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WENDY MURRAY

BEATING THE DRUMS OF NATIONAL UNITY AND BEATING UP ON REFORM

by Roger Gibbins

Now that the election is behind us, it is an opportune time to ask how the political landscape in western Canada has been transformed, and to what extent national political dynamics have changed as a consequence.

At one level, the transformation in western Canada has been profound. The Progressive Conservatives, which have served as the primary partisan outlet for regional discontent since John Diefenbaker’s 1958 landslide, have been virtually obliterated. In their place, Preston Manning and the Reform party stand triumphant, at least in Alberta and British Columbia.

And the change, of course, is more than one of party labels. The Conservatives, even before Brian Mulroney’s leadership when western Canadian MPs were the dominant force within the party, were a national organization. True, they were chronically weak in Quebec, but they had some coherent presence from sea to sea. Now, the voice of western discontent is a party that is unlikely to reach beyond Ontario by the next election, and will certainly not embrace Quebec even to the limited extent that Diefenbaker was able to do.

This is not to suggest, however, that in objective terms the Reform party should be seen first and foremost in regional terms. I would argue that despite the concentration of Reform MPs in Alberta and British Columbia, the party’s appeal to populist discontent, fiscal restraint, and social conservatism has a national audience, or at least a national audience outside Quebec. Reform’s parliamentary strength in the far West is in large part an artifact of the electoral system; Reform won more votes (968,602) in Ontario than it did in Alberta (629,164), British Columbia (586,549), or, for that matter, across the three prairie provinces (838,224).

Yet this does not mean that Manning will be able to build on the grassroots electoral support now in place outside Reform’s Alberta/British Columbia heartland. Reform

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MPs in the House of Commons will act as a western anchor to the party, and will undoubtedly characterize, if not caricature, the party in ways that will blunt its potential appeal in Ontario. More important, we can anticipate an unrelenting campaign by the media and traditional political elites in central Canada to define the Reform party in narrow, regional terms, and thus to isolate it in the
If it can be argued that the Reform draws primarily on regional discontent, then its much broader message of electoral discontent can be ignored. Manning faces a very difficult leadership task in warding off this dual threat of marginalization.

Here it should also be noted that should the constitutional debate resume, and perhaps even before, Manning and his Reform MPs are likely to be portrayed as the “real” threat to national unity. We are already starting to see reflections of this theme in the press. The Bloc is presented as a new, but moderate, left-of-centre voice on the national political scene, a little radical to be sure, but basically a progressive force, while the Reform is presented as being at odds with many of the basic values of the Canadian political community.

This portrayal, I would suggest, is inaccurate and unfair. It also fails to appreciate how irritating the Bloc is likely to be for English Canadians, and how difficult it will be to accept the Bloc as “her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition.” Yet the national unity drums will beat and they will beat upon Reform. The effect may well be to further blunt Reform’s appeal in Ontario, but to strengthen its appeal in the west.

Has then the success of Reform changed the dynamics of the upcoming national unity debate, and thus the dynamics of Canadian national politics? In one sense, neither the Reform nor the Bloc represents a new constellation of political forces; alienated westerners, fiscal conservatives, and Quebec nationalists with, at best, a tenuous connection to Canada, were important components of the Mulroney party and cabinets. However, both the Bloc and Reform will bring the national unity debate onto the floor of the House, and much more into the public eye. The debate will also be more hard-edged, given that the Bloc and Reform champion views of the country’s future that will find no support, but only hostility, in English Canada and Quebec, respectively.

It will be difficult to maintain the rhetorical packaging that has often softened the edges of the national unity debate in the past. Instead, we are likely to encounter a period of threats and bluffs, of confrontation unmoderated by English Canadian voices pleading that nationalist voices in Quebec hold a positive message for the rest of Canada. However, given the failure of the politics of constitutional moderation in the past, it may well be time for a franker, even more abrasive exchange of views.

In any such exchange, the Reform party will pose a less serious threat to the survival of Canada than the Bloc and the nationalist forces within Quebec. If the Reform party appears to be positioning itself on the post-Quebec political landscape, so be it.

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