



Practical and Authoritative Analysis of Key National Issues

STILL WAITING FOR AN ALTERNATIVE

The outcome of the next federal election may hinge on whether Campbell can persuade voters that she does represent change

by *Kenneth McRoberts*

The paradox persists. Through a variety of ways, including perhaps even the Charlottetown referendum, Canadians have demonstrated their rejection of Canada's established political class and their desire for change in the style and substance of Canadian politics. Yet, they are still waiting for a credible alternative.

PUTTING A NEW FACE ON THE TORIES

For a while it appeared that Kim Campbell might be able to persuade Canadians that she can provide the alternative they are seeking. Her statements on policy suggested little by way of radical departure in the substance of politics. But she seemed to offer a change in the style of Canadian politics, if only because of her gender and province of origin, let alone the fact that she had been in Ottawa for too limited a time to become thoroughly associated with the federal political class.

Beyond that, many Canadians clearly were so desperate for change that they were prepared to give Campbell the benefit of all doubt. For a while, it seemed that the PCs, the government party, could become the party of change simply by acquiring a new leader. The elector-

ate's suspension of disbelief would last just long enough for her to be able to carry her party to victory in the next election.

A POLITICIAN LIKE THE OTHERS

Now, this scenario is looking more and more dubious. A series of candidates' debates was sufficient to demonstrate that Kim Campbell was disturbingly like other politicians. Her positions on policy questions too often seemed vague or patently calculated. In the process, Campbell made Jean Charest, the classic professional politician, look more appealing. At least on the language question Charest spoke from real conviction; Campbell's attempts to court Quebec nationalists by sidestepping the language question, as well as projecting empathy with Quebec's constitutional grievances, looked hollow and contrived.

At the same time, on the rare occasions when Campbell has let her guard down, she has spoken in ways that seem all too reminiscent of past leaders. The "enemies of Canadians" line, with its heavy arrogance, evoked not just the present prime minister, but another prime minister from Quebec, Pierre Trudeau.

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Once again, it seems, Canadians have been disappointed.

Apparently, this disillusionment will not prevent Campbell from becoming party leader, whether or not on the first ballot. With 45 percent of the delegates already committed to her cause, however uncertain their enthusiasm, it is difficult to see how she can be stopped. Her only serious opponent is not only improbably young for a prime minister, but hails from Quebec at a time when English Canada clearly would like to look elsewhere.

"... the rapid decline of Campbell's star raises an interesting question. Why has there not emerged a more credible force for change? Given the patent alienation of the electorate, the times seem to be ripe for a radical shift in political loyalties."

Nonetheless, it is far from certain that Campbell can lead the PCs to victory in the next election. If Campbell is reduced to being "just a politician like the others," there is little reason to return to power the party that has provided such spectacularly unpopular government.

WHY NO VIABLE ALTERNATIVE?

Thus, the rapid decline of Campbell's star raises an interesting question. Why has there not emerged a more credible force for change? Given the patent alienation of the electorate, the times seem to be ripe for a radical shift in political loyalties.

To be sure, the notion that a leader of the PCs, even with a more clearly personal agenda than Campbell's, could significantly alter Canadian politics was bound to collapse under serious scrutiny. But why cannot

some other political formation effectively exploit the popular demand for change? With the NDP's loss of its bearings, why not a challenge from the left? Conversely, if the spirit of the times precludes a challenge from the left, why not one from the right? Just a few months ago, there seemed to be no limits to the electoral prospects of the Reform party, which did have a very clearly defined agenda for change.

Part of the answer may lie in the very distrust of politicians that is leading voters to seize on new faces. Little is needed for voters to conclude that "new" politicians are in fact just like the old ones. In their distrust of politicians, voters are unsparing. Even self-styled anti-politicians, like Preston Manning, may be found wanting. During his campaign against the Charlottetown accord, Manning was too quick to label the agreement as Mulroney's accord, appearing to engage in precisely the type of partisan politics that he had declared himself to abhor. Given the new focus of political debate on the deficit, the Reform party may have a new chance — provided that Manning can once again convince voters that he and his party really are a break from the old politics.

It may also be that Canadian voters sense full well that the problems facing contemporary Canada, economic and social as well as political, stem from forces that transcend state boundaries and that are beyond the control of any set of politicians. The striking similarity in the economic policies of contemporary provincial governments — Liberal, PC, and NDP — is a powerful demonstration of the extent to which the forces shaping policy lie elsewhere than the ideology of the party in power or the personal qualities of its leaders.

