

# THE ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN: CONFOUNDING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

by David Johnson

A fascinating subplot of the referendum campaign involved the ability of advocates on the No side to develop a grass-roots advertising campaign that rivalled, if not surpassed, in effectiveness the campaign designed by the highly organized, well-funded, and experienced forces of the Yes side. We truly witnessed another David and Goliath story in which David's weapon this time was free-time, prime-time television advertising.

## THE LAW

The genesis of this development was found in the provisions of the *Referendum Act* that require all major broadcasting networks to make available to referendum committees three hours of broadcasting time during prime time. Under rules established by Elections Canada, these blocks of time were divided equally among the Yes and No camps. Individual referendum committees were then invited to apply for an allocation of time, with Elections Canada's decision making being guided by the principles that applicant committees had to represent significant regional or national interests, and that a wide range of opinion should be reflected through the advertising.

## THE CAMPAIGN

These provisions laid the foundation of an advertising campaign that stunned the media moguls of the Yes side. This group possessed an advertising budget of roughly \$5 million earmarked for the production of commercials designed by the leading advertising consultants in the country. And allied to this campaign was the allegedly "non-partisan" pro-Canada advertising produced by the federal government. Given this background, the media dubbed the Yes forces the

"Dream Team," a seemingly unbeatable coalition.

However, problems quickly emerged. The advertising of the Yes forces tended to be devoted either to "feel good" images of smiling children or to foreboding images of uncertainty and despair should the Accord be rejected. These ads usually did not address the actual details of the Accord. In contrast to this slick advertising, groups on the No side produced low-key, low-budget, sometimes humorous, and substantively hard-hitting ads.

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When such commercials were run in prime time, beside the Yes advertising, two dynamics emerged. One was that the No side gained credibility as an equal competitor to the Yes side; another was that through the difference in tone, No groups were able to identify themselves as those concerned with the Accord's substance, while being most attuned to the interests of common Canadians.

The campaign was clearly a case in which less was more. The greater the expenditure of the Yes side, the more professional the advertising, and the more emotional the message regarding a No vote, the greater the likelihood that ordinary Canadians "tuned out," while believing that the Yes side was seeking to manipulate popular opinion through appeals to sentiment.

The advertising campaign thus stands as a classic counterpoint to the commonly accepted wisdom that

the greater the campaign expenditure, the greater the likelihood of campaign success. Given the structure of the advertising campaign, small, disparate, and financially weak parties and interest groups were given the opportunity to compete effectively with governments and their well-endowed supporting parties and groups. The result was an advertising campaign reflective of a far greater diversity of opinion, from a far greater range of political actors, than that generally found in Canadian election campaigns.

## THE FUTURE

Is there any likelihood that this experiment in democracy will come to be replicated in future election campaigns? Perhaps. No election act currently has any free-time broadcasting provisions matching those found in the *Referendum Act*. The current federal *Election Act* makes provision for a certain amount of free broadcasting time (in 1988—214 minutes) to be made available to all "parties"; the allocation of time to any particular party, though, is proportional to that party's level of support in the last election and the number of seats contested in the current election.

This system benefits major parties that have had representation in the most recent Parliament, and discriminates against small parties with limited past electoral success, and new parties and interest groups. In 1988, for example, the Progressive Conservatives received 101 minutes of free time, the Liberals 46 minutes, and the NDP 35 minutes. In contrast, 14 other small parties received a total of 32 minutes to be shared among themselves; the Reform Party received 2 minutes of free time. No interest groups were

eligible to receive any entitlements, although they were free to engage in any amount of paid advertising.

We can be confident that, given the vested interests of the major parties, this system will not be amended prior to the next federal election. It is quite possible, though, that this system will come under attack both

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by the smaller parties, especially the Reform Party, and various interest groups, such as NAC. The federal Royal Commission on Electoral Reform (the Lortie Commission) has already launched an attack on the status quo calling for a free-time system more open to the needs and concerns of small parties while still granting a preponderance of free time to major, demonstrably popular parties.

#### REFORM POTENTIAL

With the example of the referendum fresh in mind, the calls for reform may be strong. A future federal government, seeking to demonstrate its interest in democratic reform, may very well move to broaden the free-time provisions in the *Election Act*. And there is clearly great scope for enhancing the ability of small parties, and even interest groups, to have access to free broadcasting time, thereby making the electoral process more open and responsive to the range of public opinion found within this country.

Such a move may even be justified as a quid pro quo for the prohibition or restriction on interest group paid advertising on the grounds that although groups do have a free

speech interest in election campaigns, the ability to exercise the right effectively should not be contingent upon the wealth held by any group.

The referendum was, among other things, a demonstration of a more populist form of electoral decision making than we have hitherto seen. The referendum outcome has also been widely interpreted as a rebuke of the traditional, elitist forms of governmental decision making and electioneering to which we have been accustomed. We have now been exposed to a quite different, more democratic approach to the structuring of elections. What Canadians do with this example and this opportunity will say much about whether Canadians are willing to make some radical changes in the way electoral decision making is conducted in this country.

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## WESTERN REPORT

### WHITHER SENATE REFORM?

*by Roger Gibbins*

On October 26, western Canadians voted massively against the Charlottetown Accord; across the region, 63.1 percent voted "no" compared with 55.4 percent voting "no" in Quebec. In so doing, western Canadians appear to have shut the door on Senate reform by rejecting the first serious constitutional attempt to address chronic regional unrest with parliamentary institutions. How, then, do we explain this rejection and what does the future hold for Senate reform?

#### LACK OF SALIENCY

In trying to explain why western Canadians rejected the Accord despite its inclusion of Senate reform, three possibilities suggest themselves. The first is that Senate reform lacked the public saliency that many political commentators and academics, including myself, have assumed. If western Canadians were largely indifferent to the issue, then the inclusion of Senate reform did little to enhance the Accord's regional appeal.

More generally, it is not clear that a concern with effective regional representation in parliamentary institutions played a very significant role as western Canadians tried to get a handle on the Accord. My reading of the regional media coverage and public debate suggests that neither this concern nor Senate reform specifically was front and centre. Whether this represents a failure on the Yes side to highlight the Senate reform package or whether the relevancy of Senate reform for the mythical man on the street has been exaggerated in the past is difficult to determine.