

WESTERN REPORT

THE THREAT OF RECALL

by Roger Gibbins

In late February, the Canada West Foundation and the University of Lethbridge sponsored a conference on "Re-Inventing Parliament." As might be expected from a conference held in Lethbridge and co-sponsored by the foundation, support for the Triple E Senate was clearly evident. Indeed, the presence of Bert Brown, Chairman of the Canadian Committee for a Triple E Senate, ensured that participants followed the party line on Senate reform.

To me, however, the most interesting feature of the conference was the emotional intensity that surrounded the discussion of recall, which was the issue of the day. Recall not only attracted far more emphatic support than did any other reform measure on the table, but was seen as the key to a much broader populist agenda. It was seen, for example, as a way to weaken both party discipline and leadership control.

RECALL AND THE REFORM PARTY

Recall may well be the issue that marks the nationalization of the Reform party or, perhaps more accurately, the nationalization of Reform's populist agenda. When Reform first emerged in 1987, its primary objective was to improve the quality of regional representation within national parliamentary institutions. Its slogan: "The West wants in!" captured that objective perfectly. Now, Reform is in hot pursuit of a

populist agenda with a much broader national appeal.

Admittedly, recall is still linked to the issue of regional representation, for it is seen to provide a means through which MPs can be forced to give more emphasis to constituency concerns, and by implication regional concerns, than to the dictates of party. However, it is passing strange that the first test case should be an Ontario MP, and a Liberal at that. The change from "The West wants in!" to "Bag the Jag!" marks a significant transformation for Reform.

THE POLITICS OF THREAT

What intrigues me about enthusiasm for recall is what it says about the public mood. It was clear at the Lethbridge conference that the supporters of recall did not expect that recall would be employed very often or with great success. However, there was a strong belief that the *threat* of recall would be sufficient to make MPs more responsive and responsible.

It is interesting to pause for a moment and consider the implications of the recall "threat." One of the assumptions of representative democracy is that the threat of electoral defeat will ensure that politicians will be responsive. However, the supporters of recall assume that the threat of defeat in the next general election is not sufficient or immediate enough and, therefore, that the stakes must be raised. But are we better served by a more threatening and perhaps less rational policy environment?

There is a curious irony at work here. For the threat of recall, or for that matter the threat of electoral defeat, to be effective, politicians must want to remain in office. If holding office entails too much financial sacrifice or too much public intrusion into the member's private life, then the threat of recall or de-

feat is no threat at all. Yet, we find that the supporters of recall are often those who also attack the salaries, perks, and pensions of elected officials. If we are to practise the politics of threat, then we might be well advised to *enhance* the attractiveness of public office. Threats will work best on those who want to cling to office; they will not work for those who feel overworked and underpaid.

THE RECALL OF GOVERNMENTS RATHER THAN MEMBERS

There is another irony at work, and that is the high level of support that recall appears to enjoy within Alberta. If provincial recall measures were in place, there is no question that they would be mobilized in an effort to defeat the Klein government and its draconian budget measures. Given that the Progressive Conservatives won the last election with well under 50 percent of the popular vote, and given the organizational muscle of those opposed to the severity of the budget cuts, the recall could provide a means of toppling the government. Conservative MLAs with relatively small pluralities would face recall campaigns orchestrated by a powerful coalition of Liberals, New Democrats, public sector unions, the Catholic Church, and a variety of groups particularly hurt by the budget.

This brings us to an aspect of recall that has seldom been discussed. Recall is usually promoted as a means of removing individual MPs and MLAs from office, with Jag Bhaduria providing the now classic example. However, the recall could also be a means of defeating governments without waiting for a general election. In cases where a

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government's legislative majority was slim, and where a significant number of government members had slim pluralities, the recall could be a potent weapon in the hands of opponents.

Governments could not count on a four- or five-year term of office, but only on the length of time that it took for the recall mechanism to kick in. Governments would be as vulnerable as their weakest members. Here it should also be noted that the members most likely to be targeted by orchestrated recall campaigns would not be those who were least responsive to their constituents, but simply those with the smallest pluralities.

The existence of recall would have made it impossible for the Klein government to have embarked on its three-year plan of deficit reduction, for it would not have had three years to put its program into place. Whether or not one agrees with what the Alberta government is doing, I would argue that we would be poorly served if the planning and policy implementation horizons of governments were sharply reduced. But this is precisely what the introduction of recall would do for it, would put governments on a permanent electoral footing. The result may be more responsive government, but it would not be better government.

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QUEBEC REPORT

SPRING ELECTION?

by Alain Noël

Elections, declared Daniel Johnson on March 8, the day the National Assembly resumed sitting, are coming "very soon." Quebec's premier was thus giving credence to the growing impression that he will call an election this spring, probably for the middle of June. The Liberals would thus avoid a series of by-elections that would be required should they wait until the end of the summer, and would not have to go through the barbecue politics that did so little for Kim Campbell.

Various signs could encourage Quebec Liberals to risk an early election. First, they won a by-election in Shefford, a PQ stronghold, just a week after a discouraging defeat in another by-election, this time in Bonaventure, a traditionally Liberal riding. Second, Daniel Johnson has reduced the high level of dissatisfaction toward the government that he inherited from Robert Bourassa. Third, and most important, polls show improvements for the PLQ, and place the two main parties on a roughly equal footing in terms of voting intentions, with a large block of undecided voters (about 20 percent). The Liberals need more than this equality to win, since much of their support is concentrated in anglophone areas, but at least these three numbers indicate the party can win, if it convinces part of the uncommitted electorate.

The high number of voters who remain undecided or discrete may seem odd given the sharp differences between the PQ and PLQ. Never, a *Globe and Mail* journalist recently wrote, have the lines been

drawn so clearly in Quebec politics. Daniel Johnson has adopted an unambiguously federalist stance; Jacques Parizeau insists on his sovereigntist orientation, and even speaks of separation.

Why do so many voters hesitate when faced with such clear and contrasted options? In part, because a good number of Quebecers still have not made up their minds on Quebec sovereignty. Public opinion studies indicate that in recent years a significant proportion of the electorate has changed opinion, one way or another, according to circumstances. Even more important, in my opinion, is the fact that the constitutional question is not the primary preoccupation of voters at this time. The economy, and unemployment in particular, was the central issue of the last federal election. It remains at the top of the public agenda and will most likely be central in the coming Quebec elections. Voters know Jacques Parizeau and the Parti québécois cannot pursue sovereignty before a referendum. They are thus fairly free to assess the two Quebec parties for their programs and competence on other issues, on economic matters in particular.

SEPARATISM — THE "S" WORD

This brings us to the "S" word — separation. The PQ can draw an important lesson from the 1989 Quebec election and the 1993 federal campaign. Before the 1989 election, observers wondered how the party would fare given Jacques Parizeau's clear affirmation of the PQ's sovereigntist stance, at a time when this option appeared hopelessly unpopular. The campaign turned out to raise a number of issues, but not sovereignty, and the party lost honourably. Since the PQ would not move rapidly toward sovereignty and, in fact, appeared unlikely to win, sovereignty posed no problem for voters. The same was true, of course, of Lucien Bouchard and the Bloc