



CANADA WATCH

Practical and Authoritative Analysis of Key National Issues

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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the American debate on NAFTA. Last year, Canadians learned that when the consequences of maintaining the status quo or taking a gamble on the future are unknown, the odds favour the status quo.

Vice-President Gore addressed this issue during his televised debate with NAFTA opponent Ross Perot. He urged Americans, at this crucial fork in the road, to reject the politics of fear and go forward in a spirit of optimism. He also warned that all the problems Ross Perot talks about will be made worse if NAFTA is defeated.

Canadians might do well to pause on that thought and consider where we are today, one year after the Charlottetown accord failed.

THE RHYTHM OF CONFEDERATION

The ascendance of two upstart regionally based parties, the Bloc québécois and Reform party, was a major theme in the election campaign. Although the Liberal party attained a majority government, the configuration of Canada's next House of Commons guarantees regionalism a dominant voice in political discourse for the foreseeable future.

Some attribute the surge of regionalism to the referendum campaign and the failure of the accord. Yet the dynamics that have come to the forefront today have a strong pedigree. As its romanticization in Joe Clark's "community of communities" attests, Canada's inherent diversity has long been a source of pride. With diversity, however, there has been disparity among the partners and peoples of Canada's federal union. Antagonisms that have been quiescent through most of our history maintain a brooding presence nonetheless.

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Accepting that presence still leaves unanswered the question whether the strain of regionalism that is manifest now is either different from or more virulent than its previous incarnations.

REGIONALISM AND CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

The failures of constitutional reform in the last 10 years have drained Canada's energy and spirit. The year 1982 was unquestionably a defining moment in this nation's history; constitutional amendments were achieved, but without the consent of Quebec's provincial government.

"Whether Canada is better or worse off because the Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords failed is anybody's guess. ... At the least, the accords left a legacy that validated regional demands without achieving any resolution or closure of their agendas."

In negotiating the Meech Lake accord in 1987, the political leadership assumed the legitimacy of a "Quebec round": constitutional amendments that would rectify the misunderstanding of 1982 and bring Quebec amicably into the constitution.

Meech Lake failed for a variety of reasons. Primary among them was the public's unwillingness, outside Quebec, to accept the fundamental premise of the accord. What the political leadership saw as a generous and honourable attempt to reintegrate Quebec was perceived by the rest of Canada as a set of naked preferences for that province that were as illegitimate as they were unprecedented.

The futile attempt to bring Quebec back into Canada's "constitutional family" precipitated the ultimate constitutional adventure. The

"Canada round" included those regional and special interest agendas that had been excluded from the Meech process, such as Western alienation, self-government for aboriginal communities, and recognition of Canada's disparate identities. The challenge of including all and excluding none made the Charlottetown accord that emerged on August 28, 1992 nothing short of a miracle of negotiation.

The genius of the accord was that it gave almost everybody something they wanted without giving anybody everything they had asked for. That genius was also its fatal flaw. Significantly, the Charlottetown accord both legitimized and frustrated regional imperatives. By institutionalizing them in its proposals for reform, the accord validated the demands of Western alienation and Quebec nationalism. However, conflicting demands could not be recognized in the same document without being compromised. The accord went down to glorious defeat because Canadians were unwilling to concede their demands to compromise.

Whether Canada is better or worse off because the Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords failed is anybody's guess. Some would argue that, precisely because they can never be satisfied, regional demands should never be legitimized. Yet others thought it was possible to define Canada's identity through compromises that respected the diversity of its peoples and regions. At the least, the accords left a legacy that validated regional demands without achieving any resolution or closure of their agendas.

REGIONALISM AND THE ECONOMICS OF FEDERALISM

Meanwhile, the economics of federalism continued to shape Cana-

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da's political mood. Government contracts, transfer payments, and other "perks" of Confederation have always been closely watched and coveted. The dynamics of scorecard federalism have been exacerbated in recent years by the battle every region of Canada is waging against economic adversity. At a time of still-diminishing resources, the competition for federal largesse among regions and provinces has created new pressures on national unity.

Thus, when the Chrétien government decided to cancel the EH-101 helicopter contract, Bloc leader Lucien Bouchard demanded compensation for Quebecers. Precedent could be found in the Mulroney government's compensation package to Atlantic Canada for the loss of its fisheries. More novel was Bouchard's further demand that the Chrétien government also cancel federal contracts in other parts of the country.

With attention focused on Quebec and the west, the emergence of a new regional voice with its own set of demands has been largely overlooked thus far. Traditionally a prosperous province with a power and population base at the centre of the country, Ontario has had little to complain of in the past. Perennially "the good scout of Confederation," it was only fitting that Ontario would offer up some of its Senate seats in 1990 (albeit only prospectively) to save the Meech Lake accord.


Ontario played a major role in the multilateral negotiations leading up to the Charlottetown accord but would have gained little as a province. Ever the good scout, Ontario worked hard to achieve objectives the Rae government valued — such as aboriginal self-government — but also to secure constitutional peace.

Meanwhile, its economy was being battered by the recession and the Mulroney government's unilateral decision to roll back transfer payments to the "have" provinces — Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia. Ontario has now realized that it can no longer afford to bankroll Confederation. According to a study commissioned by its Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs, Ontario continues to subsidize the rest of Canada, at devastating cost to its economy.

There are signs that Ontario has tired of its role as good scout. Late last summer, Premier Rae responded to Quebec's discriminatory trade and labour policies, which have been in place for years, with barriers that will keep Quebec goods and workers out of Ontario. In October he announced that Ontario would challenge the constitutionality of NAFTA. More recently, he made a major speech on transfer payments and Ontario's status in Confederation, in which he vowed to fight for fair treatment in Ottawa.

THE NEW "ARHYTHM" OF CONFEDERATION

It is difficult to regard current regional dynamics as part of the rhythmic pattern of Confederation. At the same time, these irregularities can hardly be considered a surprise, given the political and economic stress of recent years. To regain the public's confidence in the federal government, Prime Minister Chrétien must act quickly to establish a self-assured and even-handed national presence.

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NATIONAL AFFAIRS

CANADA'S 35TH PARLIAMENT

by Patrick J. Monahan

As Canadians struggle to decipher the meaning of the stunning results of last month's election, one conclusion seems difficult to avoid: the country has taken a step toward a new and uncertain political era.

On the surface, the sea of Liberal red stretching across the country conveys an impression of calm and continuity, rather than of fundamental change. Governments may come and go, but Canadian political institutions appear remarkably resilient. Notwithstanding all the talk in recent months about anger and frustration in the electorate, Canadians have once again given a strong majority mandate to one of the two "old line" political parties that have governed the country since Confederation.

The importance of this national majority government for Canadian unity cannot be underestimated. Over the next 12 to 18 months, Quebecers will again be asked to choose between Canadian federalism and sovereignty. A strong national government with a francophone prime minister from Quebec means that the federalist option is well positioned to prevail in that struggle.

But this "business as usual" interpretation of the election results discounts the potential for significant political turbulence lurking just beneath the surface.

OPPOSITION OF THE REGIONS

The most disturbing feature of the next Parliament is the absence of