

Notebook / Carnet

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Volume 40, 1997

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt40nb01>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

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Citer cette note

Parnaby, A. & Rennie, R. (1997). Notebook / Carnet. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 40, 357–372.

NOTEBOOK / CARNET

Andrew Parnaby and Richard Rennie

THIS ISSUE of *Labour/Le Travail* marks the debut of the new and (hopefully) improved Notebook/Carnet. Its format has changed; so, too, has its purpose. It is now a space for thought-pieces, op-eds, short essays, or commentary on any issue related to labour and the working class. Politics, popular culture, current events, trends, and ideas are all fair game; the snappier, the more opinionated, the more unconventional the piece the better. The ideal length is 1000 words or less. And of course, we will continue to publish "calls for papers" and conference information — so please continue to send it in. Submissions should be sent c/o Rick Rennie and Andy Parnaby, Notebook/Carnet, *Labour/Le Travail*, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NF A1C 5S7. Or email them to rennie@morgan.ucs.mun.ca

CONFERENCE on Atlantic Canada's industrial heritage, sponsored by Industrial Heritage Nova Scotia is taking place 1-3 October 1998 at the Citadel Inn, Halifax, NS. Please contact Jim Candow at Jim_Candow@pch.gc.ca.

CALL FOR PAPERS: The University College Labor Education Association and the AFL-CIO are joint sponsors of a conference to be held in April 1998 on the topic of "Organizing for Keeps: Building a 21st Century Labor Movement." The conference will bring together educators, activists and researchers, to focus on the present state and future possibilities of labour organization. The organizers invite paper proposals on topics such as leadership, strategies, strikes and contracts, ethnicity and gender, and cross-border solidarity. However, all proposals related to the general theme will be considered. Proposals should be 750-1000 words in length, and should include the author's name, address, and phone number, and where possible a fax number and e-mail address. Proposals should be sent to Kate Bronfenbrenner, UCLEA Professional Council Chair, 207 ILR Extension Building, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853-3901, Fax (607) 255-2358. Proposals may also be sent as e-mail attachments to KL.B23@cornell.edu. The deadline for proposals is 15 OCTOBER 1997. The final paper should be 20-25 double-spaced pages and

the working draft should be received no later than 1 MARCH 1998. For more information call Kate Bronfenbrenner (607) 255-7581 or Katie Briggs (607) 254-4749.

CONFERENCE: TWENTIETH ANNUAL North American Labor History Conference, 15-17 October 1998, Wayne State University. The Program Committee invites proposals for panels and single papers on the theme, "Labor, Past and Present." Comparative and interdisciplinary panels are particularly welcome as are topical sessions that intersect with race, ethnicity, and gender. Roundtable and workshop sessions will be considered, as will panels that are devoted to historiographical and/or theoretical approaches. Please submit panel and paper proposals (including a 1-2 page paper abstract and cvs for all participants) by 1 MARCH 1998 to Dr. Elizabeth Faue, Department of History, College of Liberal Arts, 3094 Faculty/Administration Building, Wayne State University, Detroit MI 48202. Telephone: (313) 577-3330.

PROPOSALS ARE WANTED for consideration of the program committee for the 1998 American Historical Association — Pacific Coast Branch conference which will be meeting in San Diego during the first week of AUGUST 1998. Topics in all fields of history will be considered. Please send an original and four copies of a one-page synopsis of your proposal by 15 JULY for early consideration, along with a vitae for each participant to: Leonard Dinnerstein, Judaic Studies, Franklin Building, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85821-0080.

The British Election: A Commentary

Leo Panitch and Colin Leys

The 1997 election is being rightly celebrated as, above all, a huge relief. For the moment *New Labour* has the benefit of everybody's doubt. There is, after all, an alternative, and people are willing to wait and see what it looks like. And the size of the majority means that things can be done: over the next four or five years what the alternative means will become pretty clear.

But this should not prevent us also recognizing that this election has closed a chapter in the history of socialism. For almost a century the Labour Party has been committed to "parliamentary socialism": in this election for the first time, that commitment was definitively abandoned. We need to reckon with this: to look back briefly over the past three decades and consider what "parliamentary socialism" was, and why it failed; and to reflect on what its termination in the Labour Party implies for the construction of a new socialist project.

What was "parliamentary socialism?" As practised by Labour, it combined three things: an ideological commitment (however vague) to a non-market-driven

social order, an extra-parliamentary mass organization, and a particular conception of democracy. This conception, evolved over time from Burke to Schumpeter, saw democracy only as a contest between competing teams of parliamentary elites. It treated the extra-parliamentary party as, in the final analysis, a servant of the parliamentary team; and it conceived of citizens primarily as mere voters, not as active participants in self-government.

