

QUEBEC REPORT

QUEBEC'S NEW PREMIER

by Alain Noël

"Yes," explained Daniel Johnson's closest associate in the Bourassa cabinet last December, "I do know what Mr. Johnson ... wants to do ... Mr. Johnson is a ... a man who ... has a good ... a very good idea of ... of the state ... I have difficulties answering this question." André Bourbeau, who organized Daniel Johnson's leadership "race" and is now Quebec finance minister, was replying to a journalist who suggested that the ideas Daniel Johnson meant to promote in politics seemed far from obvious. If it were not for the deficit, noted another observer at about the same time, it would be hard to see what Daniel Johnson stands for.

Given the lack of opponents in his bid for the leadership of the Quebec Liberal party, Daniel Johnson did not have to outline his views precisely. His early lead thus reinforced the impression that he has few specific ideas beyond his general commitment to fiscal rigour, market solutions, and Canadian federalism. This perception was confirmed by Johnson's sudden preoccupation with poverty, unemployment, and Quebec nationalism.

In fact, few politicians are as transparent as Quebec's new premier. A typical conservative, Daniel Johnson represents one of the two ideological camps that coexist within the Quebec Liberal party. Had Industry and Commerce Minister Gérald Tremblay remained in a leadership race he could not win, the differ-

ences between the two camps would have been brought forth. Against Johnson, who would have insisted on the deficit, on privatization, and on changes in social programs, Tremblay would have stressed his commitment to job creation, industrial policy, and training. With a more nationalist opponent, Johnson also would have been more up front about his commitment to the constitutional status quo.

With Daniel Johnson as leader, the Quebec Liberal party thus affirms its more conservative orientations against a Parti québécois that years in opposition have brought closer to its social-democratic roots. Quebec Liberals, however, have learned from Kim Campbell's failure. In his inaugural speech, Daniel Johnson did not even pronounce the word "deficit" and emphasized job creation, which he called the "daily battlefield" of the government. The new premier also reduced the Cabinet from 28 to 21 members, and indicated he would accomplish more than what Kim Campbell did during her short summer of public relations. The announcement of a crackdown on cigarette smuggling, a major irritant for Quebec voters, was the first signal of Johnson's attempt to show a break with Bourassa's tergiversations.

For all his calculated concern for jobs and poverty, Daniel Johnson remains a conservative more preoccupied by the fiscal deficit than by unemployment, faithful to market solutions, and likely to cut back on social programs. So far, the renewal proposed by the new premier has more to do with style than content, and his Cabinet does not contrast markedly to that of Robert Bourassa. Though Johnson and his party may well borrow every page from the Liberal party of Canada strategy book, they will nonetheless remain in a position that differs markedly from that of Jean Chrétien last fall.

First, for all the changes they may claim, the Quebec Liberals are the incumbent party with more than eight years in office, and a very high level of dissatisfaction in the electorate. Given the difficult economic situation, it is hard to see how a team composed mostly of the same players could shift perceptions rapidly.

Second, the message that voters apparently want to hear — some form of commitment to fight unemployment — is not Daniel Johnson's most natural, instinctive message. The coming months will show how far the new leader can go to cast himself as a Liberal with a plan to create jobs.

Third, Daniel Johnson's opponent is not on the right, but on the left. When Jean Chrétien raised the jobs issue, he faced a Conservative party that could not easily challenge him on this ground. The Parti québécois, in contrast, can credibly promise to do more; full employment was placed at the core of the party's program a few years ago, at a time when Daniel Johnson was content to bet on exports and foreign investments. As he tries to convince Quebeckers that decisive action must be undertaken to fight unemployment, Johnson risks running his campaign on a Parti québécois issue.

The elections of Bill Clinton and of Jean Chrétien marked a shift away from the conservative politics of the 1980s. Meanwhile, the circumstances of a leadership race that never was led the Quebec Liberal party to affirm the strength of its conservative camp. Aware of the problem, Liberal strategists seek to present the new Liberal leader as a Quebec version of Jean Chrétien. The image, however, may not sell.

