

Canada Watch

PRACTICAL AND AUTHORITATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY NATIONAL ISSUES

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SPECIAL ISSUE: FOCUS ON THE OPPOSITION PARTIES

IN PRAISE OF A CANADIAN BLOC QUÉBÉCOIS

BY LOUIS BALTHAZAR

The Bloc Québécois (BQ) is an unusual party. Not so much because it advocates the secession of a province in the Canadian Parliament, but especially on account of the peculiar circumstances of its creation.

Whatever Quebec sovereigntists may say, the Bloc is not the outcome of repeated efforts on the part of some Parti Québécois (PQ) members to extend their party's influence at the federal level. All these efforts have failed for good reasons: Quebecers tend to make a difference between the federal and the provincial level. While they may support a nation-building effort in Quebec, they are usually inclined to play a fair game in federal politics—at least for the time being.

It should always be kept in mind that the Bloc Québécois is born out of a federalist ideal. Lucien Bouchard and the members of Parliament who followed him had supported a reform of Canadian federalism until the failure of

the Meech Lake agreement (more precisely, until Brian Mulroney had recourse to artificial manoeuvring to rescue the accord). Thus, the Bloc was essentially a party of disenchanted federalists. Let us note that its creation was even encouraged by Robert Bourassa, perhaps more so than by Jacques Parizeau.

Lucien Bouchard, as a Bloc representative, was a member of the Bélanger-Campeau Commission on the future of Quebec. Contrary to his PQ counterparts, he subscribed to the Commission's opening to a reform of the Canadian Con-

stitution. He later campaigned against the Charlottetown accord because he saw it as insufficient. He had declared himself sovereigntist, but always because of what he saw as the failure of Canadian federalism.

Thus, Quebec voters could rightly consider the Bloc as an alternative to traditional parties in Ottawa, not so much as a wing of the PQ. They voted heavily for the Bloc in the 1993 federal election, because they could not resign themselves to vote for a Conservative party that had lost its credibility after the catastrophic failures of Meech and Charlottetown. As for Jean Chrétien's Liberal Party, it had become an outcast since 1982, not unlike the Tories in earlier years. The isolation of

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THE PROSPECTS FOR REFORM

BY TOM FLANAGAN

The Reform Party made a historic breakthrough in the 1993 election, winning 52 seats in the House of Commons and 19 percent of the popular vote. Outside Quebec, where it ran no candidates, Reform took almost one-quarter of the total vote and won seats in five provinces, although 46 of its 52 victories came in Alberta and British Columbia. Yet, despite this remarkable success,

things do not look too promising at the moment.

Reform's popularity in public-opinion polls has hovered in the low teens since early 1994. In the most recent Environics poll (*Globe and Mail*, November 19, 1996), Reform was tied with the NDP at 11 percent, behind the Progressive Conservatives' 14 percent and far behind the Lib-

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Quebec from the constitutional process may be seen as an event as dark as the imposed conscription of 1917. Moreover, the man who had himself engineered this isolation (not only of René Lévesque's but also of Claude Ryan's Quebec) had the nerve to proclaim that people did not care about the Constitution! To such an insult, coming from one of them, French-speaking Quebecers could only respond by voting for the Bloc.

Very few in Quebec wish that their representatives spend their time promoting sovereignty, creating trouble for the sake of it, and staying apart from anything that concerns Canada as a whole.

In all likelihood, Quebec francophones should con-

tinue to repudiate Jean Chrétien as an "unfavorite son" in the next election. But, as a majority of them continues to believe in the ultimate ideal of a reformed Canadian federalism, it would not take much for them to switch to another alternative. Let the sovereignty option lose ground in an atmosphere of byzantine in-fighting within the PQ and of labour unions' opposition to the Bouchard government. Let Jean Charest's Conservatives resurrect the "beautiful risk" of 1984, and all these Bloc ridings may pass again to the Tories.

The Bloc, however, may very well counter that threat with a successful and media-heavy Convention in March 1997, a new leader and, above all, with a genuine program fit for a specific role in the House of Commons. This role should be congenial with Quebecers' expectations. Very few in Quebec wish that their representatives spend their time promoting sovereignty, creating trouble for the sake of it, and staying apart from anything that concerns Canada as a whole. The "scorched earth" policy has

little support among Quebecers.