One of the main contributions of the British new left in the 1960s was its critique of this supposed route to socialism; but although the leading new left intellectuals thought the Labour Party would never transcend it, they did not spawn any organizational alternative. When, however, the post-war settlement — the high water-mark of parliamentary socialism's achievements — finally unravelled under the Wilson Government in the late 1960s, a significant current emerged within the Labour Party which broadly accepted the new left's appreciation of the limits of parliamentary socialism, but which did not think it impossible that Labour might yet be transformed into a democratic socialist party of a different kind.

This Labour new left emerged at roughly the same time as the new right within the Conservative Party; it was a critical political turning-point. Tony Benn articulated the new left activists' understanding of this, and their sense of urgency, when he called for fundamental democratic reform of both the party and the state in order to prevent the ascendancy of what he described as "a new philosophy of government, now emerging everywhere on the right," dedicated to deregulating business and controlling the citizen in the name of market freedoms. But whereas the new right quickly gained the ascendancy within the Conservative Party, allowing them to reach outwards as a coherent political force and start to reorganize the country, the new left in the Labour Party was bitterly resisted by the party's deeply entrenched parliamentary elite who, besides being committed to "social-democratic centralism" failed to grasp the magnitude of the crisis of the post-war order. They shared Crosland's judgement, which he declared at the beginning of the 1970s, that there were no signs of a new crisis in the western economies, and that therefore "no fundamental rethinking" of party strategy was needed. They rejected the Labour new left's alternatives to the post-war settlement, in the shape of the Alternative Economic Strategy, and the municipal socialism that culminated in the Greater London Council under Ken Livingstone, and they were determined to defend the status quo inside the party. The decade-long struggle to change the Labour Party that ensued exhausted the new left — and what they had to offer the wider society was submerged in the intra-party conflict.

The 1983 election disaster was a product of these divisions — exacerbated by those social democrats who pushed matters to a split, and also by those who stayed energetically enlisting the media on their side to denigrate their opponents as the "looney left," at whatever cost to the party's overall standing in the country. The way back to power after 1983 was then defined in terms of systematically isolating and marginalizing the Labour new left and its ideas, but this meant that the party

turned its back on the one segment of its membership that had seriously confronted the issue of how to sustain a socialist project in the new era. With their defeat, the die was cast for the modernizers' project: accepting the legacy of Thatcherism as a kind of "settlement" akin to the Conservative's accommodation to the legacy of the Attlee governments in the 1950s. The Labour new left had wanted to replace parliamentary socialism with democratic socialism. New Labour replaced it, in effect, with a new kind of parliamentary capitalism, the so-called "radicalism of the centre."

Of course, New Labour's election triumph was partly due to the Conservatives' weaknesses. Already by 1995 the Conservatives had impaled themselves on a double contradiction. First, politics are national, but capital, of which the Conservatives are nothing if not the guardians, is increasingly transnational; in playing the nationalist card so recklessly the "Eurosceptics" forgot how much capital is already integrated into and dependent on the EU economy. When the leadership looked like surrendering to them, the party no longer looked like a completely "safe pair of hands" — either to big business, or to many voters. Second, the Conservatives' neoliberalism, and the growing inequality and social marginalization it generates, was in increasing contradiction with the electorate's residual sense of social solidarity. The tide was beginning to flow the other way; the Tories failed to see it. Perhaps they were misled by the comprehensive unrepresentativeness of their grassroots membership (average age 64 and rising), the opinions of the editors of the Tory newspapers, and their own privileged NIMBY lifestyles. There was also the transparent arrogance of power, and corruption. Even John Smith might have won the 1997 election for Labour, had he lived. Some at least of the tactical voting, which played an important role in the wipe-out of Conservative seats, was clearly due to people finally preferring anything to a fifth Conservative victory.

But the difference made by Blair and the modernizers was nonetheless enormous. First, they have gone as far as they could in detaching the Labour Party from the old bases of "parliamentary socialism" — the trade unions, and Labour's inner-city heartlands — and instead concentrated frankly on promoting whatever political "product" seemed most adapted to the wishes of voters in the "target seats" of "middle England." Second, they accepted that globalized financial markets pre-empt macroeconomic management by national governments, and that growth depends on creating conditions attractive to investors; and they then went to great lengths (the adoption of monetarist economic policy, more independence for the Bank of England, etc.) to persuade capital of their sincerity, trying by all means possible (including the scrapping of the old "Clause IV") to replace the image of "tax and spend" with that of "a party of business." Third, with the exception of the windfall tax on utilities for work projects for unemployed young people, and reduced primary class sizes, they have tried their best to reduce socio-economic expectations to a bare minimum, engaging instead in a good deal of "symbolic politics" ("parenting," "moral values," "tough on crime," etc.). Finally, to be able

to do all this they have re-written the party constitution, formally disempowering the grass-roots activists, effectively disempowering the trade union leadership, and potentially disempowering stropky left-wing Labour back-benchers (through changes in the Parliamentary Party's standing orders.)

