



CANADA WATCH

Practical and Authoritative Analysis of Key National Issues

THE STATE OF THE ECONOMIC UNION

by Jamie Cameron

THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

How far the three "national" parties may slide on October 25 has been the subject of much speculation thus far in the election campaign. Few expect a majority government at this point, and with the Bloc québécois and the Reform party surging, Canadians could return a Parliament that is functionally incapable of governing this country.

These dynamics have been attributed, at least in part, to a profound dissatisfaction with status quo politics and status quo politicians. Hence the rise of alternative parties, includ-

ing such unusual contenders as the Natural Law Party, which is fielding a slate of more than 200 candidates.

That the public can be so dissatisfied with the style and substance of status quo politics is disturbing. But what if this malaise represents a loss of faith in the traditional parties' capacity to reflect the interests we share as members of a nation? As commentators suggest, the prospect of a federal Parliament split along regional lines has implications for our future as a federation.

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A HOUSE DIVIDED

Prospects for Canada's Next Parliament

by Kenneth McRoberts

If current trends hold firm, the election result will raise more questions than it answers. The government that emerges probably will have a precarious hold on Parliament. It almost certainly will not be a "national" government and thus will be ill-equipped to deal with Canada's continuing divisions. At the same time, it will face two new opposition parties that will raise fundamental questions about the Canadian political order, and challenge the capacity and very legitimacy of the government to deal with them.

A CRIPPLED LIBERAL GOVERNMENT

In all likelihood, the Liberals will have the largest number of seats in the next Parliament, but they could fall well short of an absolute majority. Although the party clearly has a strong hold on Atlantic Canada and appears to be expanding its strength in Ontario, it could be virtually shut out of French Quebec and be marginal in western Canada.

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If the Liberals do secure an absolute majority of Commons seats, they will apparently be without an effective representation from Quebec. Liberal leader Jean Chrétien will have been, in effect, repudiated in his home province. This could be a fatal blow for the new government: never before has a Quebec prime minister been reduced to relying on English Canada to maintain power. There is even the possibility that Chrétien will be beaten in his own riding. After all, he last ran in Shawinigan seven years ago; in the most recent Parliament, he held a seat from New Brunswick. Beyond this personal repudiation of their leader, the Liberals would be left with little Quebec talent for their Cabinet.

By the same token, the prospect of few Liberal seats and little Cabinet material in western Canada evokes the trials of the Trudeau years, when western Canadians saw the Liberals as the tools of central Canadian interests that dominated the Cabinet.

If the Liberals do fall short of an absolute majority and need to go looking for third-party support to form a working majority, they may come up wanting. Their logical — in fact, only — ally would be the

NDP. If the NDP were to join the Liberals in a formal coalition, they could ease the Liberals' Cabinet problems by providing some western Canadian talent. But for this ploy to work, the NDP have to win enough seats to provide a majority, and by all indications, the new NDP caucus will be vastly reduced.

The Liberal government could attempt to govern anyway, in the hope that the opposition parties cannot agree on an alternative government or would not want to precipitate an election. But this could only be a short-term strategy. The Liberals themselves would probably be led to call a new election, before being forced into one.

A FRAGMENTED OPPOSITION

As for the opposition, present trends suggest that it will be severely fragmented, with the PCs, Reform, and the Bloc having substantial caucuses and the NDP a lesser one. At a minimum, this would make for a highly fractious House.

There is in fact no guarantee that the PCs will form the official opposition. If PC support does go into a free fall over the remaining days before the election, that title could go to Reform or the Bloc québécois. The latter possibility is especially intriguing. The prospect of Lucien Bouchard as the leader of Her Maj-

esty's Loyal Opposition does boggle the mind.

Even without the title of official opposition, the Bloc will be a major force in parliamentary debates, never missing an opportunity to demonstrate its thesis that Quebec's interests cannot be met within the Canadian federal system. The House will be regularly treated to heated, bitter, and intensely personal debates between Bloc leader Lucien Bouchard and Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, firmly committed to the Trudeau vision of Canada and dependent on an English-Canadian caucus.