If the Bloc has any raison d'être at all, its objectives should not be anything but the defense of Quebecers' interest within the Canadian federation and the promotion of partnership with the other Canadian provinces.

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As we recall how easily and almost blindly Quebec caucuses have followed the party line under previous Liberal governments, we cannot

but be comforted by the presence of a party that would have opposed such moves as the Canada Bill of 1982, which denied the very existence of a Quebec people.

Yet, the people of Quebec is still alive within Canada. Be they federalist or sovereigntist, Quebecers are paying taxes to the federal government and are entitled to a judgment on all policies of that government. Their interests still must be seen in the context of Canada at large. They will therefore expect of their representatives that they take a stand on general Canadian policies in fields like foreign affairs, defense, international trade, banking, and others, without necessarily relating everything to the narrow concerns of their constituency. They will also expect that their MPs remind the government in power of all its invasions of provincial jurisdiction in fields like human resources, education, culture, and communications.

A successful BQ should also promote partnership rather than sovereignty. If it is

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IN PRAISE OF A CANADIAN BLOC QUÉBÉCOIS
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possible for a person that is devoted to the sovereignty of Quebec to play a role in the House of Commons, it can only be for two reasons:

1. As long as Quebec is not sovereign, it must be considered as an integral part of Canada. If sovereigntists pay taxes, they have the right to a voice in Parliament;


2. Even after the contemplated sovereignty, the intense and sincere desire of a vast majority of Quebeckers is to keep on sharing with other Canadians, to maintain some form of union or association. It behooves a party like the Bloc to demonstrate, by all means available, how feasible and how profitable such a union would be for all Canadians. Were it only for this latter reason, an openness to English-speaking Canada is highly desirable on the part of Bloc members.

As the Loyal Opposition, the Bloc must offer an alternative to governmental policies, not only for Quebeckers but for all Canadians. Needless to say, this is far from being easy for sovereigntists.

But there is more. As the Loyal Opposition, the Bloc must offer an alternative to

governmental policies, not only for Quebeckers but for all Canadians. Needless to say, this is far from being easy for sovereigntists. It should be nonetheless possible to show the way for what could be an ideal Canadian union and even, why not, the ideal Canadian federation that failed to be. After all, the Bloc owes its existence to this failure. Why not remind all Canadians of that "impossible dream"?

Finally, the Bloc may have another service to fulfil for all Canadians as well as for Quebeckers. As the major Opposition party, it must offer a social alternative to the government's orientation. Given the right-wing bent of the Chrétien government and the further-right alternative of Reform, it would make sense for the Bloc to follow a program that would be socially slightly left of center. This would come close to satisfying a majority of Quebeckers and could attract badly needed support from the New Democratic Party. This has happened a few times in the past. It could become a successful trend in the future.

If all of the above is possible, then the Bloc Québécois could and should play a pertinent role in the House of Commons, receive the support of a majority in Quebec, and even gain a certain degree of sympathy among other Canadians. 

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ternal divisions within NDP constituencies and with labour affiliates resulted in large numbers of activists boycotting local campaigns. They have always been at the core of NDP success. The anti-Mulroney factor also meant that labour and traditional NDP supporters swung to the Liberals. And, Reform and the Bloc disrupted traditional regional patterns.

The Liberal government is much more vulnerable to an upset than the persistent personal popularity of the Prime Minister indicates. Marginal shifts in support can lead to significantly different results, particularly for the Conservatives in Atlantic Canada and to the benefit of the PCS and NDP in Ontario, where the Liberals have unrepeatabe distributions of seats.

There will be a rebalancing in 1997. The Liberal government is much more vulnerable to an upset than the persistent personal popularity of the Prime Minister indicates.

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Slippage by the Liberals in Ontario, accompanying a Reform decline, will result in the opportunity for recovery of 3-4 traditional NDP seats. The Prairies may see several additions. And in British Columbia, where the Liberal vote will rise and Reform decline, the benefit will flow to the NDP resulting in 8-10 seats. 

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