tacit consent for: the Goods and Services Tax, the war on the deficit, the Persian Gulf war, cuts to the CBC, changes to unemployment insurance, the privatization of Petro Canada, Air Canada, and other crown corporations, sending the army into Oka, and much more.⁶¹

As is their wont, the media turned the reporting of Meech into a spectator sport. In the process, they fanned the flames of the differing nationalist sentiments of French and English Canada, and played an instrumental role in the impending fragmentation and breakup of the country, with the looming prospect of some form of sovereignty association with Quebec. If, as appears likely, in the near future Quebec becomes sovereign with some economic links to Canada, it will in large part be due to media portrayals and illusions, such as the Meech accord crisis of 1990.

In propagating the "Clyde Wells did it," or "Elijah Harper did it" scenarios, and absolving Mulroney of blame, the media followed their predilection to oversimplify and misinform, while simultaneously engaging in historical engineering for political ends. This is in keeping with their role as legitimators of state policy. Thus, despite the failure to manufacture consent for Meech, the media played their role to perfection: by portraying the Meech negotiations as a spectator sport

and hence encouraging disempowerment of the public and discouraging our involvement; through sensational coverage which magnified the two solitudes and further serves the 'divide and conquer' aims of transnational corporate culture; and finally by providing ostensibly innocuous 'infotainment,' which while attracting large audiences, serves to maintain a buying mood rather than engendering a serious or critical perspective.

Thus, the Meech accord debacle constitutes supportive evidence for Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, as it operates on a national level, within the Canadian context.

Notes

1. As Michael Parenti notes, "Being the people who pay the bills, advertisers openly regard their influence over media content as something of a 'right.' Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality*, St. Martin's Press, N.Y., 1986, p. 48.

2. A candid article in the Report on Business of The Globe and Mail [Barrie McKenna, "Montreal Gazette adopts a new format for browsers," January 15, 1990] describes the trend at Canada's largest newspaper chain. "The [Gazette's new] quick-scan style, pioneered by USA Today, is intended to make newspapers friendly to a generation that gets the bulk of its news from television." Gazette publisher David Perks is quoted as saying, The Gazette is "...designed to take nothing away from the hard-core readers and to provide easier access to the scanners and the browsers. There is a segment of the population, not just young people, who don't have a half hour to put into a newspaper. What we're doing is trying to make people who scan the paper for five minutes feel like they're getting their 50 cents' worth." The article quotes a Toronto media analyst as saying, "All newspapers have to become more like TV to ensure their future."

3. The broader agenda does still receive some very limited coverage, which in turn serves the useful function of maintaining the appearance of diversity. (For an elaboration of this, see Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions*, CBC Enterprises, Toronto, 1989, p. 48) Having thus "covered" that angle, the media can go ahead and ignore it in subsequent stories. The result is that "linking" between issues might be mentioned in one article or column, among hundreds on a topic. This encourages the public to overlook or forget that perspective. Additionally, a few columnists in the country have managed to retain both their broad vision and their jobs: Frances Russell of The Winnipeg Free Press, and Thomas Walkom of The Toronto Star, come to mind. Their work serves as an oasis in a mainstream media desert.

4. In fact, as others have pointed out, media portrayals actually do serve to provide a "linking" function between news items; they articulate the prevailing cultural consensus about the nature of reality, transmitting a collective identity. In this respect, they actually "construct cohesion out of the fragmented

'facts of life.'" See Richard Ericson, Pat Baranek and Janet Chan, *Visualizing Deviance: A Study of News Organization*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1987, pp. 29-31. In this way, a "commonsense" view of reality is constructed, but there is a distinct ideological bias to it.

5. This has been elaborated in the work of Noam Chomsky, and in particular in: Edward Herman & Noam Chomsky, *"Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media"*, Pantheon, N.Y., 1988. The term "Manufacturing Consent" comes from the elitist philosophy of journalist/political scientist Walter Lippmann, who argued in its favour. It's important to note that disagreements do occur between governments and the press, for example. Usually these are of a "minor" nature, such as a preference for one business party over another. Other times, the media will rebuke the government for not adequately supporting business. For example, in February of 1991, the Commonwealth Committee of Foreign Ministers on Southern Africa, under the chairmanship of External Affairs Minister Joe Clark, decided to maintain sanctions against South Africa until there is "fundamental and irreversible change" to the system of apartheid. The ministers are awaiting action to accompany South African President F.W. de Klerk's announced intention to repeal the racist Land Act, Group Areas Act, and Registration Act. News reports tended to portray the Commonwealth decision as "perverse and irrational," in keeping with the corporate desire to return to business as usual. See Michael Valpy, "There's reason to praise South Africa decision," *The Globe and Mail*, February 20, 1990, A11.

