

FRAGMENTATION IN THE CANADIAN PARTY SYSTEM

By Peter Regenstreif

Canadian politics could be headed toward an extremely fragmented parliament after the next federal election—which must be called for sometime between now and the late fall of 1993. The result could leave five parties with significant representation and with no single one having more than 100 of the 295 seats in the House of Commons. Today, the partisan orientations of Canadians are as fractured as they have ever been. While the situation has been several years in emerging, it is being driven by processes and issues which are endemic and which recent events and issues are intensifying.

Canadians have had a multi-party system since the end of the First World War. While either the Liberals or the Progressive Conservatives (PC) have formed every government in Ottawa, there have always been three or four parties, depending on the period, contending in the federal arena.

As is the case now, these third and fourth parties have typically been regionally-based: the Progressive movement from the Prairies in the 1920s; the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the forerunner of the New Democratic Party (NDP), and Social Credit, both products of the Great Depression, also rooted in western Canada. As well, Social Credit had a Quebec incarnation in the 1960s and 1970s. When the Progressive Conservatives under the leadership of Brian Mulroney captured two consecutive majority victories, in 1984 and 1988, the number of parties with representation in the House of Commons was reduced to three—Conservatives, Liberals, and New Democrats. Now there are five, as two new regionally-based groups have appeared: the Reform Movement, centered in Alberta but spreading into the adjoining provinces of British Columbia and Saskatchewan, and in March announcing an intention to mount an effort throughout English Canada; and the *Bloc Quebecois*, a group committed to taking Quebec out of the federation. The present standing in the House of Commons: Conservatives, 159; Liberals, 81; NDP, 44; *Bloc Quebecois*, 8; Reform, 1; Independent Conservative, 1; Independent, 1.

A Legitimacy Crisis

While partisan fragmentation isn't new, its present manifestation comes at a time when the political system is confronted with a severe crisis of legitimacy. Prompted by the failure to achieve an agreement on the Meech Lake Accord in June, 1990, and confronted with a series of

decisions by the federal government which it strongly opposed, the Canadian public is now not only questioning the Conservative government but, as well, the processes through which decisions are reached. Parliament and federal-provincial conferences—the traditional mechanism through which policies are harmonized and constitutional agreements achieved—even the system of representation in Ottawa, are being challenged.

The challenges are showing up in the polls, in call-in shows on radio and television, and at the hearings being conducted by a variety of forums and commissions appointed in various jurisdictions. For example, Quebec's Belanger-Campeau Commission, set up to determine what the province should do in response to the failure to ratify the Meech Lake Accord, has just reported. The federal government has a Citizens' Forum which completes its work at the end of June; and an all-party Committee on Confederation, appointed by the Premier of Ontario, is still deliberating.

The unhappiness of Canadians with their political processes is not difficult to understand. On the key issues of the last few years, the Conservative government has gone one way, the public another:

Δ The free trade agreement with the United States found more people opposed to it than in support. That agreement, along with the Mulroney government, would have been defeated in the 1988 election but for the fact that the opposition was split between the Liberals and the NDP. Recently, when Canadians were asked who has gained from the free trade arrangements between the two countries, 71% said the US, only 5% Canada (Table 1).

Δ During that fateful week in June of last year, when the country's ten provincial premiers and the prime minister were in Ottawa meeting non-stop to ratify the Meech Lake Accord, a clear majority of Canadians were opposed to it.

Δ A Goods and Services Tax, something akin to a value-added tax, was instituted early this year. Close to 80% of Canadians had declared themselves opposed for almost two years prior to its adoption, yet still the government persisted.

Both Historic Parties Fall Back

These issues affected the standing of the parties in the opinion polls (Table 2). The Mulroney government enjoyed a rather brief five-month honeymoon before its support fell below that of the opposition Liberals. As antipathy to Meech Lake increased, so did Liberal strength. Mounting opposition to the Goods and Services Tax also took its toll on Conservative support.

Table 1

The Free Trade Issue

Do you support the trade agreement?

	Favor	Oppose	Don't Know
November 1990	31%	52%	17%
March 1990	32	49	19
October 1989	41	46	14
December 1988	44	38	19
November 22, 1988	34	41	25
November 15, 1988	32	45	23
November 8, 1988	26	50	24
October 1988	34	42	24

Who has gained more?