For its part, Reform will have a new and highly visible platform from which to make its arguments not only for rolling back the state but for adopting new mechanisms through which citizens can hold politicians accountable for their actions between elections. Last fall, Preston Manning and Reform demonstrated the depths of public alienation when they took on English Canada's political class to lead the successful campaign against the Charlottetown accord. By continuing to appeal to these popular sentiments, a Reform parliamentary delegation could make life very uncomfortable for the Liberal government.

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BLOC AND REFORM: OPPOSING THE POLITICAL ORDER

Not since the early 1960s and the sudden rise of Réal Caouette's *Créditistes* in Quebec have new parties broken into the federal political arena. Between them, Reform and the Bloc would have disproved the old adage that voters, especially in Quebec, will prefer a candidate whose party has a realistic chance of forming the government and thus can provide concrete constituency benefits. Instead, voters would have decided to "send a message."

This "message" goes beyond simple dissatisfaction with established parties and their leaders. In very differing ways, the two parties are challenging the established political order. Reform has been arguing that Canadian democracy is deficient and must be radically changed. The Bloc is arguing that the federal system is deficient and Quebec must leave it.

An especially intriguing question is how the Bloc and Reform will relate to one another. They agree on some policy objectives, such as reining in the Ottawa's promotion of official bilingualism and cutting back on multiculturalism, but they disagree on others, such as the need to restructure social policy. After all, the Bloc is receiving the unofficial support of Quebec's union movement.

Most fundamentally, the two parties disagree on the guiding principles of Canadian federalism. Nonetheless, the fact that they are based in different parts of the country and have restricted their activities to their respective parts could create a new dynamic. As the self-professed representatives of English Canada and Quebec, Reform and the Bloc could contemplate accommodations and trade-offs between the two regions

that the "national" parties cannot. On this basis, they could even agree on new formulas for accommodating Quebec within the federal system. However, they are not currently disposed to do so, given Reform's insistence that Canadian federalism must be based on the absolute equality of the provinces, and Bloc's determination that Quebec should leave federalism behind. Instead, they may themselves be drawn into open confrontation.

In sum, the next Parliament may well be like no other, composed of a Liberal government that has been repudiated in Quebec despite having a leader from the province, a Progressive Conservative party that must jostle with third parties for official opposition status, and two new parties that are committed to fundamental changes in the political order. As such, it would reproduce in an especially acute manner the underlying contradictions of Canadian politics. On this basis, it could afford a real opportunity to confront those contradictions directly and find ways to resolve them. But this might well prove to be too great a challenge.

Of course, there is another possibility. In the final days of the campaign, voters may acquire a clearer sense of the type of Parliament they are headed for. Faced with this prospect, potential Reform and Bloc supporters may reconsider and decide to make do with the old-line parties after all.

Kenneth McRoberts is Director of the Roberts Centre for Canadian Studies and Professor of Political Science at York University. ❁

NATIONAL AFFAIRS

BLOC AND REFORM

About To Change the National Political Landscape

by Patrick J. Monahan

With two and a half weeks left in the election campaign, the Conservative party looks to be headed for its biggest electoral defeat since 1953 when the PCs captured just 51 seats in a 265-seat House. Indeed, the Tories seem in real danger of being reduced to third-party status in the Commons, something that hasn't happened since 1921. Meanwhile, over at Liberal headquarters, dreams of a majority government dance on in the imaginations of Jean Chrétien's strategists.

Yet focusing on the fortunes of the two old-line national parties disguises the true significance of what is happening in the current campaign. Canadians seem ready to fundamentally rewrite the rule book governing national politics in this country. And the politicians holding the pen and shaping the rewrite are Preston Manning and Lucien Bouchard.

FALSE HOPES AND ILLUSIONS

The national media seem both surprised and baffled by the resiliency of the Bloc in Quebec and the surge in Reform support west of the Ontario-Quebec border. Indeed, a few short months ago, most pundits had written off Reform and were claiming that it was only a matter of time before the support for the Bloc began melting away in Quebec.