

Requiem for the Rhinos?

by Nicholas Breyfogle

- Fund higher education by building taller schools;
- Re-introduce turtle racing as a gambling sport;
- Simplify U.S.-Canadian free trade by swapping "Frank Zappa for Pierre Berton, Kermit the Frog for Lorne Greene" and rewrite NAFTA to trade "British Columbia (where most people already own ponchos) for Ricardo Montalban and a 1974 Eldorado low-rider with a horn that plays Babaloo";
- A guaranteed Annual Orgasm;
- Repeal the law of gravity;
- Paint fishing boundaries in watercolor so that the fish would see it and stay inside Canadian territory;
- Turn the Bay of Fundy into a mall and parking lot "to give kids a place to hang out";
- Clear the deficit with American Express;
- And promise to break all campaign promises if elected.

This platform is hardly what one would expect from the fifth most popular party in Canadian elections of the 1980s and the short-lived front-runner in the 1988 U.S. presidential elections (for a few blissful weeks the Rhinos could claim the only officially declared candidate). But, the Rhinoceros Party has never been a usual party.

Founded in 1963 by the late Dr. Jacques Ferron, in the midst of the tumult of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec politics, Ferron strove to teach "the power of positive absurdity in the face of absolute idiocies." He considered the Rhinoceros the consummate politician: "a thick skinned, clumsy, stupid animal which loves to wallow in the mire but can move fast when it senses danger."

From their Montreal "hindquarters", the Rhinos have demonstrated an acute understanding that constitutional affairs and free trade negotiations are little more than ephemeral to the average Canadian. "What mystifies most is why hot dogs invariably come in packages of six or twelve, and the buns are in packages of eight or ten." And they remind us, with comforting homespun truths, that "in times like these, we must remember that there have always been times like these."

For years, the Rhinos have provided an escape from the "idiocies" of politics, and they have been rewarded with increasing electoral success (although, no Rhino has ever suffered what they consider to be the "ultimate humiliation—being elected"). In the 1980 Canadian elections, Rhinos moved from a fringe party to a successful fringe party. They picked up 111,000 votes nationally on 121 candidates, 1.01% of the total, while finishing ahead of both the Conservatives and the New Democrats in two Quebec ridings.

After skirmishing with Pierre Trudeau in his Quebec riding in 1980, Ferron passed the mantle of leadership ("Eminence of the Great Horn") on to current Rhino visionary, Cornelius I ("His Horniness"). Cornelius is a true Rhino, born

Canadian, but expatriated to the San Diego Zoo in exchange for a giraffe in 1981.

The Rhinos set their sights on the U.S. presidential elections in 1988 when the party sponsored former major league pitcher Bill (Spaceman) Lee. The Spaceman ran on a platform of "no butter, no guns (both can kill you)"; a best of seven series between the Sandinistas and the Contras to settle the political fate of Nicaragua; and an end to the designated-hitter rule.

Today, the Rhinos are running for their lives. In response to recent changes to the Canada Elections Act that require a cash deposit for candidates to contest a riding, they have announced that no Rhino candidates will contest the 1993 election. They have declared themselves in a state of "near-open rebellion", renamed the party the 'Pauvre' (poor) Parti Rhinoceros and have become almost deathly serious.

"We believe Section 81(1)(j) of the present Canada Elections Act, and... Bill C-144, given royal assent, May 6, 1993 - both of which require monetary deposits for registered candidates in the amounts of \$200 under the present Act, and \$1,000 under the amended Act - constitute an unfair economic means test and undemocratic user fee, which in our view, infringes on the rights of economically disadvantaged Canadians, contrary to the spirit and intent of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms," wrote former Rhino head Charlie McKenzie.

"This will force ordinary Canadians to rob banks in order to run for election in this country," said Brian (Godzilla) Salmi, Rhino coordinator for British Columbia. "And we just might do it.... [Bill C-114] will do to Canada's Rhinos what poachers will do to Africa's Rhinos. Namely, make us extinct."

Despite a good deal of unbounded panic and uncharacteristic seriousness, the Rhinos show brief flashes of handling the challenge with their past aplomb. "We were quite happy when our status was preserved by the status quo, but now, our quo has lost its status," read an official communique. Outside of mainstream tactics—challenging the amendment through the Chief Electoral Officer (who told them to go to the Courts), the Supreme Court (who told them to get a lawyer), the Canadian Human Rights Commission (who denied protection under the Human Rights Act), and the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (from whom they have received no response whatsoever)—the Rhinos sought protection under "the Endangered Species Act only to discover that Canada doesn't have an Endangered Species Act."

Over the years, the Rhinos have received much criticism for the fun that they poke at the political process. Many find that politics and the current economic troubles are too serious to be mocked. But—in the midst of the Mulroneys' selling furniture to the government at outrageous prices, distributing patronage like jelly beans, and the ramifications to democracy of Bill C-114—the Rhinos respond: "you know, ask yourself seriously who is the one making the mockery of the process here?" ●

