



# CANADA WATCH

Practical and Authoritative Analysis of Key National Issues

## CONTROLLING THE ELECTORAL AGENDA

### Can the major parties do it?

by *Kenneth McRoberts*

Can Canada's two old-line parties set and control the electoral agenda now that the campaign is formally underway? The agenda that they are proposing to the country is, to say the least, a limited one.

#### LIMITING THE AGENDA

On one hand, there is the party that has held power for the last decade and is associated with policies to which the majority of Canadians remain fundamentally opposed. The Conservatives do offer a new leader, relatively new to federal politics and anxious to dissociate herself and her party from the memory of the previous leader. But Kim Campbell's appeal may well have peaked: carefully staged media appearances and photo opportunities can suffice only for so long in creating the impression of change. She and her party have yet to demonstrate that they are offering the country more than a change of faces, and a limited one at that. They have yet to make a credible delivery on the substance of change: new policies and new directions. Nor have they had noticeable success in stimulating Canada's dormant economy.

The alternative involves a party whose leader is similarly burdened by association with past governments. First elected over three dec-

ades ago, Jean Chrétien is one of the veterans of federal politics. The party can claim with some credibility to be offering a new "team," composed of a series of high profile, carefully selected newcomers to federal politics. But, once again, the promise of change does not seem to go beyond faces and personalities. In this case, a new set of policies apparently has been prepared, but it is being kept under wraps until the campaign actually is underway.

In effect, Conservative and Liberal strategists seem to be operating on the assumption that the voters will be content to choose between personalities. Thus, the name of the game is simply to project the right qualities for, as the case may be, the party leader or the party team.

#### THE CHARLOTTETOWN FIASCO

However, there are good reasons to wonder whether this can respond to the current mood of the country. A review of Canada's last popular consultation might suggest otherwise. This is, of course, not the 1988 federal election but the constitutional referendum of last fall. At that time, Canada's established national leaders also thought they were firmly in control of

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VOLUME 2, NUMBER 2  
SEPTEMBER 1993

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*Canada Watch* is a publication of the York University Centre for Public Law and Public Policy and the Roberts Centre for Canadian Studies of York University.

the agenda. They had negotiated an accord that bore the support of Canada's national political leadership, the leaders of all three established federal parties, plus the leaders of each provincial government and most provincial opposition parties. National leaders presumed that such a stamp of

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approval by the political establishment would ensure majority support. They calculated that even if voters had misgivings about the deal itself, they would not dare to vote against it. To do so would mean yet another round of constitutional discussions, for which the public clearly did not have the stomach, or even worse: no resolution of the constitutional question and the possible break up of the country.

Presented with such a definition of the alternatives, the majority of Canadians voted "no" anyway. Canada's political establishment went down to an ignominious defeat. The accord did in fact have majority support at the outset but lost it in the course of the campaign. Other political voices effectively challenged the establishment and undermined its attempt to set the agenda.

## **REFORM AND THE BLOC**

A large part of the explanation lies with "minor" or third parties who are determined to play similar roles in the coming election campaign. The Reform party led the

campaign against the accord in English Canada, claiming that it not only failed to meet the needs of western Canada, but did not meet the needs of the Canadian people in general. The Bloc québécois joined forces with the Parti québécois to argue that the accord did not meet Quebec's needs either.

## **CAN THEY DO IT AGAIN?**

On the face of it, the Reform party seems to have fallen well short of its electoral potential. Rather than rising in the wake of its Charlottetown "victory," Reform support fell. Preston Manning appears to have lost his public image as a new force in politics, who is somehow above party. Yet, the current public fixation with the deficit falls squarely within the territory that the party has staked for itself. And Reform may still be able to exploit western Canadian discontent with the federal government, Kim Campbell's Vancouver roots notwithstanding.

As for the Bloc québécois, its ardent defence of Quebec sovereignty may be frustrated by Québécois' fatigue with all things constitutional. Moreover, it cannot promise the rewards that come with voting for the government party — an argument that traditionally has had some effect in Quebec. However, this argument may have less weight if it is not at all clear which of the two major parties will in fact form the government. With the leadership of Lucien Bouchard and the active support of the Parti québécois organization, the Bloc is strongly placed to make its claim that it best represents the interests of Québécois.

Also assisting in the effort to undo the major parties' limitation of the political agenda will be Mel Hurtig's National party and a wide variety of social movements and interest groups. The tragedy is that the NDP, the party that has such a distinguished record of offering genuine alternatives to Canadians, should be in such disarray.

