CANADIAN POLITICS IN 1993

By Allan R. Gregg, Mitch Patten and Joan Fischer

As Americans put their election year behind them, and begin to look to the future with the hope a new administration inevitably brings, Canadians are entering an election year of their own. But as Canadians look toward 1993, they do so in a mood dominated more by disillusionment than by hope. Into this mix was tossed, in late February, Brian Mulrony's announcement that he is stepping down as prime minister and leader of the Progressive Conservative party in June.

Canadians take pride in what they have achieved as a country. They believe their country possesses all the resources, both human and natural, needed for it to succeed and prosper. And they believe that their problems are eminently solvable. Yet they look to the future with a fear that their potential is being squandered by a political elite and a political system that is out-of-touch and malperforming.

The Bubble

Canadians have come to view their political leadership (of all stripes and at all levels) as living in a kind of hermetically-sealed bubble. This bubble seems to follow political leaders on those few occasions when they venture outside the capital, and cuts them off from those they are supposed to be serving. Those inside the bubble seem able to talk only with each other and, therefore, incapable of understanding either the situation or the priorities of the vast majority of Canadians who have no access to the bubble.

In a study conducted late last year for Maclean's Magazine and the CTV television network, Decima asked Canadians if their faith in politicians to serve the public interest had increased, decreased or stayed the same over the past few years. Fully 73% responded it had decreased (up 10 points since 1991), 42% said it had decreased "significantly." When probed for the reason politicians are held in such low regard, only 22% indicated that politicians no longer have answers to the country's problems. The vast majority (67%) chose the responses that politicians spend too much time talking among themselves and not enough time talking with people, or that they only seemed interested in helping themselves.

This notion that Canada's political leaders are just "too wrapped-up in themselves" to deal with the country's problems becomes increasingly disturbing to Canadians as the recession lingers on and their dissatisfaction with the economic direction of the country heightens. The winter 1992 edition of *The Decima Quarterly Report* found 56% of Canadians rating the state of their economy as "poor," and none calling it "excellent" (Figure 1). The Decima/Maclean's study found that 61% of Canadians expect the economy to remain weak through most of the 1990's, with little doubt about who is to blame. While 13% of respondents attributed the uncertain recovery to Canadian businesses and workers not being as competitive as they should be, and another 20% blamed slow growth abroad, fully 63% placed primary responsibility on poor government performance and the government's free trade agreement with the U.S.

Though Canadians are so dissatisfied with the economic direction of the country and so ready to lay the blame at the feet of the government, they don't look forward to 1993 as an opportunity to change direction and set a new economic course by electing a new government. This is so largely because, as noted, it's not just the current government they see trapped in "the bubble." Two-thirds of Canadians believe that opposition politicians attack the government without having any real alternatives of their own; they are simply not convinced that a change in government will significantly improve things.

When the Decima/Maclean's study late last year asked Canadians to name their favorite politician the runaway winner was "none of the above," which was not even offered as an alternative in the study. At 30%, "none of the above" was well ahead of the U.S. President Bill Clinton and Liberal leader Jean Chrétien who followed with 14 and 16% respectively. A few points further back, in a virtual tie, were New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Audrey McLaughlin, Bloc Quebecois leader Lucien Bouchard, Reform Party leader Preston Manning, and Prime Minister Mulroney. Clearly, Canadians are not enamored with the choices they have before them.

The On-Going Constitutional Argument

Never has this gulf between the politicians and the public been more evident to Canadians than during the recent constitutional debates. When Canada's constitution was amended and brought home from England in the early 1980's, the separatist government of the day in the province of Quebec refused to sign the newly "patriated" constitution. This refusal left the one-quarter of Canadians who live in Quebec symbolically outside of the constitution. Since that time, and especially over the past six years, Canadian governments at both the federal and provincial levels have been engaging on and off in discussions and negotiations aimed at "bringing Quebec back into the constitution." For the most part, Canadians have watched this trend with only mild interest (and increasing frustration) as the economy has slid into recession and the government has appeared more and more preoccupied with constitutional issues.