These changes have unquestionably been crucial to the scale of New Labour's victory, and we have no wish to belittle their historic achievement in definitively terminating the Thatcherite era. This Conservative Party may well take more than one parliament to overcome its unrepresentativeness and its Europhobia, and to seem trustworthy again to both "middle England" (not to mention middle Scotland and Wales), and big business.

But the hard fact remains that the disproportion between Blair's oft-repeated goal of "national renewal" and the means proposed (from a more representative council for the Bank of England, to compulsory school homework) is painfully large. The weaknesses of the British economy will not go away of their own accord, yet New Labour has ruled out the kind of "radical bourgeois" reforms that progressive economists like Will Hutton and John Wells have persuasively argued are necessary, fearing the opposition from vested interests they would inevitably provoke. Even New Labour's modest economic proposals, from tax reforms to the end of the assisted places scheme, will be rancorously misrepresented and attacked when the Tory tabloids have restocked on spleen, as will Scottish devolution and other constitutional reforms, not to mention the inevitable compromises in store on Europe, Northern Ireland and other controversial issues.

Nor is it clear that giving absolute priority to low inflation, and making a big point of not "playing politics" with public finances, will be rewarded in the long run, either by lasting business support for Labour, or by higher rates of investment, growth and employment. Gordon Brown's born-again fiscal rectitude leaves so little scope for redistributive spending, or the real improvements in education, health services, pensions and social services, that Labour's least advantaged supporters are hoping for (in spite of all the modernizers' efforts to lower their expectations), that considerable disenchantment seems unavoidable.

And as opposition rebuilds — and as accidents happen and mistakes are inevitably made — the costs of the disempowerment of the party's activists and the labour movement will have to be counted; it may have made possible the near-military discipline of the election campaign, but it also means that the party no longer has a nation-wide cadre of committed grass-roots activists seriously opposed by powerful interests. Over the next parliament, in other words, the narrowness of the terrain of democratic action that New Labour accepts as all that is practicable will gradually become painfully clear.

The optimism generated by New Labour's stunning victory should be tempered, then, by the recognition of the fact that its programme is set so frankly within the boundaries set by capital. Do people really suppose that capitalism's contradictions have disappeared? Is its indispensable need for growth ecologically sustain-

able? Do we really expect full employment to return; or — alternatively — can we foresee a new consensus on transferring a steadily growing share of the surplus to the support of the poor and the unemployed, so that the increasingly alienated and dangerous “relative surplus population” is re-integrated into “the community?” Has the secret been discovered which will prevent worsening world-wide inequalities from leading to more and more crime, violence and wars, as they always have in the past?

It is not entirely far-fetched to see a parallel between our situation and that of 1850. Then, national economic conditions did not yet make it possible for the workers to take power, as the socialist revolutionaries of 1848 had imagined. Today, the conditions do not yet exist for socialism to be achieved in the face of the power of global capitalism. Now, as then, there is an urgent need to study the current phase of capitalism and understand the new forms taken by its contradictions.

Analysing the contradictions of globalized capitalism and their political effects is not the same as constructing a renewed socialist project, even though the two tasks are intimately interconnected. We need to think through some fundamental issues that must be resolved in any conception of an alternative future to the one the neo-liberals are creating for us, including how far we accept the ideas of continued growth and consumerism. We also need to address ourselves to developing a new set of conditions governing capital flows that would once again allow governments to have a decisive say in their countries’ economic and social development. This will require new transnational alliances among progressive parties, which must be capable of generating a powerful groundswell of popular support for such control over capital, instead of focusing on assuring business of their support for the market as New Labour has done.

The defeat of the Labour new left’s attempt to transcend parliamentary socialism suggests that the way forward does not lie through transforming the Labour Party. This does not mean that progressive elements in it should not be supported, but supporting them should not be confused with the main task. New organizational forms must be developed, and a new conception of parliamentarism and its relation to extra-parliamentary politics needs to be worked out. It is not a question of parliamentarism versus extra-parliamentary struggle, but of what kind of parliamentary practice, complemented by what kind of non-parliamentary practices, are capable of moving us forward. Vital to this will be debate and collective thinking on how to involve ordinary citizens in a radical democratic transformation of the institutions of the state — a line of thought that has been virtually extinguished in the Labour Party since the defeat of the new left project.

