

The Rise of the Reform Party

The Changing Face of Canada

In the wake of the 1993 federal elections, the six-year-old Reform Party of Canada has emerged as a forceful presence in Canadian politics, determined to restructure the Canadian Confederation and to implement its ultra-conservative ideology. The radical proposals of this young party have found considerable electoral support; in the coming years it may succeed in shaking up the Canadian nation and its entire political system.

by Kristina Soutar

The 1993 federal election in Canada will long be remembered for the nation's overwhelming statement of discontent with traditional politics and its endorsement of fringe parties. October 25, Election Day, marked the worst defeat in history of a governing party in Canada: the Progressive Conservatives (PCs)—the party of Confederation and “Founding Father” Sir John A. Macdonald—lost 155 seats. Now, with only two seats, the Conservatives have lost their official status as a parliamentary party. (A minimum twelve seats are required to qualify for research funds or automatic recognition in parliament). The New Democratic Party (NDP), a smaller though consistent presence in the federal political arena, faces a similar fate with only eight seats. The benefactor of the Conservative debacle was the Liberal Party led by Jean Chretien. With 178 seats—nearly double what they previously held as Official Opposition—the Liberals sit firmly entrenched in power.

Many analysts have argued that the Liberals owe their astonishing majority to factors other than their own policies: they have the Conservatives to thank for self-destructing. Fringe parties new to the political landscape took up the lost PC votes which did not go to the Liberals. Remarkably, Chretien faces a House of Commons where his Liberals are the only party with national representation. The separatist Bloc Quebecois, whose political platform is built around the secessionist lobby in French Canada, took 54 seats in Quebec—two thirds of the province—to become Official Opposition.

And at 52 seats—up from one seat at dissolution, and now almost equal to the Bloc's strength—will sit Preston Manning's Calgary-based Reform Party. Firmly rooted in the regional discontent of the West, but with a national agenda (despite running no candidates in Quebec), the party claimed 24 of British Columbia's 32 seats, and an additional 23 from Alberta. Besides earning a decisive Western protest vote, the Reform Party has emerged as the strongest politically conser-

vative presence in Canada, and has capitalized on the demise of the PCs and the split of the right-wing vote. Reform support is growing: in populous Ontario, though it won only one seat to the Liberals' 98, Reform came second in 57 of the provinces 99 constituencies.

Unleashing a Political Whirlwind

Founded in 1987 as a populist Western protest party operating only in the four western provinces, the Reform Party entered the political mainstream in a time characterized by Canadians' growing discontent with politicians. In 1991, realizing that issues which concerned Westerners affected all of Canada, Reform decided to expand to a national level; it shed its motto “The West Wants In”, and turned its attention to addressing the problems of the Canadian nation as a whole.

The Reform Party's governing principle—ideologically far to the right—is that the government which governs least, governs best. Yet, Manning's vision for a “New Canada” also includes proposals to restructure power in Canada so that all provinces would be treated “equally”. In this marriage of regional concerns to conservatism lies the Reform ideology.

Though critics are skeptical about the simplicity and lack of sophistication in Reform's proposals, Preston Manning's success in the elections and his growing sup-



Preston Manning: “balanced federalism” and minimal government. [The Reform Party]

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port base indicate that his vision is one which is shared by many Canadians.

The 1993 Election: Reform Party Platforms

Many of the key issues in the 1993 election campaign centered around the contemporary concerns of Canadians that their country is in a decline. Unemployment, a mushrooming deficit of close to \$500 billion, a growing crime rate, a national unity crisis following a decade of failed constitutional reform attempts—the Reform Party offered a fresh response in all these areas.

The Deficit: Manning pledged to deal with the deficit in three years by implementing massive spending cuts. Among

and vowed to emphasize victims of crime. His proposals appealed to many who believe that the Canadian justice system is too soft on criminals. The Reform Party outlined plans to eliminate automatic parole for repeat offenders, deport non-citizens other than refugees for indictable offenses, and apply adult laws to repeat adolescent offenders.

