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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
Robarts 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.

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But the pundits overlooked a number of hard realities. The first reality was that neither of the two old-line parties had any effective strategy to counter the rise of the Bloc québécois in Quebec. This view of the Bloc was premised on the simplistic theory that Quebec voters always want to be on the "winning side." Thus, once it became appar-

"Canadians seem ready to fundamentally rewrite the rule book governing national politics in this country."

ent who that winner was going to be this time, all those voters who were "parked" with the Bloc would rush to support either Jean Chrétien or Kim Campbell.

But what if the premise underlying this view were wrong? Suppose Quebec voters were leaders rather than followers, unwilling to be bought off by the promise of a few seats around the federal Cabinet table? And what if it turned out that Quebecers preferred parties led by politicians from their own province? Certainly it seems more than a coincidence that parties led by Quebec politicians have formed the national government for close to 24 of the past 25 years.

Perhaps the only benefit that will arise out of the impending sweep of Quebec by the Bloc québécois is that we will be spared any further arm-chair theorizing about how Quebec voters can always be counted on to support winners selected for them by Canadians in the rest of the country.

REFORM'S SURGE

What about the resurgence of the Reform party, which had been all but written off by the national media as recently as four weeks ago?

The political dynamics surrounding Reform were vastly different

from those involving the BQ. Unlike the BQ, Reform was far more vulnerable to being squeezed to the political margins by the Conservatives. The Tory strategy throughout 1993 — including the choice of Kim Campbell as leader and the appropriation of many of Reform's policies — capitalized very effectively on this political high ground.

And Prime Minister Campbell's emphasis on a "new politics," in which political leaders would talk openly and honestly about the tough choices facing the country, undoubtedly struck a chord with many Canadians fed up with empty rhetoric and broken promises.

The problem is that you can't talk one game and then play another. When pressed for details of her plan to eliminate the deficit in five years, the prime minister retreated into the worst excesses of the old politics, promising that the deficit could be eliminated in five years without touching any of Canada's social programs. Come again?

Anyone searching for the "defining moment" of Kim Campbell's short-lived tenure as Prime Minister need look no further than her evasive answers to BQ leader Lucien Bouchard during the English-language leaders' debate. Her unwillingness to respond to a direct and simple question — "what is the current deficit Madam Campbell?" — told Canadians that here was a political leader with something to hide. That's not a message that's bound to win many votes in Canada in 1993.

WHAT NEXT?

With the BQ and Reform set to take a combined total of 100 seats or more on October 25, a new round of wishful thinking has already been set in motion. For example, *The Globe and Mail's* Robert Sheppard has opined that BQ and Reform don't really pose a threat to national unity

since we have been governed by regional parties before. The only difference, according to Mr. Sheppard, is that after October 25 regional trade-offs will occur "out in the open" rather than behind closed doors. Other academic commentators have suggested that the election of BQ and Reform pose an opportunity to strike a "new deal" between Quebec and the rest of Canada, one apparently premised on the idea of giving Quebec some asymmetrical or special provincial powers.

Former Ontario Premier David Peterson has advanced a quite different — and far more convincing — interpretation of the significance of a Reform and BQ breakthrough on October 25. He argues that the simultaneous appearance of these regional parties poses a major threat to the survival of the federation.

"A national Parliament without a majority government and dominated by Reform and BQ MPs is the equivalent of a political "sell order" for Canada."

Mr. Peterson speaks as a veteran politician, one who understands both the necessity for and the difficulty of achieving national political compromises in a segmented country such as Canada. Political parties, cabinets, and, most significantly, prime ministers with a national base and national outlook have played a critical role in brokering those compromises in the past.

To imagine that these same kinds of delicately brokered compromises could be achieved in bargaining between Preston Manning and Lucien Bouchard seems highly implausi-

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ble. These two leaders are intelligent and articulate and have well-thought-out visions of where they want to take the country. The problem is that each man's tenaciously held vision directly contradicts the other's. Moreover, both Manning and Bouchard will come to the table as regional politicians rather than as national ones.

The history of federations around the world tells us that the domination of national political institutions by regional parties is a warning of serious potential for political disruption. A national Parliament without a majority government and dominated by Reform and BQ MPs is the equivalent of a political "sell order" for Canada.

Most recent polls indicate that the splintered nature of the vote may permit the Liberals to sneak through the middle with a majority government, even with less than 40 percent of the vote. It is also possible that you might win the Lotto 6-49 this week by buying a single ticket. But there is one thing you can count on: the stakes riding on the outcome of the vote on October 25 are very high indeed, for all Canadians.

Patrick J. Monahan is an Associate Professor at Osgoode Hall Law School, York University. National Affairs Report is a regular feature of Canada Watch.

WESTERN REPORT

THE MALAISE LINGERS AS CAMPAIGN CARRIES ON

by Roger Gibbins

It is difficult, writing in early October, to read the entrails of an election campaign that has yet to run its course. Nonetheless, the campaign to date has exposed some interesting features of the political landscape in western Canada.

DIVERSITY STILL PREVAILS

The observation that "the West" has largely disappeared as an integrated or homogeneous political region is by no means new, but it is one worth repeating. It is also one that has been confirmed by the early dynamics of the 1993 election, dynamics that vary considerably across the four western provinces.

The Reform party has yet to make substantial inroads in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, where the NDP remains a factor in what is shaping up to be a three-party contest among traditional players. In Alberta, the NDP has been eclipsed by even the National and Natural Law parties, and the contest is evenly matched among three contenders: the Conservatives, Liberals, and Reform. In British Columbia, the electoral scene changes again with the NDP coming back into play, at least on the margins, and with many ridings featuring four-party contests. Thus, in the context of the campaign, it is

difficult to speak very coherently about "the West."

THE MANY CHANNELS OF PROTEST

The second observation is that the populist, protest vote in western Canada flows through many channels, and does so in ways that sometimes defy conventional wisdom. Although the Reform party has provided the major vehicle for both regional and populist discontent in the West, a host of non-traditional parties are alive and well on the campaign trail. The Natural Law party is flaky enough to pick up

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some regional support from the ever-present radical, if not lunatic, fringe, and Mel Hurtig's one-man National party band and its song of nostalgia for the 1960s enjoys significant support, albeit not enough to elect candidates.

However, the most interesting regional development is the flow of electoral support from the NDP to Reform, a flow that has been particularly evident in British Columbia and Saskatchewan. (In the Alberta case, there is nothing to flow.) The Reform's ability to capture former NDP support suggests that this support, at least in the West, but probably not exclusively in the West, has been driven as much by protest as by a shared left-of-centre ideology. After all, the New Democrats and Reformers share a common self-perception as outsiders challenging a system that is fundamentally flawed and unfair. Their common populism provides a convenient electoral bridge for voters moving from