

*"Quebec's New Premier,"
continued from page 75.*

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

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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.

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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 are about to launch the draconian assault on the deficit envisioned by Reform during the 1993 election, and, thus for Canadians for whom are the defi-

cit is an acute concern, Reform may be the only serious player in the game.

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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Canada Watch welcomes submissions on issues of current national interest. Submissions should be a maximum of 1,000 words. The deadline for consideration in our March issue is Monday, March 7. Write or fax us at:

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ECONOMIC REPORT

REFORMING UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

by Fred Lazar

In 1940, the first *Unemployment Insurance Act* was passed by Parliament. The primary objective of this Act was to provide insurance against the risk of income loss due to unemployment. From a rather modest beginning, the unemployment insurance (UI) program has grown in scale and scope.

In 1992, \$19 billion was paid out under the UI program to about 3.7 million persons who experienced some interruption in their employment income during the year. These payments accounted for 36 percent of the \$52.8 billion in total federal government transfers to persons in 1992, and 21 percent of total government transfers to persons (\$89.7 billion). Aggregate UI payments are expected to exceed \$20.5 billion in 1993.

Changes to the Act during the 1950s and 1960s, and culminating in the 1971 revisions, marked a turning point for the UI program, as it moved further away from insurance principles toward horizontal equity and income support. The 1971 revisions increased benefits significantly and eased the eligibility rules to enable a larger proportion of the unemployed to qualify for benefits. As a result, unemployment insurance became the major component of the social welfare system in Canada in

Continued, see "Reforming Unemployment" on page 78.