The prospect for the emergence of new types of socialist organization depends on renewed popular mobilization on a scale which cannot be expected to emerge quickly. For behind New Labour’s electoral success lies the reality of the defeat inflicted on socialism, and major defeats take time to recover from. We need to be

ready to think long-term again. Not the least benefit of New Labour's electoral success, predicated on a resolute acceptance of the short-term as the horizon of the possible, may be to have reopened some space for socialists to work out how to act in the present in a way that does not undermine our capacity to build a different future.

BACKING AND FILLING: THE 1997 CANADIAN ELECTION

Reg Whitaker

The federal election of 1997 was no turning point in Canadian history. No election is likely to hold the potential of changing the fundamental direction of the economy and society, and certainly not the distribution of wealth and the class structure. Indeed, on these issues the spectrum of respectable opinion was if anything narrower than it has been for years.

Still, elections in Canada have recently gathered a portentous aura about them: great issues of nationhood and the political community have seemed at issue, from Free Trade in 1988 to the traditional party system in 1993 to the gathering storm of Québec separation in 1997. While the notion of democratic control of the *economy* has been receding from the grasp of voters, the *political* structures have come into real question. In this regard, 1997 was an important step in the consolidation of a new and still uncertain national party system. It was not at all as significant as the 1993 election that fundamentally realigned the party system. The voters in 1997 confirmed some of the changes ushered in by that transformative contest, amended others, and generally performed some backing and filling on the new political landscape post-1993.

1993 witnessed the dramatic national destruction of the Conservative party; its collapse in Québec was paralleled by a thrashing everywhere else — but for different reasons. In English-speaking Canada, the Conservatives suffered from the catastrophic unpopularity of Mulroney and a desire for revenge that easily survived Mulroney's own retirement. But above all the Tory collapse outside Québec can be attributed to its loss of the right-of-centre vote that had carried it to majority status nine years earlier. Some of this right-wing vote went to the Liberals, but much of it, at least west of the Ottawa River, went to the Reform party. Mulroneyism thus ended in disaster in both Québec and English Canada, and on the Tory ashes, two new parties arose.

1993 was not just about changing players. It was also about changing some of the rules of the political game. The demise of the Tories as a major party was also the demise of one of the two old-fashioned catch-all or "brokerage" parties, parties which were about winning the electoral game much more than they were about policy, or program, or principle. The Bloc Québécois (BQ) was a new kind of beast

in Ottawa, a party of principle so uninterested in power that its very *raison d'être* was to put its MPs out of a job by helping bring about the secession of Québec. The Reform party too was a party of principle; although certainly driven by a desire to gain power in Ottawa, it was more programmatic and ideological in its approach than the Tories had ever been. And the BQ and Reform together represented something else new in Ottawa: they both, in very different ways, had broken definitively with the National Unity consensus that had been unchallengeable gospel to all three older parties. The result was a parliament from 1993 to 1997 that was unlike any predecessor. Earlier parliaments had been rife with partisanship. This one was distinguished by a higher level of *ideological conflict*.

Of course the big winner in 1993 was actually the Liberals, hardly a model of the new politics. In that sense, nothing might seem to have changed, except the party name in government. Appearances, however, were misleading. First of all, the Liberals achieved a *majority government for the first time ever without a majority of seats in Québec*, where the BQ held a virtual monopoly in Francophone ridings. Instead, the Liberal regime was solidly anchored in a sweep of Ontario. The Liberals did have representation from all regions and all provinces, but Ontario was *their heart*. Second, with the change in the composition of the opposition, the Liberals, chameleon-like, changed their policy role from centre-left to centre-right. The decline of the NDP and the rise of Reform of course mirrored deeper changes taking place in the political economy and political culture. The Liberals had always taken their cues from the movements on the margins of the political mainstream, which had usually meant co-opting CCF-NDP policies at strategic moments. The Chrétien government, and particularly Paul Martin in the crucial Finance portfolio, quickly recognized that the new political dynamic was coming from the right and that this could happily reinforce the Liberals' golden opportunity to win back the solid support of capital, now that the Tories had committed suicide. Thus the spectacle of a succession of neo-liberal budgets being brought down by Martin while herding Reform MPs in front of him like human shields. Reform became the NDP of the 1990s, professing populist contempt for the Liberals while laying out their policy clothes to be picked up one by one and tried on by the government.

The 1997 election was in many ways a bizarre contest, by traditional standards. Instead of being contestants in the same electoral game, each party was in a sense playing its own game, with its own specific rules. Despite their difficulties, the Liberals were, at the end of the day, the only party trying to play the old game of brokerage politics, being all things to all people, or at least most things to most people — even to pretend, in the old sense, to be a truly *national* party. The opposition parties were each targeting narrower, niche markets.

