

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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erals' 50 percent. Its standing was competitive only in British Columbia (20 percent), Alberta (40 percent), and Saskatchewan (25 percent), and it registered only 6 percent in the crucial province of Ontario.

If things go well for Reform, it might win about as many seats as it now holds, which might be enough to become the Official Opposition, because many observers see the Bloc Québécois as winning fewer seats than the 54 it took last time. But if things go badly for Reform, the party could be pushed back to its core support in Alberta and rural British Columbia and Saskatchewan.

Ignoring the polls, the party has announced a "go for broke" strategy for the next election, promising to win a majority of the 301 seats in the House of Commons. The plan is to hold its strength in the west, make a huge breakthrough in Ontario by taking sixty ridings in that province, and pick up a sprinkling of seats in Quebec and Atlantic Canada. But, as I argued at length in my book *Waiting for the Wave* (Stoddart, 1995), such a degree of success is conceivable only if Reform rides some giant wave of po-

litical discontent, and there are no signs at the moment that such a wave is in the offing. The two most likely sources of a wave would be a separation crisis in Quebec and/or a fiscal crisis manifested in a run against the Canadian dollar, but neither seems imminent at the moment. For his own reasons, Lucien Bouchard will delay a third referendum beyond the likely date of the next federal election; and Paul Martin's efforts in the Finance portfolio have shored up Canada's fiscal position—at least until the next recession, which also seems unlikely to occur before the next election.

Under the circumstances, it is impossible to see Reform as a contender for government; more realistically, the party's operational goal must be to survive long enough to take advantage of a fiscal/political wave that may well roll in around the end of the century. I see a spectrum of possible outcomes for Reform in the next election, from achieving Official Opposition status, at the high end, to becoming a western rump party, at the low end. If things go well for Reform, it might win about as many seats as it now holds, which might be enough to become the Official Opposition, because many observers see the Bloc Québécois as winning fewer seats than the 54 it took last time. But if things go badly for Reform, the party could be pushed back to its core support in Alberta and rural British Columbia and Saskatchewan. Because of the geographical concentration of its support, the party could probably take about 20 seats in the West, even though its share of the national vote as indicated in the recent Environics poll was only 11

percent.

Reform's main weapon in the next election will be its "Fresh Start" campaign platform, which Manning has already released. This platform has the potential to mobilize support on the right. It contains a number of ideas, such as abolishing employment equity and pay equity; privatizing Canada Post, Via Rail, and CBC-TV; removing the Wheat Board's monopoly; and using tax cuts to continue the downsizing of government that should be popular among ideological conservatives.

In my view, Reform will do better only if it can do what it did in the 1993 campaign, namely get the lion's share of the vote from ideological conservatives in the west and Ontario. This is not nearly enough to win an election, but it was, and could be again, enough to finish second, well ahead of any other party in English Canada. The key in 1993 was Reform's "Zero in Three" budget-balancing proposal, which was far more detailed and credible than Kim Campbell's vague statements on the subject. When faced

with serious fiscal conservatism, Campbell and the Tories veered toward the centre, and traditional Conservative voters defected *en masse* to Reform.

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There are, however, many weak links in the chain of events required for Reform to do well. The party is beset with problems of organization, personnel, and leadership stemming ultimately from Preston Manning's conception of a

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tional NDP supporters returning to the fold, especially in Ontario where the Harris government's tough fiscal policies have galvanized the NDP's constituency.

[T]he PC's goal is not to challenge the Liberals but to win 30-40 seats and hope that Reform and the Bloc slip back enough to allow the Tories to become the Official Opposition.

Heather MacIvor's commentary on the Conservatives suggests that those who wrote the Tories' obituary following the 1993 campaign did so prematurely. The party has always displayed a remarkable resilience and can be expected to make significant gains in 1997. Yet the PC's goal is not to challenge the Liberals but to win 30-40 seats and hope that Reform and the Bloc slip back enough to allow the Tories to become the Official Opposition. MacIvor sees this outcome as a healthy one for Canadian democracy, since the country needs two genuine national parties capable of forming a government with support from all regions of the country.

These assessments suggest that the opposition parties will be more concerned with each other than with the Liberals in the coming campaign. If the true contest is for Official Opposition, then we can also expect to see the opposition parties targeting their message at specific ridings and regions. Only the Liberals

will be competitive in all regions and will run a broad-based campaign aimed at forming a national government.

The remaining articles discuss issues that may surface during an election campaign but are of more enduring importance. Tim Porteous assesses the debate around tobacco advertising. Ian Greene and David Shugarman tackle the issue of ethics and politics. And Lisa Philipps explains the significance for Canada of yet another American import, balanced-budget laws.

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populist party.

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To mention only some of the most obvious difficulties: Reform has never mastered corporate fund-raising; it still lags far behind the Liberals and PCs in this area. It has few highly skilled operatives to handle polling, advertising, and public relations. Reform MPs are obviously weary of Manning's manipulative leadership, and several of the most talented caucus members will not be running again.

The cult of populism encourages politically incorrect outspokenness to the point of rashness, making media gaffes a perpetual threat. Most fundamentally, the highly personal character of Manning's vision and leadership style, which is in one sense a strength, is also a weakness because it constrains the party's ability to grow and cope with new situations. It also allows Manning to create problems for the party by speculating about his personal views in public, as illustrated by his recent remarks about using a referendum to pass a constitutional amendment prohibiting abortion. Such episodes confuse people about what the party really stands for.

All of these weaknesses together help account for the "one step forward, two steps

back" character that so many observers have noted in Reform. It has happened over and over again—just when the party seems to be gathering momentum from the resolutely conservative policies which are its greatest asset, its internal difficulties rise to the surface. The longer a party is around, the less forgiving voters become of gaffes and pratfalls. If Reform hopes to emerge from the next election as a realistic alternative to the Liberals, it will have to show more consistent professionalism than it has hitherto. If not, the "Fresh Start" message will not be broadly communicated and Reform will fall back to the status of a Western rump party, like its Social Credit predecessor.

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