Canada	5%
United States	71
Both/Neither	11
Don't know	13

Questions: "Are you in favor of the free trade agreement with the United States?" "Since the policy of free or freer trade between the United States and Canada was adopted in January 1989, who has gained more—Canada or the United States?" September 1990 survey.

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization.

But Canadian partisan orientations are volatile. Support for the Liberals reached a high point in June 1990, when the party was in the midst of a convention to choose its new leader, Jean Chretien. It began to slide almost immediately thereafter. First, the *Bloc Quebecois* was formed in the aftermath of the failure of Meech Lake, and it began to make serious inroads in Quebec. Last August it won a by-election for a vacant seat in Montreal. Then, in the provincial election in Ontario in September, the NDP mounted an effective effort and, with 38% of the vote, won 74 of the 130 seats in the provincial legislature.

The surprise NDP victory reverberated throughout the country. The party's federal support increased dramatically throughout the fall, until the outbreak of the war in the Persian Gulf in mid-January of this year. At that point, NDP federal leader Audrey McLaughlin took a strong stand against the use of force by the US and its allies (including Canada)—and, almost immediately, her party began falling in the polls, while the Mulroney government began to come back a bit.

The ability of the government to increase its support is limited by the fact that a majority of *Bloc Quebecois* adherents are voters who backed the Conservatives in the

last election. The same is true of the Reform Movement in the west. As conditions continue to favor these two new groups, conservative prospects suffer. Poll data (Table 2) underline the marked regional variations. The Liberals today are strong in Atlantic Canada, have just over one third support in Quebec, are neck-and-neck with the NDP in Ontario and the Prairies, and trail the NDP in British Columbia. The *Bloc Quebecois* is confined to Quebec while, as noted, the Reform Movement's base is in the west, although it is increasingly showing signs of spreading eastward into Ontario. The Conservatives are trailing, and badly, all across the country.

Which Way Quebec?

Electoral prospects depend very much on what happens with Quebec. The recommendation of the Belanger-Campeau Commission, ratified by Premier Robert Bourassa, calls for a referendum on sovereignty either between June 8 and 22, or between October 12 and 26, 1992. In the meantime, the rest of the country is being challenged to bring an attractive constitutional offer to the province. If such an offer is accepted, the referendum might not be held.

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A federal election isn't required by law for two and a half years. If a solution to the constitutional impasse with Quebec is achieved and a referendum avoided, then an election is likely to be called in the fall of 1992. However, if a referendum is held, the government is unlikely to call for a national vote before 1993—at least such is its thinking now.

The Parties and Their Prospects

Quebec aside, however, some points are clear:

Δ The Liberals, the traditional government party which has dominated Canadian politics throughout this century, are in disarray. They have no clearly established program and are split on the key issues: free trade, tax policy and the deficit, whether to maintain universality in social programs, and what to do about Quebec. Moreover, they are in extreme financial difficulty, with a deficit of over \$4 million. They dominate in the poorest regions of the

country and among the minority ethnic populations who have come to Canada since the Second World War. Their present parliamentary representation is concentrated in lower-middle and working class constituencies in central and eastern Canada.

Δ The NDP's strength is greatest in the west, and its hopes for a substantial increase there and elsewhere now appear to depend on the performance of the newly-elected Ontario government led by Premier Bob Rae. However, the recession has hit Ontario hard and the new government has been having its problems. Meanwhile, there is a strong possibility of NDP governments in Saskatchewan and British Columbia, which would no doubt enhance the party's standing federally.

Δ The strength of the *Bloc Quebecois* depends on the heightened support for sovereignty in Quebec. Should a referendum be avoided or should it be held and fail to carry a majority, the bloc could be seriously wounded. In the

Table 2

PARTY SUPPORT IN CANADA SINCE THE 1988 ELECTION

	PC	LIB	NDP	Reform	BQ	Others
1988 Election	43%	32%	20%	2%	—	3%
December 1988	49	28	20	—	—	4
January 1989	48	26	23	—	—	4
March 1989	41	30	26	—	—	4
April 1989	37	38	22	—	—	3
June 1989	30	45	21	—	—	4
September 1989	30	41	24	—	—	5
December 1989	26	39	28	—	—	7
March 1990	17	50	25	—	—	8
June 1990	17	50	23	—	—	10
July 1990	19	49	23	—	—	10
September 1990	15	39	32	7	4	3
October 1990	15	31	38	9	4	3
November 1990	14	35	36	8	6	2
December 1990	12	34	35	8	6	2
January 1991	12	31	41	9	7	1
February 1991	16	35	34	8	5	2
March 1991	16	39	30	7	7	1
April 1991	14	32	26	16	10	2