The BQ, of course, does not even contest any but Francophone Québec votes. Reform barely exists east of the Ottawa River, and targeted the West and Ontario: with their infamous attack ad with a line drawn through Québec politicians, both sovereignists and federalist, they chose (realistically enough, if in questionable

taste) to play for anti-Québec votes directly. The PCs were dead in BC and most of the West and moribund in Ontario. Nonetheless, they vociferously proclaimed themselves to be a national party unlike Reform; this was code for sporting a Québec leader, but meant little else. In advocating a distinct society clause in the Constitution, the PCs signalled they were jettisoning right of centre voters in the West just as surely as reform was signalling its abandonment of Québec votes. Both Reform and the Tories were targeting the same niche market on the right, although sometimes emphasising different parts. It was a bitter struggle for the right, especially in Ontario, but it was not entirely a zero-sum contest: there were a great many 1993 Liberal voters who were targeted by both right-wing parties as being their natural supporters.

As for the NDP, they too had a niche market in mind. Indeed, alone of the opposition parties, they at least had the grace to concede from the outset that they had no hope of winning, and set their sights more modestly on regaining official party status. To accomplish this, they sought to recover enough of their traditional unionized working class supporters in areas where their votes could count locally: parts of BC, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario—and, with a Nova Scotia leader, certain areas of Atlantic Canada. The NDP's appeal did in a sense shift moderately leftward as they dropped the hitherto obligatory bows in the direction of fiscal responsibility *à la* Bob Rae (since they were not going to form a government, they did not really have to worry about the deficit). Instead they could concentrate on the complaints of working people at the receiving end of persistent high unemployment and neo-liberal cost-cutting. Since no other party paid the slightest attention to left-wing concerns, this seemed to open up a space for the NDP to exploit. Yet it must be said that there was very little of a positive or creative nature in the NDP campaign. Much of the time, they seemed to be mainly fighting defensive battles, protecting the tattered remnants of social programs, complaining about the onslaught of initiatives from the right.

The contest then was between one party attempting to mass market itself across the country, and four opposition parties each of which were targeting niche markets that, even if saturated, would fail to yield a majority or even a minority government. The only open question was whether it would be a Liberal majority or minority. None of the parties, save the lone and generally ignored voice of the NDP, was in any disagreement with the neo-liberal, zero deficit, global competitiveness, agenda. The BQ, which does draw upon considerable union support and participation, was only interested in flogging its sovereignty nostrum and was embarrassed into silence by the spectacle of its big brother, the Bouchard government in Québec City, directing its own Harris-style assault on the social sector. The televised leaders' debate symbolized the marginalisation of the left: Alexa McDonough occasionally got a word in edgewise, as it were, re unemployment, but the other leaders treated her much like an importunate stranger at a party who keeps trying to butt in on a private conversation and change the subject.

The economy should have been the Liberals' trump card. Setting Canada on a fast track to the elimination of the deficit (that Holy Grail of fiscal conservatism will almost certainly be reached by 1998 or 1999 at the very latest) was a policy triumph, and one that had earned the accolades of the international bond agencies and even the Fraser Institute. But credit for sound fiscal management could never quite push the scandal of persistent unemployment from the voters' consciousness. Despite the plaintive whines from government spokespersons that new jobs were being created at record rates (which may have been true, yet beside the point), many Canadians were deeply insecure about their economic futures, with good reason, and apprehensive about the impact of the deficit-reduction agenda on government's ability to soften the buffetings of the market and global competition. It turned out on election night that Atlantic Canada in particular had a very different take on the deficit story, being far more concerned with the negative impact of federal offloading of social programs. So the Liberals' economic trump card was misplayed — except perhaps in Ontario, where nothing the Liberals did could lose them support.

The Liberals, we should be reminded, have not achieved the successes they have by being stupid. With Justice Minister Allan Rock the front man, the Liberals fixed themselves to the progressive side on a number of issues that possessed high symbolism but low price tags: gun control and gay rights being the most high profile. A shrewd electoral calculation was made that while their stances on these issues might lose them support in rural areas and small towns, it would be a positive in large metropolitan areas, where social attitudes are generally liberal and where Bible-banging moralism sets off alarm bells. Gun control in particular was a useful lever against the opposition parties. The gun lobby worked hand-in-glove with Reform candidates across the country, and did have some impact in rural areas. The campaign failed however to elect a single Reform candidate in rural Ontario and probably had no impact in the rural ridings in the West, where Reform was already predominant. Yet Rock, who even had the nation's police chiefs on his side, gained credit in large cities, especially among women voters, for doing something about senseless violence. McDonough was particularly embarrassed on this issue, given the strength of the gun lobby in the NDP's Saskatchewan base (in the last parliament, more Reform than NDP MPs had actually voted in favour of gun control). Despite her upfront feminism on most issues, gun control reduced her to stammering obfuscation.