## **HIGH VOTER VOLATILITY**

The potential for these various forces to derail the major parties' plans is magnified by the planned televised leadership debates in which Lucien Bouchard and Preston Manning will participate as equals (to the extent that linguistic skills permit in Manning's case). Moreover, with audiences attending and reacting to the debates as they unfold, party operatives will have much more difficulty containing the gaffes and other errors of their leaders.

Most importantly, the voters themselves are not as fixed in their party loyalties as they used to be. These days campaigns clearly do make a difference. Just as during the referendum debate voters shifted from a "yes" majority to a "no"

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majority, so during the 1988 election the lead went from the Conservatives to the Liberals and back to the Conservatives. This time around voters may well may be ready to respond to the call of new parties.

Already, during the first few days of the campaign, Kim Campbell's penchant for candid answers and professorial "theorizing" has led her to answer a reporter's question in a way that precluded any real hope to the nations's unemployed. For their part, Liberal forces seized on this totally unexpected opening, decrying Tory heartlessness. In effect, the plans of Tory strategists for an issueless campaign have been endangered by their own party leader. But as the Liberals are drawn into a

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## ANNUAL PREMIERS CONFERENCE

Canada's 10 premiers and 2 territorial leaders met for the annual premiers conference in Baddeck, Nova Scotia on August 26 and 27. Premier **Robert Bourassa** of Quebec attended the conference for the first time since 1990. The premiers called for a federal-provincial first ministers meeting on the economy, and also agreed to encourage the federal government to negotiate self-government agreements with aboriginal peoples.

## CANADIAN BAR ASSOCIATION TASK FORCE REPORT

A task force, chaired by former Supreme Court Justice **Bertha Wilson**, reported on August 22, on gender barriers within the legal profession. Examining the bar from the start of legal training to the pinnacle of life on the bench, the report makes over 200 recommendations to remove constructive and systemic biases against women in the system.

## ROYAL COMMISSION REPORT

On August 17, the **Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples** released its report, *Partners in Confederation*. The report found that a native right to self-government has never been extinguished. This is significant because, if true, recognition of the inherent right to self-government would not have to be explicitly acknowledged by constitutional amendment.

## NAFTA UPDATE

"Side deal" agreements were reached regarding the **North American Free Trade Agreement** on August 12. The Canadian government won the concession that in the event of trade disputes, tariffs would not be raised against Canadian exports, but Ottawa would pay fines instead. With the conclusion of these agreements, the package can now proceed for consideration in the U.S. Congress in the Fall, and for fast track ratification by January 1994.

## MANITOBA BY-ELECTIONS

Premier **Gary Filmon** called by-elections for September 21 in five vacant seats in the Manitoba legislature. At present the Progressive Conservative government has 29 seats (including that of the speaker) in the 57-seat house. There are 18 New Democrats and 5 Liberals. Without a victory in any of the races, government representation will be on par with that of the opposition.

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*"Choosing,"  
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Liberals, stronger in Ontario and in many Quebec ridings, can best use this second strategy.

Obviously, the game is a complex one. With shallow partisan roots and unprecedented choices, many arguments or events can sway voters. Apparently, the leadership of the Quebec Liberal party is already sending messages telling Liberals to support the strongest federalist candidate in their riding. For the Bloc québécois, the worst scenario would be to see this "Holy Alliance" work with the help of a perceived country-wide sweep in favour of one party (most likely Liberals). The best scenario for the Bloc would be a repetition of last fall's referendum when dissatisfied federalists joined sovereigntists in the No camp. More probable, in my opinion, is an intermediate scenario whereby the Bloc québécois would win strong representation in Ottawa, roughly in line with its current standing in the polls.

As the 1993 campaign starts, it is important to keep in mind that the electorate is not unstructured. Cleavages exist that lend some predictability to the election. At the same time, these structures and cleavages are fluid and can be transformed. This fall, in a particularly complex and volatile context, the parties' arguments and strategies are likely to play a decisive role.

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debate over precisely how unemployment might be reduced, they too may become much more caught up with defining and defending policies than they had originally intended — and fending off criticisms that they would repeat the economic errors of the Trudeau regime with which Chrétien is so intimately associated.

In short, as the campaign gets into full swing it may acquire a dynamic of its own, in the process becoming much more interesting than either of the old-line parties would have wanted.

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