There have been ebbs and flows in Canada's ongoing Constitutional argument. By spring 1992 constitutional issues were again beginning to dominate the political agenda. After almost two years of "shuttle diplomacy" between Ottawa and the provinces, constitutional

conferences attended by a selected cross-section of Canadians, informal meetings of first ministers, and countless "new proposals" for constitutional reform, it seemed that a new package of amendments that federal, provincial and Native leaders could agree on was at hand. By the time final agreement on the new package was reached at Charlottetown in early August, it had become clear that the current political climate demanded the "Charlottetown Accord" be put to a referendum before it was formally adopted by the provincial legislatures and federal parliament.

Most political leaders were confident of success. They had breathed a collective sigh of relief when it was announced that an agreement had been reached. While they were far from clear on the details of the Accord, most Canadians seemed to approve of the principles it contained. Western premiers had been able to obtain a "Triple E" senate (elected, equal and effective) to strengthen their regional input in Ottawa; Native leaders had won a form of self government; Quebec got special recognition, including a permanent guarantee of 25% of the seats in the House of Commons no matter how much the province's population declined relative to that of the rest of Canada. The almost immediate endorsement of the Accord by both the traditional opposition parties—the Liberals and the NDP—gave the new package the appearance of an initiative unanimously endorsed. Canadians seemed ready to put the issue behind them by voting "YES" in the referendum.

Cracks appeared quickly, however. First, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women went public with its opposition to the Accord, arguing that the wording was weaker in its protection of women than the existing Charter of Rights. Provincial opposition parties in British Columbia and Manitoba were joined by the separatist opposition in Quebec in urging a "NO" vote, and Preston Manning announced he would lead his Reform Party in opposition.

Following media reports about continued haggling among the bureaucrats delegated with drafting the Accord's legal text, Canadians began getting the impression that the Accord was far more complicated than they had originally believed. And it seemed to many that some of the "fine print" contained elements which they fundamentally opposed. For a public whose cynicism toward politicians was already well entrenched, it was not a big leap of logic or emotion to believe that their political leaders were trying to "sell (them) a bill of goods" without explaining its implications.

In Quebec the YES/OUI campaign had run into its own problems. One evening in late August, a key advisor to provincial premier Robert Bourassa used a cellular phone to call Quebec's deputy minister of intergovernmental affairs. Unknown to them, the conversation, including the advisor's complaint that Bourassa had "caved in" during the negotiations on the Accord, was being monitored and taped by someone. The unidentified eavesdropper gave the material to the media which—after abiding by a temporary court injunction preventing release of the tape—gave the comments huge play the moment the injunction was lifted. The charge that Bourassa had caved-in, especially coming from a close advisor, seriously damaged the premier's credibility and dealt a fatal blow to the YES/OUI forces in Quebec.

As the public credibility of those who had negotiated the Accord tumbled, and serious doubts about the Accord grew, the "NO" campaign's job became easier. Their task became simply to provide evidence that these doubts were well founded. In Quebec, the taped evidence of "Bourassa's cave-in" became the focus of the "NO" campaign's attack. In English Canada, the notion that the distinct society clause and the guarantee of 25% of the seats in the House of Commons for Quebec (without similar explicit guarantees for other regions) became examples of the "unfairness" of the Accord and proof that it "created different classes of Canadians." On referendum day (October 26,1992), six of the ten provinces opposed the Charlottetown proposals, and Canadians voted 55 to 45% to reject the Accord.

The year-end Decima/Maclean's study asked Canadians if, given the reaction to the Charlottetown proposals in the referendum, it would be better to resume negotiations toward a new constitutional package; attempt to implement the changes in the Accord through a series of separate agreements between the federal government, the provinces and other groups; or forget about any constitutional changes for the foreseeable future. Sixty percent favored the latter, while just 21% wanted to move ahead with a series of separate agreements; and 18% would resume negotiations.