The most interesting battle was for the Right. Here the Liberals could watch with detached amusement as Reform and the Tories fought to the death. In the West, it was strictly no contest: Reform won hands down. In Québec and Atlantic Canada, the Tories under Charest had no effective Reform opposition. It was only in Ontario that the two pretenders had equal forces in the field and here it was like the battle of the Somme as the two armies beat each other senseless. At the end of the day, Liberals stepped over the corpses and into every seat in the province, except for a lone PC who took the seat of the infamous one-time Liberal Jag Bhaduria, and

ex-Liberal renegade John Nunziata who won as an independent sporting campaign posters virtually identical to official Liberal signs.

The battle of the right was thus won by Reform, but it was a pyrrhic victory. Preston Manning will now be the *de jure* leader of the official opposition, a title he already held *de facto* for English Canada. Reform consolidated its position in the West. It has not suffered the fate of some protest parties and disappeared after flaring up initially. This is a hard lesson for many in central Canada to grasp. Much of the media and the political elite in the other parties has consistently let wish-fulfilment get in the way of hard analysis when it comes to Reform. Given the Liberals' high-noon heist of their central plank of fiscal conservatism, Reform's survival and slight improvement through a second election is a major milestone on the way from a movement to an established party at the centre of the Canadian political system. Clearly there is much more to Reform than right-wing extremism or neo-liberal economics. The party's ability to convince Westerners that it is their best voice is important (in Alberta and BC it is widely seen as the "home team"). But "regionalism" in itself is an incomplete explanation. Reform's thrust of grass-roots activism and its anti-elitist program of democratic reform (free votes, referenda, recall, etc.) have clearly struck a deep chord in contemporary middle-class and even parts of working-class Canada. Reform has staked out a position as the principled opponent of the "special interests" diverting the taxpayers' dollars, and of identity politics, whether in their most powerful contemporary form as the Québec sovereignty movement or in the guise of the politics of gender, sexuality, or multiculturalism. "Political incorrectness" turns out to be a strong grass-roots movement in today's Canada and it is Reform that is riding the wave. This analysis is a source of irritation to the Left, which once claimed a monopoly on "democracy," but has lost ownership. Right-wing populism may be an ersatz brand of democracy, as left-wing critics argue, but to people grown cynical and mistrustful of government and indeed all large institutions, Reform is the only party that has put more democracy on offer, while the others — the NDP included — have delivered patronizing Meech-like lectures to the people on elite accommodation, and while in office have too often offered unedifying spectacles of patronage, corruption and the arrogance of power.

There was a deeply paradoxical quality to the way in which Reform won its advantage over the Tories. There was one clear "wedge" issue that Reform could use against the Tories, and the Liberals as well: national unity — more specifically, opposition to any distinct society clause as an answer to the sovereigntist challenge. The Tories were committed firmly under Jean Charest to the distinct society, as were the Liberals (although with less conviction). This issue was lethal to the Tories in the West and also served to slam the brakes on a rise in PC popularity in Ontario. In the latter province there were really two souls of conservatism: the old John Robarts-Bill Davis image of Ontario as statesman of Confederation, interpreting Québec to Canada and Canada to Québec; and the anti-Meech, anti-Charlottetown

school that was fed up with giving away the shop to separatists. Charest had the old school, Manning the new, but neither could predominate.

It must be said that Reform's tactics in advancing its agenda were effective in the short-run but fraught with longer-term dangers to a party seeking to establish itself as an alternative government. The infamous Québec attack ad served crudely but probably effectively to establish that Reform stood outside the hallowed national unity consensus that had underpinned the party system from Pearson and Trudeau in the 1960s right through to Mulroney and Chrétien in the 1990s. Besides commending them to a great many English Canadians who for a variety of reasons had never been bought into this consensus (from bilingualism through the distinct society), Reform's pinpointing of "Québec politicians" as the problem had considerable resonance in a country where there was already widespread disillusion with an elite accommodation politics that after thirty years of Québec-driven obsessions had only brought Québec closer than ever before to separation. It did have the effect of sending the other parties scurrying into postures of indignant self-righteousness with the unintended consequence of keeping the Reform-driven agenda at the forefront while revealing the weaknesses of Reform's critics. Charest, waxing pompous about Reform's "bigotry," refused pointblank to even countenance a "Plan B" to deal with a future Yes vote, while at the same time inexplicably arguing that a post-Yes vote period would be like a "black hole" (which Plan B is supposed to counteract by providing guidelines). McDonough, who had tried studiously to ignore the Québec issue altogether, went right off the deep end by accusing Manning of leading Canada into civil war, and then revealed her own complete misunderstanding of the basis of Québec sovereignty by declaring that the answer was "more jobs." The Liberals just rambled, as Liberals will, about how they had the situation well in hand if only people would stop talking about it and leave it to the experts (some experts!). In short, Reform had flushed out the opposition and the sight was not pretty.