Political Reform: One of the key elements of the Reform Party is its grassroots approach to politics. Manning proposed sweeping reforms to democratize the parliamentary process, including measures to ensure that MPs were directly accountable to their constituents or else could be recalled.

The Triple-E Senate—elected, effective and equal—is another key part of Manning's Western support base. It forms

The Changing Face of Canadian Politics

No. of Seats in Parliament	Liberal	B.Q.	Reform	N.D.P.	P.C.	Other
1988 Federal Election	82	---	---	43	170	0
1993 Dissolution of Parliament*	80	8	1	44	157	2
1993 Federal Election	178	54	52	8	2	1

* At dissolution in 1993, there were 3 vacant seats

the victims were foreign aid, direct subsidies to businesses, and—one of the most painful proposals to Canadians—old age security benefits of those other than the most needy. Other social programs Reform proposed to slash were unemployment insurance, provincial transfer payments and any government funding for day care.

Jobs: Rather than relying on job creation schemes, Manning put forth a solution which stems from his conservative ideology. The Reform Party believes that high taxes and a high deficit are what destroy jobs, and with these burdens reduced, the private sector would be able to function freely. The natural result: growth, jobs, prosperity.

Medicare: Under Reform leadership, Canada would decentralize medicare, thus allowing provinces to administer that service as they see fit—including the right to charge user fees. For a population that regards the health system as one of the cornerstones of Canada, this proposal frightens many into thinking that Canada would soon have an elitist, "Americanized" health system—one without universal good quality and equal access to all.

Law and Order: In terms of crime and punishment, Manning proposed to flex an iron fist,

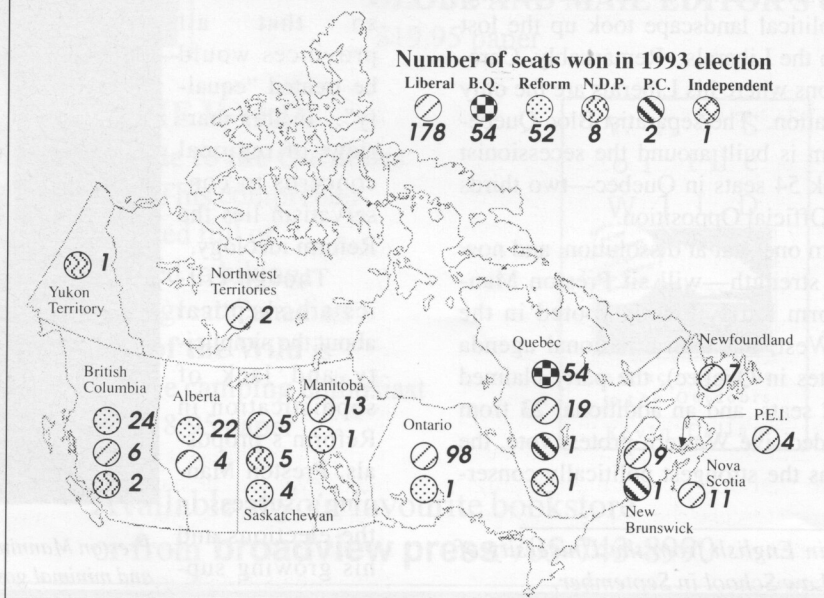
the basis of "balanced federalism": a nation built of ten equal provinces. Manning rejects definitions of Canada that work around the notion of two founding nations, or which run along demographic lines, neglecting the less populous West. By restructuring government so that the Commons represents people, and the Senate represents provinces (similar to the relationship between Congress and the Senate in the U.S.), the West would gain equality in the Confederation. This goal strikes a chord with many Westerners who feel they have a limited voice in the nation's policies.