After the Referendum

While pundits called the failure of the Charlottetown Accord a setback for the Mulroney government, Canadians at large indicated that the political price of straying from the economic agenda was being paid by all politicians. Decima asked the public if, as a result of the referendum, their opinion of a series of national and regional politicians had gone up, stayed the same, or gone down. In every case more respondents said their opinion of the politician in question had gone down rather than up.

Even Preston Manning, who was the only national political leader to oppose the Accord, had slipped in public favor during the referendum. Manning, who has often been compared to Ross Perot for his straight talking "anti-politician" style and message, had opposed the Charlottetown Accord virtually from the beginning. Canadians were sour on all politicians.

The most important short-term consequence of the constitutional referendum may have been, then, to heighten the already strong cynicism with which Canadians view their political leaders and political process. And as Canadians enter this election year troubled by the economic direction of their country, this cynicism is threatening to dominate the political climate as never before.

Free Trade

The Free Trade issue represents yet another problem for government. In September 1985, when *The Decima Quarterly* survey first examined Canadians' attitudes on entering into an agreement with the United States that would eliminate tariffs and significantly reduce other trade barriers, 71% endorsed such an agreement. At the time, it was understood that public support for the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was not based on any clear understanding of the issues involved, but rather on a long-standing belief that it would be in Canada's best interest to establish closer ties with the United States. As the public debate unfolded, however, it was the opponents of the FTA who seemed to have the greatest impact on public opinion. Potential job losses and economic liabilities seemed more tangible and were more easily understood than the longer-term benefits being communicated by free-trade proponents.

Further, FTA opponents were quicker to communicate the potential problems than proponents were to communicate the potential benefits. Within two years, support had dropped to 56% and never recovered. In late 1989, and again in the summer of 1991—when the new North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) negotiations began—half the public stated that Canada should exercise its option to exit the existing Free Trade Agreement.

Not surprisingly, then, when support for Canada's entrance into the new trilateral trade negotiations was first examined in the summer of 1991, a majority (59%) of Canadians said they were opposed—a figure that moved not at all over the subsequent year and a half during which NAFTA was finalized. More people (39%) thought that joining with Mexico and the United States in another free trade agreement would only make things worse and leave Canada less competitive, than thought that participation in NAFTA was necessary in order to be able to compete with the trading blocs formed by the European and Pacific Rim countries (31%).

The concern about free trade is clearly driven by the perceived impact on jobs and wages. Over 70% said that NAFTA will reduce the number of jobs in Canada and the wage levels of Canadian workers. But from a political perspective, the negative implications of free trade are more complex, forming another component of the "bubble" problem. First and foremost, the Canadian public believes that politicians spent far too much time and money in 1992 on an issue of relatively little importance to most Canadians—the Constitution—than on the very real problems of a prolonged recession, decreasing competitiveness, and an education and training system that is among the most expensive in the world, but appears to be failing to meet the demands of the next century.

Second, the single-minded pursuit of free trade, despite the perceived harm it has caused various segments of the population, provides yet more reinforcement for the "bubble" theory. The political elites pursue an agenda and the common person pays the price. To some extent the Canadian public seems to see free trade as inevitable, but they also seem to be saying "not right now." They also believe that the federal government has failed to deliver its "transitional" promise to help people deal with the impact of free trade. In fact, Canadians have by and large accepted the notion of global markets and the need to compete with them. But in their current negative mood they won't say yes to the new accord "the politicians" have negotiated. Only in Quebec does the NAFTA find plurality support (Table 1).