That said, Reform may have done considerable harm to itself in the longer run by burning bridges to moderate Québec opinion, not to speak of moderate opinion in English Canada. Ironically, Reform's vision of a radical decentralization of powers to all provinces including Québec, is actually quite close to the Québec Liberal party's program. Yet Manning and his party have been indelibly painted as anti-Québec bigots. This may not hurt them in BC but it does in parts of Ontario, and does not help them in Atlantic Canada either, where people are deeply apprehensive about being cut adrift from the rest of Canada by separation and becoming an "East Pakistan." Reform's willingness to look at two tracks for Confederation, with or without Québec, is a welcome contribution to political realism but it is also playing with fire. This stance strengthens their hold on a part of English Canada, just as it erects barriers to advancement into other parts of English Canada, and certainly bars them altogether from Québec. And it throws

the whole question of the federal government's response to the next referendum call by the PQ into potential chaos. Reform has posed a very high-risk option.

The Conservatives ran a rather strange campaign. Hard-right young Tories had captured the party platform at the pre-election convention, saddling Jean Charest with a Mike Harris-style neo-con agenda with tax cuts at the centre. This was supposed to be the *quid* for the *quo* of a Harris endorsement that never came. There is no evidence that tax cuts are an election winner (ask Bob Dole) and it may well have secured the image of the Tories as irresponsible fiscal conservatives in the minds of right of centre voters, with the Liberals and the Reformers both tying major tax cuts to the prior disappearance of the deficit. PC strategists insisted that they were not battling for Reform votes but for Liberal votes, of which there were many more. Yet it was clearly *right-wing* Liberal voters they were targeting with their glitzy CD-Rom-delivered program, which produced a programmatic profile indistinguishable from one targeting Reform votes.

Yet as the media campaign unfolded, it was diffuseness and lack of policy content that characterised the Tory pitch more than its program. Ironically, even though they were pointed at one of this election's niche markets, they ended by running an old-style campaign emphasising the personal qualities of their leader while in practice several quite different localized regional campaigns went on undisturbed by national programmatic guidelines. Jean Charest clearly had an image edge with his youth, his glibness and his effortless command of the TV medium. Charest "won" the leaders' debate and Tory support floated upward in the polls. The temptation to exploit his "charisma" (a term that has lost all its original Weberian meaning at the hands of the spin doctors, and now signifies little more than the "sizzle" that sells the steak to impressionable consumers) was overwhelming, abetted no doubt by Charest's own grandiose sense of his political destiny. One Tory ad was positively eerie in its postmodern self-parody: shot in a contemporary high-tech office setting completely empty of any workers, it features Charest as the only human being, confidently striding toward the camera making his pitch. The viewer notices that the walls are decorated with pictures — all of Jean Charest! The effect is all the more vertiginous when we realise that the product Charest is pitching is Charest himself. As the campaign went on, Charest increasingly adopted the disconcerting habit of referring to himself in the third person; perhaps subconsciously he had come to realise that the pitchman was his own product.

All this was in vain. Nowhere west of the Ottawa River did the Charest sizzle convince voters to buy an invisible steak. In Atlantic Canada, Tory gains were paradoxical. Here the hard-right party platform was no more relevant than the image of the leader. Atlantic Canada was in full revolt against the impact of the neo-liberal economic agenda — precisely what the Tory platform promised more of — and while some voters in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick opted for the NDP whose policies actually matched their voters' expectations, even more in this

traditional two-party region opted to protest the Liberals by the simple and time-tested method of returning their seats to the Tories. The result is that Charest will come to Ottawa with a caucus dominated by MPs who see their mandate as protecting social spending and programs with regional effects like employment insurance and support for fishermen with vanished fish stocks.