The Reform Party came to life on the populist swell of Western discontent. But Preston Manning's theory of government non-involvement, fiscal conservatism and grassroots politics draws heavily on the influence of his father, Ernest Manning, a founder of the Social Credit Party in Alberta and premier for 25 years. The Social Credit government under Manning Sr. was responsible for the making of Alberta as a modern, urban society, and its ideology is often echoed in the younger Manning's political identity.

The Roots of Social Credit

The Social Credit Party in Alberta emerged in

A NATION DIVIDED: THE 1993 CANADIAN FEDERAL ELECTION



the middle of the Great Depression of the 1930s as a radical reform movement dedicated to the abolition of poverty in the midst of potential plenty. Its founding father was a Christian fundamentalist named William Aberhart—better known as Bible Bill, the radio evangelical Baptist preacher, and founder of the popular Calgary Bible Institute. In 1932, a personal loss suddenly made Aberhart vow to fight the abject poverty of people in his ailing province. He discovered the remedy in the economic reform theory of Social Credit pioneered by Scottish Engineer Clifford Douglas.

Though Douglas' theories were the result of years of study to understand how to measure the credit of a nation, Aberhart popularized Social Credit based only on Douglas' notions of Basic Dividend and Just Price. Basic Dividend was a set sum in credit which was to be distributed to every citizen of Alberta, in order to guarantee life's necessities. Just Price was a method of reducing prices in order to increase consumption to the level of production. Only when these two were equal would the total sale of goods cover the total cost of production.



William "Bible Bill" Aberhart: a recipe for "the abolition of poverty in the midst of potential plenty." [Provincial Archives of Alberta]

The Rise of Social Credit

When the widely popular Aberhart and his young assistant Ernest Manning began broadcasting Social Credit to the people of Alberta, it quickly caught fire. In the 1935 election the Socreds swept to power because of the idyllic promises they made to a destitute population—though they lacked technical details and knowledge about how those promises were to be implemented.

The province was already bankrupt, and Aberhart failed to distribute the Basic Dividend as the first months passed. Financial problems, the difficulties facing implementation of lofty principles, and internal party struggles characterized the Aberhart Socred government from the outset. Yet they managed to hold on to power through the 1940 election, at which point World War II began to absorb the Depression economy with increased employment and rising grain prices. With the death of Aberhart in 1943, Ernest Manning was chosen leader by the party caucus. At 34 he became the youngest premier in Canadian history.

The Transformation of Social Credit

With the Depression over, Aberhart dead, and the Socred Party rife with problems, the end seemed near. But Manning gave the party life by introducing a new enemy to replace that of poverty: socialism. "Big government" replaced the old foe "big bank". The business community, in light of Social Credit's new political slant, was quick to support it. In the 1944 election Manning regained lost ground and found himself with a new mandate.

To compliment his individualistic business politics, Manning introduced the Alberta Bill of Rights in 1946 which carried on the spirit of the Basic Dividend by guaranteeing education, medical care, and social assistance. He purged the cabinet of anti-semitic, racist and otherwise intolerant elements which had been brewing in some Socred circles.

Then, in 1947, oil was discovered, and for the next twenty years Manning's party coasted along on oil boom prosperity. Thousands of people immigrated and Alberta grew into a prosperous, urban, secularized society—far from the rural, Christian roots of the old Socreds. Doors opened to U.S. owned corporations who sent exploration crews, built roads, and employed Albertans in the process. By 1966 oil revenues formed one third of the money for provincial expenditures. Throughout these decades the government poured money into the province's education, transportation, and medical systems. Care for the elderly, housing plans—all of these Manning's rich government could easily afford. It was a time of development and expansion, and Manning built up the province while adhering to a conservative ideology favorable to the creation of individual wealth.

Though the government seemed infallible for decades, decline was inevitable. Infighting began to plague the party, and the Socreds of Ernest Manning grew old in office. In 1967 Tory Peter Lougheed, promising to revitalize Alberta, pulled much of Socred support from under their feet. Manning retired in 1968, and in 1974 the Conservatives took Alberta, ending the Socred era.

