

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.

Roger Gibbins is Professor and Head, Department of Political Science, University of Calgary. Western Report is a regular feature of Canada Watch. 

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.*

***"Protest Vote?" continued
from page 59.***

chantment and protest. The victory of the Bloc, argued Robert Bourassa a few days after the election, did not mean much for Quebec politics. It was merely a protest vote. Likewise, Jean Chrétien explained that good government would convince Quebecers that they were wrong to distrust him and his party.

THE BQ: A LOGICAL CHOICE

Voting for a party that cannot take power obviously expresses a rejection of the established parties. Like Canadians everywhere, Quebecers have also become more distrustful of politicians in recent years. Overall, however, the vote appears more as an expression of coherence than as a superficial protest against politics and politicians.

Since the beginning of 1992, support for the Parti québécois has never fallen below 40 percent in the polls, and support for sovereignty has also been at or above 40 percent. Logically, PQ and sovereignty supporters could be expected to vote for Lucien Bouchard's party. Far from being a protest, such a vote represented for them a logical choice — one that expressed their confidence that politics can make a difference. As for the additional votes the Bloc obtained to reach a total of 49.5 percent, they seemed well within the range in which support for the Parti québécois and for sovereignty fluctuated in recent years.

It could, in fact, be argued against the protest interpretation that the Bloc québécois did not reach very far beyond its natural electorate. In the 1992 referendum, 57 percent of Quebecers backed the interpretation proposed by the BQ and the PQ and voted "no." (Given the overwhelming victory of the "yes" in Anglophone ridings, it seems fair to discount the few who voted "no"

because they approved Trudeau's interpretation.) At 49.5 percent, the Bloc did not recapture this electorate. This result, of course, raises important questions about what Jacques Parizeau calls "the next two periods" — the Quebec election and the potential referendum on sovereignty.

"THE NEXT TWO PERIODS"

The race between the Parti québécois and the Quebec Liberal party is close. The PQ should win. The economic situation in Quebec has been difficult for a number of years. The Liberals have been in power since 1985 and are perceived as a tired government, and Daniel Johnson, the next leader of the party, is neither a new figure nor a particularly charismatic politician. Given the distribution of the electorate, the Parti québécois also converts its votes more easily into seats. All the same, doubts persist about the PQ, primarily because Jacques Parizeau seems less popular than his party, and he is prone making poor political judgments.

On election night, the contrast between Lucien Bouchard and Jacques Parizeau was striking. Understanding the unusual nature of his victory, Bouchard went out of his way to reassure those who had not voted for him and pledged he would attempt to represent all Quebecers. Parizeau, however, celebrated with his partisans and underlined the sovereigntist character of the vote, conveniently ignoring that a small majority of voters had not supported the Bloc québécois, and speaking as if the task of rallying a majority to his option could be postponed.

Even if we assume that the Parti québécois can win the next election, the prospects for a referendum on sovereignty do not appear favourable. At best, sovereignty now attracts 50 percent of the electorate. At times, support for sovereignty has peaked beyond a majority, but true support remains closer to 40

than to 50 or 55 percent. In an intense campaign stressing the costs and the difficulties of sovereignty, it is hard to see how the Parti québécois will be able to obtain a majority. Again, Jacques Parizeau may not be the best proponent of his option. Perceived more as an ideologue than as a pragmatic politician, Parizeau seems more able to rally his troops than to convince the large group of voters who are tempted by sovereignty but remain skeptical. Parizeau helped the Parti québécois reaffirm its sovereigntist option at a moment when support for sovereignty appeared hopelessly low. He may not be the best person, however, to lead the party through the next steps, which involve reaching beyond the circle of partisans.

This being said, much will depend on what happens in the coming two years. In 1990, the acrimonious debate surrounding the collapse of the Meech Lake accord generated a sovereigntist surge in Quebec with a peak well above the 50 percent threshold. This surge suggests a bitter debate between Quebec and the rest of Canada — one possibly fuelled by the Reform party — that could lead a majority to support sovereignty. More fundamentally, it indicates that, at least at one moment, a majority of Quebecers have considered sovereignty an acceptable option. These temporary sovereigntists are available to be convinced. With a strong sovereigntist presence in both Ottawa and Quebec, a positive response in a referendum cannot be excluded. The odds, however, remain, as always, against those who propose major changes. To convince Quebecers that the uncertain prospects of sovereignty are worth the risks, sovereigntists will have to develop strong positive arguments in favour of their option.

*Alain Noël is Associate Professor,
Département de science politique,
Université de Montréal.*

