

THE 1997 ELECTION CAMPAIGN: CAN THE LIBERALS BE BEATEN?

BY DAVID V.J. BELL & PATRICK J. MONAHAN

Most political observers expect the Liberals to call a federal election some time this year. Most also predicted an easy victory for the Liberals, until the Prime Minister's

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sub-par performance on the year-end CBC "Town Hall Meeting". The real contest, according to the pundits, would be for second place and Official Opposition status, thereby earning the chance to unseat the Liberals in the subsequent election in 2001.

The question is whether this assessment needs to be altered in light of the media outcry over the Prime Minister's unsuccessful evasions on the GST issue. The Town Hall debacle appears to have left the first serious scratch in Jean Chrétien's Teflon-coated armour, which has protected him from loss of support even despite his uncertain leadership during the 1995 Quebec referendum. If the Liberals end up losing an election they seemed guaranteed to win (at

least until a few weeks ago), it would not be the first time in recent years that electoral fortunes shifted dramatically in the course of a campaign. Should polls indicate a serious decline in Liberal support prior to the calling of an election—although first indications are that support for the Liberals has held despite Chrétien's gaffe—we might expect a strategy of delay in order to extend their current term to near its five-year maximum.

In any event, the fate of the Liberals depends on more than the performance of the Prime Minister and other members of the cabinet. It is strategically related to the fortunes of the opposition parties. Accordingly, *Canada Watch* asked four respected and independent commentators to offer their assessments of the prospects and positioning for the four major opposition parties in the coming campaign.

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The overall conclusion that emerges from these assessments is that, whatever the damage sustained by Mr. Chrétien in the Town Hall broadcast, the Liberals retain an impressive advantage over each of the opposition parties. None of the opposition parties seems positioned to unseat the Liberals as the government and the campaign will likely remain a race amongst the opposition parties for second and third place.

Louis Balthazar's commentary on the Bloc Québécois (BQ) argues that the party faces a risk of losing support to both the Conservatives and the Liberals. He argues that this threat can best be countered if the BQ attempts to defend the interests of Quebecers within the Canadian federation, rather than focusing single-mindedly on sovereignty. Balthazar argues that Quebecers have very little interest in a "scorched earth" policy, in which Quebec MPs spend all their time promoting sovereignty or "creating trouble for the sake of it". Rather, Balthazar maintains, the BQ should attempt to provide genuine alternatives to government policies, alternatives that take into account the interests of all Canadians and not just those of Quebecers. He suggests that if the party pursues this "Canadian" approach, it can hope to equal its 1993 electoral success, in which it won 54 seats.

Tom Flanagan's assessment of Reform's prospects suggests that there is a spectrum of possible outcomes for Reform in the next election. At the high end, Reform could win about as many seats as it did in 1993 and attain Official Opposition; at the low end, the party could be pushed back to its core support in Alberta, rural British

Columbia and Saskatchewan and take about 20 seats. Which

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of these scenarios unfolds depends, at least in part, on the performance of Jean Charest's Conservatives and on whether Charest can win back the disaffected Tory voters who went Reform in 1993. Flanagan also argues that Reform will need to demonstrate a greater degree of professionalism, avoiding the gaffes and pratfalls that hurt the party in 1996.

Peter Warran argues that the NDP will regain Official Party status in 1997 and emerge with 18-20 seats. Warran believes that the 1993 federal election result was abnormal, with Reform

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and the Bloc disrupting traditional regional voting patterns. The anti-Mulroney factor also means that many labour and traditional NDP supporters swung to the Liberals in 1993. Warran sees a rebalancing in 1997 with tradi-

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

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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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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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