It was in these surroundings that Preston Manning, riding on today's prairie populist movement, developed his political principles of minimal government. He is clearly his father's son in his commitment to free enterprise and individualism. And at the moment the followers of the Reform Party are the trusting followers of Preston Manning, just as Socred followers put their faith first in Aberhart, then in the elder Manning to lead them.

And yet Preston Manning has gone much further than his father ever did: he has created a party which appeals to people everywhere, unlike the Socred movement which was narrowly rooted in the Depression era politics of the West. Manning now wields considerable power in parliament and views his



Ernest Manning: sound business principles.
[Provincial Archives of Alberta]

party as a national government in waiting. In the federal arena, Reform has inextricably linked the old populist conservatism with a vision to address the problems of Canadian national identity, and the integration of Canada's West into a new federal structure.

The problems of the West in Canadian Confederation have a long history in the gradual formation

of the nation. With the passing of the British North America Act in May, 1867, the federal Dominion of Canada was born, comprised of Quebec, Ontario, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Often described as a marriage of convenience, Confederation came to pass as a gentlemanly agreement in response to the immediate needs of the parties involved: the French-English impasse was relieved by the creation of provinces with separate powers, and the threat of American invasion was lessened. The constitutional document itself was moderate, and it did not incorporate any national aspirations or principles. The seeds for a modern national identity crisis were sown at the very birth of the nation.

The West in Confederation

When a united Canada was created, provisions were made for other territories to join Confederation so that one day a dominion could exist from coast to coast. The Prairie West represented important resources which, when harnessed, would be crucial for Canada's prosperity. At the outset, the Prairies entered Confederation as a sort of colonial possession of the federal government. British Columbia—vital to Confederation for economic and military reasons as the gateway to the Pacific—was the only western province to negotiate the terms of Confederation as an independent British colony.

Manitoba, accepted as a province in 1870, did not receive control over its crown land and resources until 1949; Ottawa retained these reigns of power so long for financial purposes. B.C. joined in 1871, one of the agreements being that the federal government would complete the transcontinental railway by 1881 (not actually done until 1885). Ottawa's policy of holding land "for the purposes of the Dominion" was applied to Alberta and Saskatchewan, who were granted provincial status after much difficulty in 1905.

The Sources of Western Discontent

The West has held many different grievances about its treatment within the Canadian Confederation. For the most part,

problems revolve around the fact that theirs is a resource oriented economy, which has been exploited by the bankers and manufacturers of Central Canada—the economic and demographic heart of the country.

Tariff Policies: Regional inequities and dissatisfaction began as early as 1879 with the National Policy implemented by Sir John A. Macdonald. The aim of the National Policy's tariff feature was to encourage manufacturers from Ontario and Quebec. For example, it placed a 20% tariff on farm equipment in order to penalize competing products from the United States and Britain. As a result, Western farmers, who depended on farming equipment, had to pay either high duties on imports or substantially higher prices for domestic products. Any Western opposition to the tariff policy met with formidable opposition from Central Canadian manufacturers, merchants and bankers supporting it. By the 1930s, worldwide trade wars and the Great Depression caused Canadian tariffs to rise by 50%. Only in the 1970s, after GATT negotiations, did agricultural tariff barriers begin to go down.

The West has argued that it has been forced by the realities of world trade to sell its agricultural products on very competitive world markets, while at the same time being forced by Ottawa to buy equipment in the higher-priced, uncompetitive domestic market plagued by tariffs. The populous East, home of the manufacturers, has always had the electoral clout to keep such policies in place.

The Railways: Canadian railway rates were another source of Western discontent. At the start of the 1880s, when the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) began freight operations, its rates were twice as high as the Grand Trunk Railway's rates in Central Canada for the same service. While the CPR's income and expenses were pooled nationwide, bushels of wheat nonetheless travelled in the Prairies for twice the price they did in Ontario and Quebec. Westerners deeply resented the fact that they were subsidizing the building and maintenance of the less used CPR line west of Sudbury. For the better part of the century they argued for the equalization of rail rates, and the process of rate equalization was long and slow.