Of all the parties, the only clear and unequivocal loser was the BQ. Not only did they lose their outlandish position as Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, but they lost votes and seats in the heartland of the sovereignty movement, and they lost a momentum that had previously driven the sovereignists from success to success (the 1993 federal breakthrough, the provincial victory of the PQ, the near-victory of the referendum). In popular vote terms, the BQ still held a plurality of the Québec vote, but they took only 46,000 more votes than the Liberals, a margin of only 1.2% over their deadly rivals (who held a huge lead in the Anglophone and Allophone vote). Part of the BQ's problems were internal, including disorganization, dissension, personality conflicts and a lacklustre leader. Behind these problems is the conundrum of a party so thoroughly devoted to an idea that it stands outside all the normal rules of politics. BQ MPs are not authentically representatives of their constituents in the everyday business of Parliament, rather they present themselves as representatives of the greater *idea* of the sovereignty *project*. They may act as ordinary MPs in trying to advance their constituents' interests, either collectively or individually, in the policy and administration of the federal government — indeed most have tried to do so, to the best of their abilities — but when they do so, they do so inauthentically, out of step with their own self-proclaimed larger historical role as facilitators of the end of federalism and the birth of an independent Québec. The PQ in Québec City can be both an embodiment of a historical project and a provincial government at one and the same time. There may be tensions between these two very different roles, but there is nothing inherently inauthentic about a provincial Québec government that is also a potential sovereign Québec government doing the everyday business of governing now, with an eye on transforming itself in the future. The BQ has no such obvious linkage between its historical mission and its institutional role. *The game within the game* played by the BQ in the 1997 election was to convince its potential electorate that this was not an election but a referendum on sovereignty. What the results showed is that a declining number of voters were willing to suspend disbelief.

No one should be under any illusion that the decline of the BQ in 1997 automatically translates into a decline in the sovereignist thrust, or that Lucien Bouchard is in major trouble over his next referendum. There is some declining interest in using Ottawa as a theatre for the sovereignty morality play, but the prospect for achieving a Yes mandate in Québec will follow its own rhythm. Nothing in this election result should set Ottawa minds at ease about Québec.

The NDP came out of the election frantically patting itself, and its leader, Alexa McDonough, on the back. Modest mission accomplished: the party returned to

official status, and even, by one seat (although not by popular vote) nosed out the Tories for fourth spot in the pecking order in the new parliamentary barnyard. The party's breakthrough into Atlantic Canada (a majority of seats in Nova Scotia and a startling foothold in New Brunswick — and Acadian New Brunswick to boot) was the basis for much euphoria. Yet if the motivation of Atlantic voters shifting to either of the two opposition parties was simply to "send a message" to the Liberals, and if the Liberals listen and respond with more dollars here and patched-up programs there (and with the disappearing deficit, they will have more room for regional sensitivity), the next election may produce considerable disappointment for the NDP.

Elsewhere the picture was mixed to poor. Here and there in the West, the NDP won back traditional seats it had lost in 1993. But Ontario was an unmitigated disaster, with not a single seat in the industrial heartland. Despite renewed union support, once solid blue-collar unionized areas failed to respond. In auto-producing Oshawa, for instance (once the seat of former NDP leader Ed Broadbent), the NDP finished third, for the second consecutive election thousands of votes behind the second place Reform candidate who garnered significant support from dissident members of the Canadian Auto Workers Union.

In short, the social democratic voice will be back in Ottawa, a bit louder than before, but hardly in a position to turn around a ship of state weighed down as it is with a heavy anchor pulling it so insistently to the right. And little will counteract the already prevalent tendency in the NDP to avoid creative new solutions to problems in favour of ritual reiteration of familiar refrains.

With no clear winners in the opposition ranks, and with the emphasis in media commentary on Liberal failure to fulfil their own expectations, was this a "losers' election?" Not quite. The Liberals, after all, *were* the winners. Jean Chrétien became the first Liberal PM since Louis St. Laurent in 1953 to win back-to-back majority governments, something not even Pierre Trudeau was able to accomplish. And despite setbacks, the Liberals remain the closest thing the next parliament will have to a *national* party. Besides sweeping Ontario, the Liberals hold the largest number of seats in three other provinces (Manitoba, PEI and Newfoundland) and they are the only party to hold a significant share of the popular vote in every region and every province, finishing either first or second in votes in eight of the ten provinces. In the West, they held on to all of their cabinet ministers, despite the Reform tide. And the opposition offers the mirror-image of the government's strengths: in the next Parliament, the Liberals will be able to pick their way through an opposition zoo. Voices of regional protest will be identified with this or that opposition party, while the Liberal government can sail above the fray, wrapping itself in the maple leaf and the national interest, not to speak of national unity. Better yet, the demise of the deficit will allow Liberal purse-strings to be relaxed. In some ways then, despite the severe bruising of the Québec referendum and despite the failure so far to turn around the economy in ways meaningful to ordinary Canadians

(as opposed to Bay Street and Wall Street), the Liberals can approach the next Parliament in a relatively upbeat mood. If Mr Chrétien can be persuaded to make a graceful exit sometime over the next four years, and hopefully before the next referendum, and if none of the opposition factions gel into a coherent national alternative, the Liberals may be poised to carry on their government party act well into the next century — assuming of course that Québec does not redraw the map.

All this is at the level of partisan politics. At a deeper level, there is no question that the 1997 election produced clear winners who were not even official contestants. Capital is laughing all the way to the bank. Some things never change.



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