A PARLIAMENT LIKE NO OTHER: DEBATING THE NATURE OF CANADA
by Kenneth McRoberts

From one perspective — namely, that of the government benches — the recent federal election constitutes a renewal of the past. After a two-term Conservative hiatus, Canada’s “government party,” the Liberals, are once again back in power led by a Cabinet in which veteran Liberal MPs assume prominent positions. The longest serving of these figures is, of course, the prime minister himself, who traces his presence in federal politics back to the early 1960s.

From another perspective, though, that of the opposition benches, Canada’s Parliament has been fundamentally transformed.

Reduced to only two seats, Canada’s other national party may well be on the way to oblivion. Dividing the opposition seats almost equally between them, Reform and the Bloc québécois each represent fundamental critiques of the existing political order, especially as it has been incarnated by the Liberals.

This contrast between continuity in government and fundamental change in the opposition guarantees that the upcoming Parliament will be like no other. The conditions are

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THE RHYTHM OF CONFEDERATION
by Jamie Cameron

The Gore-Perot Debate
It has been little more than a year since Canadians rejected a comprehensive package of constitutional reforms, the Charlottetown accord, in a referendum vote held across the nation. South of the border, the U.S. House of Representatives faces a crucial vote on NAFTA in mid-November. For any number of reasons, it would be mistaken to press an analogy between the Charlottetown accord and the impending vote on NAFTA too far.

But analogies there are. Much was at stake on October 26, 1992 when Canadians voted to reject the accord. Likewise, the U.S. vote on NAFTA is crucial, for its trade implications to be sure but, more important, for its impact on the president’s credibility and the choice America will make between protectionism and globalization.

Just as it did throughout Canada’s referendum campaign, the rhetoric of fear has played a role in

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now in place for a debate on the most fundamental of questions, including the very nature of Canada.

A “National” Government?
The Liberals can find some grounds for vindication in the election results. After all, until the final days of the campaign, many observers, including this one, thought that the Liberals were probably heading for minority government status. Yet, while their popular vote was 41 percent, the lowest in the last four elections, the Liberals won no fewer than 177 seats. Moreover, these seats are spread among all 10 provinces. And the Liberals were spared the humiliation of seeing their leader lose in his own riding.

However, Liberal support varied enormously across the provinces, and the new Cabinet clearly reflects this. In these terms the new Liberal administration is very different from past ones. With only four Cabinet portfolios (plus the prime minister), Quebec has singularly low representation for a Liberal Cabinet. This reflects, of course, the fact that the Liberals had singularly limited electoral success in the province.

Conversely, Ontario’s presence in the new Cabinet is remarkably large: no fewer than 10 of 22 positions, reflecting the Liberals’ astonishing electoral success in the province (98 of 99 seats). All the other provinces have been limited to a single Cabinet member (with the exception of P.E.I., which has none).

In short, the Liberals can claim to have formed a “national” government—but its credentials are shaky.

“Business as Usual”

Nonetheless, the Chrétien government’s style clearly will be “business as usual.” The primary emphasis will be on stimulating the economy through a modest job creation program. And public confidence in government is to be regained through the managerial competence of the professionals of the Liberal party and their preferred civil servants.

Beyond that, the new government apparently has no intention of tackling directly Canada’s national unity crisis. The constitutional question will be put “in the refrigerator,” if not in the deep freeze. Apparently, the hope is that the crisis can be abated through a combination of economic stimulation and continued pursuit of the policies that the Liberals themselves, under the Trudeau leadership, devised to hold the country together.

Yet the prospects for such an approach are dim indeed. The very presence of the Bloc québécois and the Reform party demonstrates the failure of these policies to secure “national unity.” And once Parliament convenes, the Bloc and Reform can be counted on to launch a frontal attack on them, and the conception of Canada that underlies them. For the first time, the battle over the nature of Canada will be joined within Parliament itself, and the Liberals will find that “business as usual” will be no easy task.

Challenging the “National Unity” Strategy

For 30 years, the federal Liberals, with the active support of the PCs and the NDP, have presumed that the key to “national unity” lay in a set of policies that would incorporate Quebec within Canada. Foremost among these was official bilingualism: reinforcing the presence of French throughout the country would lead Québécois to see all of Canada as their country. Another was multiculturalism: it offered a conception of Canada that would incorporate on the same basis Canadians of all origins while denying the claim of Québécois to any distinct status as a “founding people,” let alone a nation. A third element was a constitutionally entrenched bill of rights: through it, not only would French language rights be guaranteed throughout the country, thus reassuring Québécois, but all Canadians would share a basic set of rights. The aggressive pursuit of these policies, so the argument went, would lead Québécois to identify more strongly with Canada and forgo their demands for expansion in the powers and status of the Quebec government.

This logic underlay the Charlottetown accord: there might be adjustments in Quebec’s representation within Parliament, with a guarantee of no less than 25 percent of seats in the House, but the powers and status of the Quebec government must remain essentially like those of the other provinces.

