



# CANADA WATCH

Practical and Authoritative Analysis of Key National Issues

## THE PCs AS THE PARTY OF CHANGE?

by *Kenneth McRoberts*

If one thing is clear about the contemporary political scene, it's that the electorate wants change. Canadians are profoundly dissatisfied with the state of the economy, the GST, and just about everything else for which they can hold the federal government responsible. They feel disenfranchised and unable to influence the making of government policy. And, of course, they have an especially high level of animus for the current prime minister.

It's hard to identify an instance in which a government has been more roundly rejected by the electorate both for its policies and the personal qualities of its leadership. The federal PCs seem to constitute a textbook example of a party whose standing in the polls guarantees that it will be thrown out of office at the first electoral opportunity.

Yet there is a distinct possibility that things won't turn out that way. Although voters clearly want change, they may well wonder whether any of the opposition parties can provide it. For one reason or another, they may find each of them to be lacking. Ironically, it could be the PCs who, with a new leader, will be best able to project the image, if not the reality, of change.

The primary liability of the Liberals is, of course, a leader who has been part of the federal political scene for 30 years now — almost twice as long as the combined ca-

reers of the other two party leaders. Given his tenure in so many Cabinet portfolios during the Trudeau years, Jean Chrétien may have difficulty convincing voters that he is the solution to Canada's problems rather than a major past contributor to them. Nor does his discourse credibly offer new ideas and fresh approaches.

For its part, the NDP should be much better placed to present itself as the agent of change. Not only is its leader relatively new to federal politics, and for that matter the first woman to lead a federal party, but the party has a long and distinguished history of articulating an alternative political vision, rooted in a distinct set of principles. The NDP, and its CCF forebear, has been the quintessential party of change.

Yet the contemporary NDP seems to be determined to disassociate itself from this tradition. For several years now it has been trying to project the image of a more humane but clearly moderate alternative to the old-line parties. The federal NDP has even taken the step of hiring an economic consulting firm to certify the fiscal responsibility of its proposals.

Moreover, we are now being treated to the spectacle of provincial NDP governments whose determination to cut spending and downscale the state rivals, if not exceeds, that of the old-line parties. This is especially true with the Ontario NDP government that, in its futile effort to secure the

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toleration (if not the approval) of business, has at times seemed remarkably pro-business. Now it is preparing an assault on compensation in the public sector, broadly defined, which in its threats of wage rollbacks and layoffs, evokes the campaign that the Parti québécois government waged in the early 1980s. Just as happened with the Lévesque government, the Rae government seems headed for a confrontation with one of its most clearly defined electoral constituencies: teachers and other public sector workers. In the eyes of many Quebeckers, the early 1980s episode compromised forever the PQ's credentials as a party of "social democratic" change.

Even the Reform party has apparently lost some of its credibility as an instrument of change. For a time, the party seemed to be riding on the groundswell of popular desire for change. A new party that had not been sullied by holding office, it offered both a new political leadership and whole host of clearly defined alternative policies. Yet, by many accounts, the Reform party has already become "just another party" in the eyes of many Canadians, including western Canadians. During its campaign against the Charlottetown Accord, which the Reform party spearheaded, both party literature and Preston Man-

ning himself were too quick to label the agreement "the Mulroney Deal." By making partisan attacks, Reform lost its status as a "movement."

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among all the parties it will enter the next election campaign with a newly minted leader. The most likely PC leader, Kim Campbell, would indeed be "new" in a good number of respects. Not only has she been on the federal political change for a short period of time, she comes from a region that has never produced a leader of a major federal party. Equally important, she projects a capacity for independent thought and a readiness to entertain new solutions to old problems.

In the end, however, this still might not be enough to save the PCs. Appointing a new leader with

many of these same characteristics, Audrey MacLaughlin, didn't enable the NDP to make a breakthrough in the polls. And a change in leader alone is certainly no guarantee to voters that a new PC government would be significantly different from the present one. We have no clear sense whether and in what direction Campbell would want to change the government's way of doing things. Nor do we have any reason to believe that if she did have an agenda of change Campbell would be able to impose it on both the party and the government. The idea of the Tories as the party of change may be a bit too much for many people to swallow — other than Tory party strategists who, of course, are seeking precisely the opposite of change.

Nonetheless, it does raise an intriguing and ironic prospect: the party that has held office for nine years, engendering profound public wrath in the process, manages to beat the opposition parties at their own game. The fact that this is even a possibility speaks volumes about the quality of democracy in Canada.

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