In their first major meeting after Johnson's nomination, the Liberals applauded a jazzy video produced

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by a marketing agency, celebrated their new leader and their new team, and derided an opposition they castigated as a bunch of old guys, of politicians from yesteryear. Does this sound familiar?

From now to this fall, many things can happen. Daniel Johnson could prove a good premier and win back the support that Liberals have lost in recent years. The last months of the Bourassa government gave a new meaning to the notion of *laissez-faire*; at one point this fall, the *Conseil du Patronat*, Quebec's main employer association, wondered whether there was still a government in Quebec. A decisive and effective Daniel Johnson could make a difference. Jacques Parizeau could also make mistakes and lose support that remains fragile. Parizeau, however, is now careful to stick to prepared speeches and stress his team, which is, indeed, very strong. He can also count on Lucien Bouchard and the Bloc québécois to return the support they received from the Parti québécois.

Quebec now has a new premier, a new middle-of-the-road party (with Jean Allaire, Mario Dumont, and almost no one else), a new prime minister in Ottawa, and new sovereigntist MPs in the House of Commons. All the same, the next political fight will be a classic one, between federalists and sovereigntists, and between the centre-right and the centre-left. The major actors and ideas are well known, and, given the economic situation, abrupt opinion reversals are not very likely. The odds remain against Daniel Johnson.

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WESTERN REPORT

THE NEW PARLIAMENTARY FACE OF REFORM

by Roger Gibbins

The opening of the new session of Parliament has treated Canadians to some strange scenes. Undoubtedly, one of the strangest was the pancake breakfast hosted by the Reform party for Bloc québécois MPs; papers across the country carried the photograph of Preston Manning and Lucien Bouchard sharing a can of

"Yet over the past seven years we have seen progressive movement away from a focus on regional discontent and toward one on populist reforms, fiscal restraint, and social conservatism. There is unquestionably a national constituency for all three, and it is that constituency that Reform hopes to nurture and tap."

maple syrup. On a more substantive note, the highlights have included the attempt by the Bloc to carve out a legislative role as the defender of the Canadian social conscience, and the decision by Reform to expand into Quebec.

How do we make sense out of such developments? In the case of the Bloc's new role, as the protector of Canadian social programs, perhaps the best thing is to recognize that the role is nonsensical. Indeed, it may even be offensive. After all, how can one defend Canadian social programs while proposing to destroy Canada?

REFORM ON THE PLAINS OF ABRAHAM

But what do we make of the plans by Reform to expand into Quebec? Is there any more sense to be found here, or is Reform simply responding to the mythology of national politics? Is the party expanding because Canadian tradition makes it clear that a party with candidates in only nine provinces is not truly a national party?

I suspect that the decision to expand is based in part on a narrower set of strategic interests. The odds are reasonably good that Quebec will hold a sovereignty referendum during the life of the present Parliament. If Reform is to be a player in the referendum debate, it needs to be an officially registered party on the Quebec political scene. It makes sense, then, to expand into Quebec to avoid being sidelined during a debate that the Reform party will argue, correctly, is really a debate for all Canadians.

Of course, Reformers may also believe that there are populist votes to win in Quebec, and that Reform has the potential to be a significant partisan player in the province quite apart from the referendum issue. If this is, indeed, the case, then the Reformers are responding to hubris rather than to any realistic assessment of the Quebec political environment.

THE PURGE OF REGIONALISM

There is, however, a more substantive message to be read into Reform's Quebec expansion. The decision marks the final abandonment of regional discontent as an explicit electoral base for the party. When Reform was founded in 1987, its very foundation was regional discontent. The slogan of the new party was "the west wants in," and its policy principles reflected a primary concern with the nature of regional representation in national institutions.