In their “no” vote in the referendum, the majority of Quebec francophones made it clear that this strategy had not worked. Now, with their massive support of the Bloc, they have ensured that their voice will be heard in Parliament itself.

The Bloc and Reform

Not only will the Bloc argue that the objective of Quebec francophones remains expansion in the status and powers of the Quebec government, but it will be claiming that many of the policies designed to sway Québécois from this objective, especially official bilingualism and multiculturalism, are themselves problematic: the former undermines the nationalist objective of making French predominant in Quebec, and the latter reduces Quebec’s culture to one of a myriad of official cultures.

In this attack on official bilingualism and multiculturalism, the
Bloc will be joined by Reform. Its
critique of federal language policy
mirrors the Bloc’s complaint: Eng­
lish should be predominant outside
Quebec, just as French should be
predominant within Quebec.
Multiculturalism is attacked because
it continues the notion that cultural
differences among Canadians should
be publicly recognized and cele­
brated.

If by somewhat different routes
the Bloc and Reform can agree in
their rejection of these federal poli­
cies, they clearly cannot agree on
how Canadian federalism should be
revised. In its insistence on the abso­
lute equality of the provinces, Re­
form categorically rejects any ex­
pansion of Quebec’s powers alone.
To that extent it confirms the Bloc’s
contention that the federal system
cannot be satisfactorily renewed —
at least not to the satisfaction of
Quebec nationalists.

Herein lies the challenge to Cana­
da’s new opposition parties: to
change their common opposition to
the existing political order into com­
mon support of something new.
Whether or not the Bloc and Reform
can accomplish this, they will suc­
cceed in radically extending the terms
of debate in Parliament. Policies that
were once regarded as beyond criti­
cism, because they were essential to
national unity, will now be the focus
of debate precisely because they have
not produced national unity. Yet it is
difficult to see how the Chrétien
government, so deeply tied to the
Trudeau administration that framed
this “national unity” strategy, can
do anything but defend it.

Canadians could be treated to a
spectacular debate over the next few
months. In the end, the country may
be better for it.

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THE CANADIAN ELECTIONS
VIEWED FROM SOUTH OF THE
49TH PARALLEL

by Earl H. Fry

As they awakened on October 26,
most U.S. observers of the Cana­
dian political scene were not sur­
prised that the Liberal party had
 garnered a majority of the seats in
the House of Commons and that the
NDP had fared very poorly, but they
were stunned at the virtual annihi­
lation of the Progressive Conserva­
tive party.

The U.S. investment community
will now watch the Chrétien gov­
ernment very closely to determine
whether job stimulation will take
priority over deficit restraint.
Chrétien’s proposed $6 billion in­
frastucture project is viewed as
largely ineffective, and if even more
money is added for public works
projects at the expense of deficit
reduction, the Canadian dollar is
likely to decline in value and inter­
est rates may go up in order to attract
foreign buyers for the federal and
provincial governments’ massive
IOUs. The Conservatives’ poor per­
fornance in deficit reduction over
the past year just adds to the grow­
ing concern outside Canada about
Ottawa’s ability to control govern­
ment spending.

The Clinton administration hopes
that Chrétien will cool the rhetoric
about renegotiating the NAFTA until
after the package is voted on in mid­
November in the House of Repre­
sentatives. Anti-NAFTA opponents
in the United States trumpeted
Chrétien’s victory immediately,
claiming that his threat to negoti­
ate rendered meaningless the
planned vote in Congress. Clinton
already faces an uphill battle in the
House among his own group of
Democratic party skeptics, but if he
wins this battle, he will probably sit
down with Chrétien in Seattle at the
meeting of the Asia-Pacific Eco­
nomic Cooperation (APEC) forum
and begin to develop a cordial rela­
tionship with Canada’s new prime
minister. Nevertheless, he is unlikely
to show any sympathy for reopen­
ing either the FTA or NAFTA texts,
but may listen to suggestions for
finally reaching workable definitions
of subsidies and dumping.

Clinton has an ambitious job crea­
tion package for the United States
and much of the program is based on
increased exports linked to the ap­
proval of both NAFTA and the Urug­
uy round. With 30 percent of Cana­
da’s GDP linked to the exporting of
goods and services, with 75 percent
of all exports destined exclusively
for the U.S. marketplace, and with a
sizeable increase registered in Cana­
dian exports to the United States
since the FTA went into effect,
Chrétien would also be wise to push
for open markets, based on the
premise that if the U.S. economy
grows, so will the Canadian economy
and Canadian jobs. Conversely, a
strident campaign by Chrétien to
renegotiate both the NAFTA and
the FTA might backfire, giving am­
munition to the growing number of
protectionists in the U.S. Congress
who would like to limit Canadian
access to the U.S. market, especially
in the agricultural and other natural
resource sectors.

Continued, see “South of the 49th
Parallel” on page 52.