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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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.

However, any campaign to do so outside the west is handicapped by an understandable perception that Reform is at heart a regional party devoted to promoting the interests of western Canada. What better way, then, to signal the end of this western preoccupation than to expand into Quebec? Can Reform really be serious about regional angst if it is devoting its resources to building a bridgehead in Quebec? Thus, the target audience for the expansion is not Quebec itself, but the Ontario and Atlantic electorates.

The task will be to convince Canadians outside the west that this transformation has taken place when 51 of the 52 Reform MPs are from the west. The test for Manning’s leadership will be to keep Reform MPs focused on national issues and to approach issues like parliamentary reform, the deficit, and social policy as would MPs from Mississauga or Halifax. This will not be easy, although to date both Manning and his party have had considerable success in shedding their regional costumes.

LESSONS TO BE DRAWN FROM ALBERTA?

Although the federal budget has yet to be tabled in the House, it appears that the Liberals will leave a considerable opening for Reform on issues of the debt and deficit. There is no sign that the Liberals will leave a considerable opening for Reform on issues of the debt and deficit. There is no sign that the Liberals will leave a considerable opening for Reform on issues of the debt and deficit.

At the same time, the Reform party and Preston Manning will have to keep a wary eye on the Alberta provincial scene to see how Premier Ralph Klein’s determination to reduce the budget by 20 percent over the next three years plays with the provincial electorate. If Klein looks as though he will survive a growing storm of opposition, then Reform’s resolve to stake out a similar position on the federal deficit will be strengthened. However, if the storm threatens to cripple Klein’s prospects for re-election, then Reform might be well advised to soft-peddle their approach to the federal deficit.

Of course, neither Manning nor his party are likely candidates for policy moderation. But then, maybe their parliamentary experience will inject a note of caution, as many of the strongest Reform supporters fear.

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Western Report is a regular feature of Canada Watch.