

CANADA'S GREAT...

"The Liberals did not so much win a mandate as the Conservatives lost on the issue of stewardship."

By Nelson Wiseman

Last month's Canadian election featured both continuity and a dramatic break with the past. The election of a majority Liberal government (garnering 41% of the popular vote and 60% of parliament's 295 seats) is consistent with tradition. The Liberals have ruled for two-thirds of the past century, making them appear as Canada's natural governing party. Where discontinuity is evident is in the rise of two regionally-based parties. The Bloc Quebecois—offering no candidates outside the province—won the majority of seats in Quebec. The Reform party—offering no candidates in Quebec—won the majority of seats in the two westernmost provinces, Alberta and British Columbia and got 20% of the popular vote in Ontario. Remarkably, the incumbent Progressive Conservatives were nearly obliterated, sliding from the largest ever majority in Canadian history in 1984, and another majority in 1988, to an unprecedented fifth place finish with a paltry 2 seats. The social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) was also rejected, its biggest setback ever, shrinking from 20% of the vote and 43 seats in 1988 to 7% and 9 seats.

The Constitutional Muddle

What do these developments reflect? The Liberals did not so much win a mandate as the Conservatives lost on the issue of stewardship. The coalition crafted by Brian Mulroney, one that brought together Quebec's nationalists and English Canada's social conservatives, proved temporary and is now dead. His last term in office was dominated by a constitutional reform enterprise that went awry: the failed Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords. Driven by the elites, these accords were rejected by the masses. De-

spite laborious crafting by the three traditional federal parties—the Conservatives, Liberals, and the NDP—and the ten provincial premiers, constitutional tinkering, the crux being to add a phrase to the Constitution declaring Quebec a "distinct society," proved to be an unmitigated debacle and misadventure.

In the constitutional referendum held a year ago, a resounding 55% just said "No." The results were virtually identical in Quebec and in the rest of Canada. This fall's national election proved to be Round 2 of the referendum despite the parties studiously avoiding, or at most obliquely referring to, the Constitution. The Bloc and Reform, both of which had urged Quebecers and Canadians to jettison the constitutional proposals for quite different reasons in 1992, won then and have won now. The former argued that Quebec's interests were being sold out, the latter that Quebec was getting too much.

Do these stark, contrasting, and apparently irreconcilable differences portend the break-up of Canada and the separation of Quebec? Not likely. There are more rounds to come. The issue of Quebec's separation or its redefined status in Canada will, in the first instance, be determined in Quebec, not in the federal parliament in Ottawa. The next round in the saga will come in the spring of 1994 when Quebec's provincial election is expected. If the provincial Parti Quebecois comes to power, they promise to hold a referendum on sovereignty in 1995. Their last such gambit in 1980, asking for a mandate to negotiate something called "sovereignty-association" with Canada, was soundly rejected. If they are successful this time—a still doubtful proposi-

tion—the future course of events, deliberations, and posturings are unpredictable.

The Changing Polity

Is the 1993 election a temporary aberration or a fundamental realignment of Canadian politics? It's clear that the ideological political spectrum is no longer what it has been. The election shattered the established continuum, making it appear more American. Reform (like the Republicans in the US and the Conservatives in the UK) is on the right. It stresses deficit reduction, reined-in social or entitlement programs, and less government. The Liberals (like the Democrats and Britain's Labour) appear, at least for now, on the left. They ran on a platform promising job creation through government stimulus and maintaining the social safety net. They will probably govern like the Progressive Conservatives against a backdrop of acute, protracted, fiscal restraint.

The Reform party may fade if it lives up to its promise of permitting its members of parliament (MPs) to vote their conscience and as their constituents demand. This would represent a break from the strict party discipline that has operated in parliament. Might the Conservatives disappear, leaving Reform English Canada's second party, unthinkable just a few weeks ago? The Bloc's prospects are uncertain. It has studiously avoided calling itself a party and is built wholly around its charismatic leader, Lucien Bouchard, and a single principle, Quebec's sovereignty. Ideologically, it is social democratic, but Bouchard was a Mulroney cabinet minister. The left-right dichotomy is subsumed and overwhelmed by the national question in Quebec.

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