6. Susan Delacourt, Graham Fraser, "Marathon talks were all part of plan, PM says," *The Globe and Mail*, June 12, 1990, p.1.

7. Bill Taylor, "World's press give little ink to Meech," *The Toronto Star*, June 9, 1990. p. A8.

8. Cf. "Holdouts okay federal plan in breakthrough on Meech," *The Toronto Star*, June 9, 1990, p. A9. The *Star* also carried a box score countdown to June 23, with a map of Canada titled: "Meech Lake Countdown," and the number of remaining days.

9. Ericson et al., *Visualizing Deviance*, p. 35.

10. Don MacPherson, "'Goalie' Bourassa enjoys shut-out in easy victory," *The Windsor Star*, June 11, 1990, p.A7.

11. Terrance Wills, "Ex-QB Getty threw game-winning block," *Windsor Star*, June 11, 1990 p. A8.

12. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, N.Y., Viking, 1985, cited in Ericson et al., *Visualizing Deviance*, p. 354.

13. "Peterson disavows plan to discredit Meech holdouts," a Southam News report carried without a byline in *The Toronto Star*, May 31, 1990. See also Chris Hall, "Wells slams 'despicable' plan," *The Ottawa Citizen*, May 31, 1990.

14. A revealing article carried in The Report on Business of The Globe and Mail carried the headline, "Gulf strife boosts newspaper sales." In the article, Globe media reporter John Partridge was careful to point out that "...costs too are soaring," lest we get the idea anyone profits from war. See John Partridge, "Gulf strife boosts newspaper sales," The Globe and Mail, January 26, 1991, p. B1.

15. Trina McQueen, "How the CBC covered Meech Lake," Toronto Star, July 25, 1990, p. C3.

16. Cf. Rick Salutin, "Brian and the Boys," Saturday Night, November 1990, p. 85.

17. Salutin, "Brian and the Boys," p.85.

18. Salutin, "Brian and the Boys," p. 85.

19. Salutin, "Brian and the Boys," p. 87.

20. Salutin, "Brian and the Boys," p. 85.

21. Peter Mansbridge, "Even if its boring, it's time to pay attention," The Globe and Mail, January 26, 1990, A7. (From a speech at the University of Calgary.)

22. Mansbridge, "Even if its boring, it's time to pay attention," p. A7.

23. Andrew Nikiforuk, "How the CBC Handed Mulroney the Mike," Toronto Star, July 1990.

24. Ericson et al., Visualizing Deviance, pp. 351, 360.

25. Frequently, there is no attempt to balance such views. Balance is only required to offset the opinions of "special interest" groups, rather than government or business. For example, months after the Oka crisis ended, Quebec Indian Affairs Minister Thomas Sidden appeared before the hearings held by the House of Commons aboriginal affairs committee, and told it that "Mohawk factionalism was to blame" for the violence at Oka. "Disputes" and "turmoil" resulted from a traditional "custom" system established 21 years ago by former Liberal minister Jean Chretien, Sidden said. "Mr. Sidden said there was a breakdown in negotiations over the golf course dispute because the clan mothers had replaced the band council and chief..." the newspaper reported. The only response to this was from Liberal MP Ethel Blondin, who pointed out that in recent years there have been almost as many ministers of Indian affairs as chiefs in Kanesatake. No attempt was made to interview George Erasmus or any other native spokespersons, to obtain a different perspective. It is thus that authorized knowers have both privileged and virtually unchallenged access to the media. See Graham Fraser, "Native system blamed for violence at Oka," The Globe and Mail, February 20, 1991, p. A1.

26. For his most recent discussion, see Noam Chomsky, Necessary Illusions, CBC Enterprises, Toronto, 1989.

27. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, Manufacturing

Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media, Pantheon, N.Y., 1988. For a recent overview of the propaganda model, see Noam Chomsky, Necessary Illusions, p.153.

28. Noam Chomsky, "The Carter Administration: Myth and Reality," in C.P. Otero (Ed), Noam Chomsky's Radical Priorities, Black Rose Books, Montreal, 2nd Ed., 1981, p.141.

29. C.P. Otero (Ed), Noam Chomsky's Radical Priorities, Black Rose Books, Montreal, 2nd Ed., 1981, pp.299-300.

30. "Sensible Restraint on Panama," The New York Times, editorial, pg. A30, October 5, 1989.

31. "Bush, Under Fire, Defends Role in Panama Crisis" The New York Times, October 7, 1989.

32. Jeffrey Simpson, "How the ice cracked," a book review on The Collapse of Communism, The Globe and Mail, June 9, 1990, p. C8.

