

Victory or defeat

Process all-important in Canada's referendum

Canadians recently voted on whether or not to accept a set of constitutional reforms which would adjust power relations between the provinces and central government. ALICE COETZEE was among a delegation of 13 South Africans invited to observe the mechanics of the referendum.

THE substantial "No" vote in Canada's October constitutional referendum left the political establishment with egg on its face and the "grassroots" claiming a victory for participative democracy.

In a country where many people question the real power of their individual vote it certainly was a victory for democracy. At the same time though, it could also have been seen as a failure of democratic process because a potentially good product, the Charlottetown Accord, was rejected through unhappiness around the way the accord was devised and tested.

The Canadian referendum highlighted the dynamic, and often ambiguous, nature of the democratic system as it operates within regional, national and global forces. Even after 125 years of stable democracy, Canada is still grappling with a fair way to solve internal ethnic tensions, competing regional interests, economic disparities and to ensure fair representation.

While the Canadian and South African



The Canadian result confounded the political establishment. Initially supported by more than 70 percent of the population, the Charlottetown Accord was hailed as a

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dressing exercise because the Charlottetown Accord bore no resemblance to submissions to the commissions or their reports.

Their proposed alternative was a constituent assembly composed of representatives from the people, the government and business, meeting in open discussions so that people knew what was on the table. When you have an acceptable process they claimed, you get an acceptable product.

The process debate also involved a critical evaluation of the format of the referendum and its timing as an appropriate tool to test public opinion.

'On paper the process seemed impeccable. Yet, in many quarters it was not acceptable'

Those on the "No" side felt that the referendum should not have been called after the fact. By only giving Canadians the opportunity to accept or reject, they were denied the right to contribute to their constitutional future or make the decision better.

Even within the "Yes" camp there was the concession on this point. An academic from the University of Calgary felt it was unsatis-

factory to ask people to give a "yes" or "no" to a complex document with some 30 clauses. Instead, the main issues should have been isolated and people asked for their feelings on those. That would have given the drafters of the accord some guidance whereas a simple "yes" or "no" gave none.

Her suggestion also raised the question of the appropriateness of the referendum in the first place. At municipal level, the Canadian experience of referenda is very positive, because the people are asked to vote on single issues. But, when a "yes" was needed to some 30 items, reflecting sectoral interests, it was almost impossible.

This was borne out by many of the "No" voters who agreed to most parts of the document but stuck at either one or other point.

The criticism of process, however, resonated more deeply at the level of values which are needed to underpin a political system. The lack of trust in the political leadership was constantly raised. So too were accountability, communication and empowerment within the political system, with people on the street expressing a profound sense of alienation from the political process.

All this has a history. Many people were still smarting from the earlier rejected Meech Lake Accord described as "11 men behind

closed doors the night" the Charlottetown "promise" making" a

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WORKING shoulder to shoulder in an intense two-day process, the religious leadership from South Africa's multiple and diverse faiths produced the country's first Declaration on the Rights and Responsibilities of Religious People.

What had started two years earlier with consultations, workshops and widespread debate, came to a decisive point in Pretoria at the National Inter-faith Conference on

Religious freedom turning rights into

South Africa's first declaration on religious responsibility was drafted at a conference in Pretoria
ALICE COETZEE reports.

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