Regional Breakdown

	April 1991					
Atlantic	19%	41%	30%	3	0	7
Quebec	16	26	11	0	41	5
Ontario	11	41	32	15	0	1
Prairies	15	21	22	43	0	0
B.C.	13	25	43	18	0	1

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization.

meantime, it dominates Quebec outside the island of Montreal and is severely damaging to the Conservatives.

Δ "If an election were held today"—the classic preamble to the question asking vote intention—the Reform Movement would likely sweep most of Alberta, where it won a federal by-election 18 months ago, and carry a substantial number of constituencies in British Columbia and Saskatchewan. Whether it can make major inroads in Ontario depends on its ability to break out of its largely male, middle-aged, English style to encompass the wide variety of ethnic and religious groups making up the province's population. The movement is opposed to bilingualism across the country and its right-wing policy positions are powerful inducements to traditional Conservative supporters. Its decision to confine its campaigning to areas outside Quebec is a not-too-subtle appeal to those fed up with that province's continuing demands and domination of the country's political agenda.

Δ Last, and at this point least, the Conservatives. The Mulroney government embarked on a major new policy direction for the country when it assumed office in 1984:

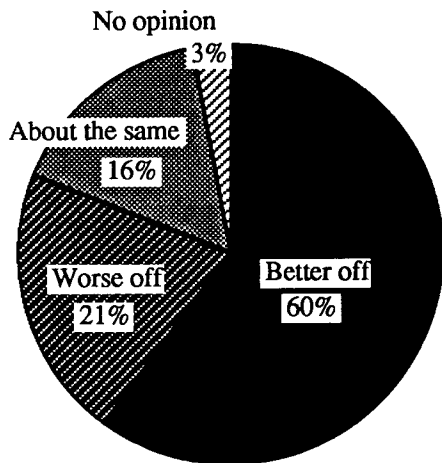
deregulation, privatization, free trade with the United States, tax changes, and a new agreement with Quebec. The attempts to achieve these objectives have severely shaken the country. With the Goods and Services Tax an on-going negative and with the economy in deep recession, the Conservatives have dropped in the opinion polls to the lowest level ever for a governing party. Mulroney himself is extremely unpopular. Polling this spring shows that only 17 percent believe that he "...would make the best Prime Minister," compared to 27% for Chretien and 24% for McLaughlin. Another 23% said that none of them would be best, and 9% were unsure (Gallup: March 1991).

Still, the government fell to 22% in the polls in the middle of its first term but came back to win a second majority in 1988. That experience cautions against writing Mulroney off entirely. His hopes rest on a substantial economic recovery and some sort of resolution of the constitutional crisis. Pending those eventualities, the prospect for the next federal election is for five political parties to have substantial representation, much of it regionally-based. At the moment, the Liberals and the NDP appear to be the best positioned, with the possibility of some sort of a governing agreement between them.

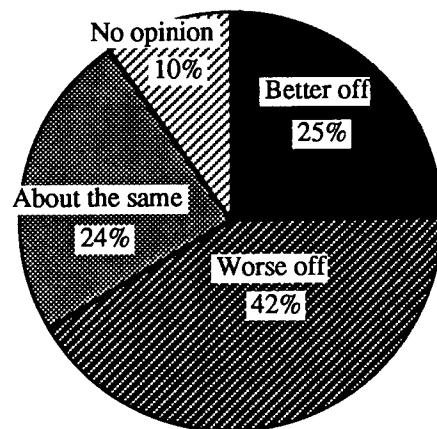
Peter Regenstreif is professor of political science, the University of Rochester, and president of Policy Concepts, Toronto

Assessing Present and Future Economic Prospects

Question: Financially speaking, do you feel that you are better off, worse off, or about the same as your parents were at your age?



Question: Do you think that the next generation (for example your children, nieces or nephews) will be better off, worse off, or about the same when they are your age?



Source: Survey by Environics Research Group, October 22-November 15, 1990.