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CAMPBELL HEADED FOR FIRST-BALLOT WIN DESPITE GAFFES

Obstacles facing late comeback by Charest appear insurmountable

by Patrick J. Monahan

With leadership front-runner Kim Campbell stumbling badly in early May, the door seemed to be opening for a late comeback by Environment Minister Jean Charest.

The last of the convention delegates were chosen by Conservative riding associations on May 8. Although Defence Minister Campbell possessed a commanding lead, up to 25 percent of the delegates were not

"The current race fits almost perfectly the established pattern of first-ballot conventions."

formally committed to a particular candidate. [Informal surveys had Campbell with 45 percent support, Charest with 27 percent, Edwards with 6 percent, and the remainder either uncommitted or unknown.]

The large block of uncommitted delegates has fuelled speculation that Campbell's "enemies of Canadians" comment at the May 13 candidates' debate, along with her controversial interview with Peter Newman in *Vancouver* magazine, would give Charest enough support to force at least a second ballot at the convention.

The problem for Charest, however, is that the structure of the lead-

heritage; a heritage traced to certain scholars on the left as well as to a certain party of the left — namely the NDP — when it has been in opposition.

THE SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT

The experience of being in government has certainly chastened the Ontario NDP, leading the party to increasingly stress the importance of debt control, deficit reduction, and the need for a dramatic “downsizing” of the public service. More and more, the rhetoric and policy proposals of the Ontario NDP are converging with those of other Conservative and Liberal governments at both the federal and provincial levels.

All governments are fearful of growing deficits and debts resulting in the loss of expenditure policy capacity as more funds must be earmarked to debt repayment; yet governments are also fearful of increasing individual and corporate taxation rates as a solution to this problem, fearful of the economic and electoral consequences of such increases on a society viewed by many as “tax weary.”

The easiest targets under these conditions, then, are public sector wages and staff complements, followed by social program service levels. The uniform interest shown by governments of diverse political persuasions

in seeking budgetary savings through cutbacks from these fields is striking — so striking in fact that certain members of the federal NDP have attacked the Ontario government for acting in a manner inconsistent with social democratic principles.

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT IN CONTEXT

This brings one back to the concept of the “social contract.” The Rae government is arguing that its approach to public sector restraint is unique in that it is rooted in corporatist ideas having their origins in social democratic policy making as witnessed in Western Europe.

Unfortunately for the Ontario government, this is only a half-truth. Though the social contract concept has corporatist origins in that it seeks to bring labour, management, and government together to establish mutually agreed-upon goals with each party having a “stake” in the decision-making process, the advent of the social contract project in Ontario leaves much to be desired. The existence of rigid preconditions coupled with the threat of drastic unilateral action by the government should these preconditions not be accepted belies the sincerity of the government in seeking a consensual compromise with labour.

Moreover, the very sudden appearance of the social contract as a

policy objective, linked to a very short timeframe of two months within which to negotiate such contracts for over 950,000 public sector employees, suggests a government engaged in ad hoc policy that is, by definition as well as by experience, poorly conceived. Corporatist arrangements found in such countries as Austria, Sweden, and Germany, in contrast, have been the products of years of careful planning and negotiation in which strict preconditions are absent and with all parties desirous of the establishment of such contracts, believing they will provide some tangible gain for each group. Such is not the case for Ontario in 1993.

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT PROGNOSIS

The social contract talks in Toronto over this spring will in all probability die a dismal death. They have been doomed from the outset. We should then look to see the Ontario government undertaking unilateral actions to reduce public sector staff and wage rates. Industrial action, including strike action, would then be a distinct possibility. As the Rae government is learning, the practice of government is tough; so too is progressive socioeconomic planning.

David Johnson is Adjunct Professor of Political Science at Brock University.



*“Still Waiting,”
continued from page 110.*

In part, Canadians have lost confidence in the capacity of their political class to govern because it no longer seems to have the power to do so. Voters would like to believe that new leaders or political formations can put things right again. But

voters know that they cannot and the illusion soon collapses.

The outcome of the next election may well hinge on whether Kim Campbell can somehow persuade voters that she does represent change after all, however ill-defined. In this, her greatest asset will be her primary protagonist, Jean Chrétien,

whose image as a veteran member of Canada’s political class is set for all time.

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

