

THE PROSPECTS FOR THE PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVES IN THE 1997 FEDERAL ELECTION

BY HEATHER MACIVOR

The Progressive Conservative Party of Canada was shattered in 1993. The electoral system crushed the party, awarding it 0.67 percent of the House of Commons on the basis of 16 percent of the vote. The incumbent leader lost her seat.

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A two-term majority Conservative government, the first since Macdonald, had been reduced to two MPs and a majority in the Senate. Angry voters had elected Reform MPs in former Tory ridings in the West, split the Tory vote in Ontario (helping the Liberals win 98 ridings), and defected to the Bloc Québécois (BQ). The chattering classes quickly consigned the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada to the dustbin of history; no party had ever come back from this kind of humiliation.

This was not the first elegy for the Conservative Party of Canada. The bells had tolled in 1896, 1921, 1935, 1963, and 1980. Every time the party

was beaten, it always got back up—sometimes after a long period on the mat, and always badly bloodied, but it came back fighting. The cycle of success, punishment, and rebuilding has typically followed a series of stages. First, the party wins a smashing majority, due in large measure to Liberal arrogance and incompetence, a divided electorate, a charismatic leader, or simply a public desire for change. Second, the Conservative government is undone by circumstance (the 1917 conscription crisis, the Great Depression, the Cold War, constitutional upheaval) or by the incompetence of its leaders (the 1979 budget vote, Diefenbaker's dithering, Bennett's arrogance, Meighen's rigidity). Third, the

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voters rise up in righteous wrath and smite the party for its sins. They switch back to

the Liberals or, when the opportunity arises, they turn to "third" parties (the Progressives, Social Credit, Reconstruction, Reform, the BQ). Fourth, the Tories regroup and rebuild, taking advantage of the latest technology, their provincial bases, and the thousands of members across the country who remain loyal through feast and famine.

The length of the rebuilding stage depends on four principal factors: the appeal of the party's leader; its success in presenting itself as a legitimate alternative to the Liberals; the state of its provincial wings; and sheer luck. The leadership issue has not troubled the Tories since Campbell stepped down in late 1993. Jean Charest took over as interim leader; his position was confirmed by the party's national convention in April 1995. This was the party's first gathering since the election debacle. Seeing a few thousand fellow Tories gave a real psychological boost to dispirited party members who had wondered whether their party would survive. Six months later, Charest played a prominent and widely praised role in the federalist campaign against the Quebec referendum, raising his own profile and that of his party. Donations started pouring in, nearly erasing the party's accumulated debt from the 1993 campaign and allowing it to start planning for the next election.

Surprisingly, a November 1996 Globe/Enviro-nics poll showed that only 48 percent of Tory-identified respondents named Charest as the best prime minister. This result shows that, despite Charest's personal popularity, the party is not yet a legitimate alternative to the Liberals. Le-

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credible policies, a pursuit in which the party has been engaged since the summer of 1995. The membership is divided between those who advocate a clear shift to the right, to recapture Reform voters in Alberta and Ontario, and those who want the party to stay in the middle of the ideological spectrum as a national alternative to the Liberals. The August 1996 policy convention in Winnipeg witnessed a number of open clashes between the two camps; the right won some concessions, including tax cuts, but overall the party hewed to the middle path. The wisdom of this course will be tested in 1997.

The provincial wings have been active. Manitoba and Alberta have been governed by Conservatives since well before the 1993 defeat. Mike Harris won a surprising majority in Ontario in 1995, and the Prince Edward Island Tories upset the ruling Liberals in November 1996. This

should augur well for the federal party. But in contrast to previous years, where the provincial wings remained at least publicly loyal to the federal party, many members of the Ontario and Alberta wings, including some Tory MPPs, have dallied with Reform since 1993. Much depends on the allegiance of Klein and Harris to their national leader, the extent of which is not yet apparent.

What does the party's history tell us about the 1997 federal election? First, those who wrote off the Tories in 1993 spoke too soon. The party has always displayed a remarkable resilience in the face of catastrophe. With an energetic leader, a solid organizational base, and strong

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provincial wings, the party will mount a serious challenge for second place. Second, history tells us that the

Tories will need more than four years to rebuild. The party rarely spends less than two consecutive electoral cycles in opposition: 15 years after 1896, 22 after 1935, 16 after 1963. Some observers have predicted a Tory victory in 2001. But given the fluidity of the party system, with the fate of Reform and the Bloc Québécois so uncertain, such prognostications should be treated with extreme caution. The party's luck is the great intangible, well beyond the comprehension of a mere political scientist.

Disclaimers of second sight notwithstanding, a Liberal victory in 1997 is all but assured. The real battle is for second and third place. Federal Liberals privately speculate that the PCs will win up to 50 seats and form the Official Opposition. The Tories' own predictions are somewhat more cautious, hovering around 30 seats. At the very least, they know they have to regain official party status (a minimum of 12 seats) if the party hopes to continue its comeback. The most promising seats are in the Atlantic provinces and in rural Ontario. Candidate nomination will be a huge task for the Tories, with only two incumbents. Candidate search committees will likely have difficulty finding standard-bearers in many ridings, even though the Tories have consistently led Reform in the polls since early 1996. Many former candidates and MPs are still paying off debts incurred in 1993, when they failed to qualify for public reimbursement. They are understandably wary of being burned twice.


But without a credible team, Charest will face an uphill battle to convince Canadians that his party is really on the comeback trail. His own

seat is in jeopardy, and he cannot fight all 301 ridings himself.

In the end, a healthy representative democracy needs two national parties, either of which is capable of forming a government with support from all regions of the country. As Mother Jones put it, government is like underwear—if it isn't changed regularly, it starts to smell.

Despite the obstacles ahead, and barring an extraordinary change in political fortunes, the Tories should regain official party status in 1997 with a comfortable margin. The increased visibility and resources will give the party a huge boost as it continues rebuilding. Whatever one thinks of the Tories and their past leaders, the fate of the party is crucial to the future health of the Canadian political system. It is clear that Reform cannot take the PCs' place as a national party; Reform's free-market, individualist ideology has little appeal in Quebec and the Atlantic, and it has not made a real breakthrough in Ontario. Nor will Reform and the PCs "unite the right". They will battle to the death, a contest in which the Tories hold most of the cards: history, strong financial support from the business community, decades of

organizational and parliamentary experience, a more realistic and balanced approach to policy, a genuinely national membership base and, perhaps most important, several strong provincial wings (though, as we have seen, the ties between the two levels are loosening).

In the end, a healthy representative democracy needs two national parties, either of which is capable of forming a government with support from all regions of the country. As Mother Jones put it, government is like underwear—if it isn't changed regularly, it starts to smell. The Liberals should be good and ripe by the beginning of the next millennium, but there will be no alternative without the Tories. The Conservatives' Houdini-like escape from certain death is an encouraging sign for those of us who take Canadian democracy seriously. 

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