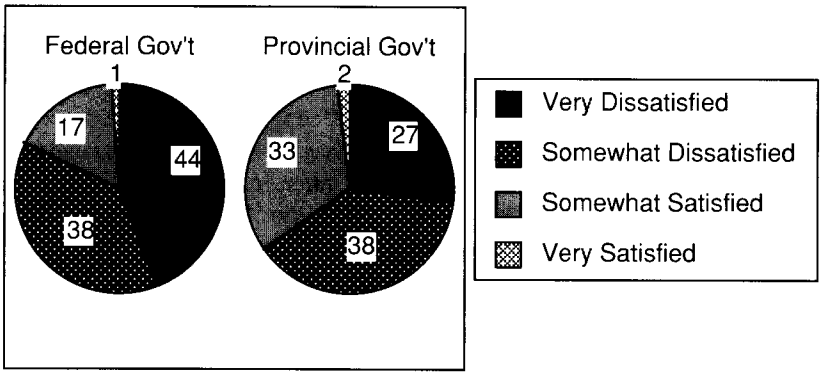
EXCEPT IN QUEBEC, CANADIANS OPPOSE THE FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

	Support NAFTA	Oppose NAFTA
All Canada	38%	59%
Atlantic Provinces	37	60
Quebec	48	45
Ontario	32	68
Prairie Provinces	36	60
British Columbia	39	58

Question: As you may know, on August 12, Canada, the United States, and Mexico reached an agreement that would eliminate tariffs and significantly reduce trade barriers on goods and services flowing between the three countries. This agreement is usually referred to as the North American Free Trade Agreement or NAFTA. Generally speaking, would you say you strongly support, support, oppose, or strongly oppose Canada's entering into this agreement with the United States and Mexico?

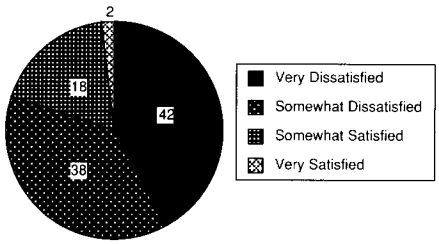
Source: Decima Research, September 16-October 8, 1992, n = 1,500.

In a Pattern Common Around the World: Canadians Express Dissatisfaction With and Pessimism About Their Government, Their Economy, and their Future

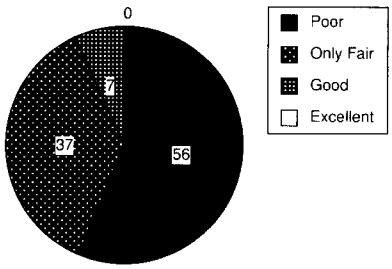


Questions: ...how satisfied are you with the performance of the federal government?... performance of your provincial government?

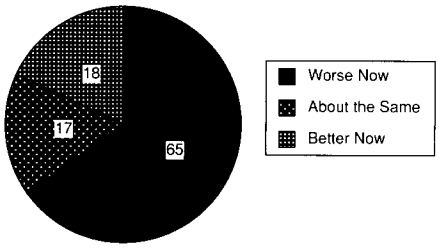
Question: ...tell me...how satisfied you are with the direction the country is going in today.



Question: ...how would you describe Canada's economy today?



Question: How would you say your personal prospects for the future are now, compared to how they were four or five years ago?



Into an Election Year, After Mulroney

As noted at the outset, Canadians believe that their country has what it takes to confront and solve its problems. And, they are looking for signs that their political leadership can rise to the challenge of marshalling the country's resources in a focused effort to tackle these problems. As the election draws nearer, any political party or leader who can provide that hope by demonstrating an understanding of the problems and empathy with the electorate's concerns, would have the potential to take the country by storm. But as Canadians survey the political landscape, they find themselves continuously confronted with the same disillusioning, hermetically-sealed bubble.

Brian Mulroney's resignation, of course, adds a new complexity to the election year. It seems likely that the person most dismayed by the resignation was Jean Chretien, the leader of the Liberal party. Conventional wisdom had suggested that the likelihood of a Liberal win in the election was much greater against a conservative party led by Mulroney than one led by a (relatively) fresh and untarnished newcomer. With Mulroney's decision to step down, all bets are off. Attention will now focus on the race leading up to the Progressive Conservative leadership convention, likely to be held in June.

Canadians, by and large, are greeting the possibilities inherent in an election year with a collective "So what!". It remains to be seen if a new Conservative leader can rekindle some enthusiasm for and faith in the political process among the general population.

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