33. For an account of this possibility and London's ideas, I refer you to one of the few very thoughtful journalists writing in Canada today, Frances Russell of The Winnipeg Free Press, "Canadians will pay high cost for Meech Lake," April 25, 1990, p. 7.

34. As mentioned earlier, two exceptions are Frances Russell and Thomas Walkom. Cf. Frances Russell, "Big business bullhorns line up for Mulroney again," The Winnipeg Free Press, May 12, 1990 p. 21; David Crane, "Forces unleashed that threaten Canada's future as strong nation," The Toronto Star, June 16, 1990, p. D2.

35. Jeffrey Simpson, "More bitterness lies ahead," The Globe and Mail, June 12, 1990, p. A27.

36. Simpson, "More bitterness lies ahead," p. A27.

37. Noam Chomsky, "1984: Orwell's and Ours," in Carlos Otero, (Ed) Noam Chomsky's Radical Priorities, p.302.

38. Noam Chomsky, Necessary Illusions, p. 3.

39. Evidently, I learn from the Meisel article in this series that CBC TV news Ottawa bureau chief Elly Alboim independently arrived at a conclusion similar to this. See Elly Alboim, "Inside the news story: Meech Lake as viewed by an Ottawa bureau chief" in Roger Gibbon (Ed.), Meech Lake and Canada: Perspectives From the West, Edmonton, Academic Printing and Publishing, 1988. After Mulroney's "Roll the dice" interview, this view became more popular. Cf. Christopher Young, "PM Fuels Fire for Personal Gain," The Windsor Star, June 14, 1990, A10.

40. Susan Delacourt, and Graham Fraser, "Marathon talks were all part of plan, PM says," The Globe and Mail, June 12, 1990, p. A1; Graham Fraser, "PM's method part of tradition," The Globe and Mail, June 16, 1990, p. A3; see also the editorial excusing Mulroney and condemning maverick Tory MP Patrick

Nowlan, "It's all in the timing," The Globe and Mail, June 16, 1990, p. D6.

41. "It's all in the timing," editorial, The Globe and Mail, June 16, 1990, p. D6.

42. See the Meisel article in this chapter for this assertion.

43. Fraser, "PM's method part of tradition," p. A3.

44. Jeffrey Simpson, "Honour, enthusiasm, stripped from accord after feverish talks," The Globe and Mail, June 11, 1990, p. A8.

45. "Mulroney's Role," editorial in The Windsor Star, June 11, 1990, p. A6.

46. Salutin, "Brian and the Boys," p. 86.

47. Salutin, "Brian and the Boys," p. 85.

48. "'War' against Chretien keeps Quebec PC caucus in the fold," Ottawa CP, Windsor Star, June 26, 1990, p. A6.

49. Chomsky, Necessary Illusions, p. 33.

50. Salutin, "Brian and the Boys," p. 87.

51. Tanya Lester, "How Manitoba's Aboriginals Stopped Meech," Canadian Dimension, 24:6, Sept. 1990, pp. 6-8.

52. In 1987, Harper was Minister of Indian Affairs in the NDP government of Howard Pawley, when he was arrested for refusing to take a breathalyser test and leaving the scene of an accident. He was fined \$450, and quit the cabinet. Two months later, Pawley reinstated him. Pauline Comeau, "The Man Who Said No," Canadian Forum, July/August 1990, pp. 10-11.

53. In fact some of the rumours have been dismissed by the PMO, and derided in the media, including Ottawa's Frank magazine, and The Globe and Mail. Cf. Charlotte Gray, "Where are those Mulroney rumours coming from?" The Globe and Mail, May 4, 1991, D1.

54. Allan Fotheringham, "Duck! Here come Brian and Mordecai," Maclean's, April 22, 1991, p. 68.

55. This is so pervasive that it seems hardly necessary to provide examples. However, as I write, the English-language media are reacting to the Allaire report, the Quebec Liberal Party proposal on Quebec-Canada relations. The front page banner headline in The Windsor Star read, "Bourassa demands new deal - or else." (Jan. 30, 1991, A1, by Peter Maser, Southam News.)

56. Clayton Ruby, "The Real Losers if Meech Wins," The Globe and Mail, June 15, 1990, A19.

57. John D. Whyte, "A Shabby Innovation," The Globe and Mail, June 15, 1990, p. A19.

58. John Whyte, "A Shabby Innovation," p. A19.

59. "The need to recognize Quebec's distinct society," editorial, (unsigned) The Globe and Mail, June 16, 1990, p. D6.

60. Chomsky, Necessary Illusions, P. 36.

61. For a good account of the neo-conservative agenda, see Maude Barlow, Parcel of Rogues, Key Porter Books, Toronto, 1990, and Joyce Nelson, Sultans of Sleaze, Between The Lines, Toronto, 1989.

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