


*"35th Parliament," continued from page 57.*

tence. The predictable howls from various special interest groups about their lack of appropriate representation were brushed aside by the prime minister, indicating a degree of decisiveness and confidence on his part that will prove very important in the difficult months ahead. Clearly, Jean Chrétien has come a long way from his early days as Liberal leader in the summer 1990, when he suggested that the armed warriors at Oka should simply be allowed to put down their guns and walk away scot-free.

The good news out of this election is that it remains possible to construct a winning national coalition by appealing to the elements of a common Canadian citizenship. It is also noteworthy that, despite the Bloc's impressive showing in Quebec, support for the sovereignty option there remains significantly below 50 percent. It is conceivable that Quebecers could even elect a PQ government next year and then vote "no" in a sovereignty referendum in 1995. That outcome would be messy and ambiguous, but somehow also quintessentially Canadian.

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## WESTERN REPORT

### 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

west. 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 pub-

lic 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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## QUEBEC REPORT

### A PROTEST VOTE?

by Alain Noël

During most of the election campaign, a number of journalists and observers in English Canada maintained that, in the end, Quebecers would desert the Bloc québécois and turn to the party most likely to take power. Puzzled by the stable and rising support obtained in the polls by the Bloc, they nevertheless clung to the conventional wisdom, hoping it would prove true in the end.

Past election results suggest that this view of Quebec voters is wrong. In 1979, Joe Clark formed a minority government largely because Quebecers remained faithful to the Liberal party. Trudeau was able to form a minority government in 1972 because only Canadians outside Quebec supported the Conservatives. Likewise, in 1957, Quebecers ignored Diefenbaker's argument that they should elect potential ministers. The 1993 election provided an additional instance of autonomous electoral behaviour.

The conventional view of Quebecers as calculating band-wagoners is not exactly a compliment. It is often accompanied by the idea that in Quebec a profligate party can buy its way into power. At the very least, it says Quebecers have little political bearings — "they study politics with their feet," wrote Trudeau many years ago.

Another way of stating that Quebec politics is not driven by stable and rational considerations is to associate the 1993 vote with disen-

*Continued, see "Protest Vote?"  
on page 60.*