The Pattern Continues: The National Energy Program

In 1980 the federal Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau proclaimed that with the National Energy Program (NEP) it would Canadianize the oil and gas industry, creating greater self-sufficiency in energy, and would reorganize energy industry ownership. A program designed and implemented by the Liberal Cabinet in distant Ottawa, the NEP was soundly condemned by western provinces.

Incentives in the form of grants were introduced to encourage development of oil reserves—but criteria for giving these grants favored areas in Canada's North, and off-shore sites. Until the introduction of the NEP, the energy industry was based primarily in Western Canada. The move of control to Ottawa was regarded as anti-Western. It was loathed even by those not involved in the industry for its blatant discrimination against the West, since it maintained domestic prices of oil and gas resources at half the world price.

The NEP drove exploration and drilling companies south of the border by discriminating against foreign-owned compa-

nies through tax incentives and prohibitions. The number of wells drilled dropped drastically, and thousands of jobs were lost in the drilling and service sectors of the energy industry. The perceived ill treatment of the West by Ottawa strengthened Westerners' feelings of alienation.

The reality of Canadian politics is that Quebec and Ontario determine elections and policies. But the West "wants in"—or else it may decide to embrace the separatist elements that want out. It wants equality, and this is why Preston Manning and the Reform Party are so appealing. Yet Manning's intention is not simply to put Westerners in power; his aim is to implement the national agenda of parliamentary reform in order to do away with the regional inequities that threaten to tear the country apart.

Constitutional Discord: The Identity of a Nation

Recent constitutional debates exemplify the extent to which Canadians and Canada lack a cohesive national identity. The paperwork for the creation of Canada was merely a brief shell of the country it would create, and lacked, among other things, a formula for amendment. It was not until 1982 that Canada's constitution "came home" from Britain. This occurred, despite Quebec's strong objections, after several hectic weeks of into-the-night bargaining by Pierre Trudeau, creating a constitution package that included the now controversial Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The unhappiness of Quebec over its exclusion

has played a major role in constitutional debate ever since.

Brian Mulroney's Meech Lake accord of 1987 was designed to convince Quebec to accept the Constitution. Much of the accord centered around the separation of federal and provincial powers: it provided an opt-out program for provinces who preferred to create their own programs compatible to national standards while receiving full funding, and it allowed provinces to provide lists of Senate nominees. A great deal of the controversy sparked by Meech centered around the issues involving Quebec: Quebec would be a "distinct society", and it was reserved three places on the bench of the Supreme Court of Canada. The West was fiercely anti-Meech: what is perceived as special demands by, and special treatment of, Quebec has not a sympathetic ear across the prairies and into the Rockies. The Reform Party has always stated very bluntly that it represents English Canada and is committed to countering French demands which so infuriate Westerners—and, increasingly, many other Canadians as well.

As the Prime Minister pleaded with the provincial premiers to accept the deal in the name of Canadian unity, the shaky foundation of Canada as a nation was exposed more clearly than ever. And so Meech Lake fell, unratified in two provinces, paving the way for two more years of Canadian constitutional debate.

Leaving behind the back room bargaining methods that angered Canadians already fed up with politicians, Mulroney ushered in a talking phase. The new Charlottetown accord was designed to take everybody into account—to write the constitution around the people. The result was a process which strove to meet the demands of every special interest group in Canada.

Endorsed in August of 1992 by all ten provinces, two territories and four aboriginal groups, the 60 clauses were presented to the nation. In the weeks leading up to a national referendum on the proposal, the accord was either publicly rejected or accepted by interest groups on the basis of what it

did, or, more often, what it did not, offer them. It was this bickering, and the lack of a comprehensive definition of Canada that ultimately caused the Canadian majority to reject the accord in the October, 1992 referendum.

The Charlottetown accord contained the contentious Canada Clause, which was intended to supply the poetry and references to national identity that were missing from the original Constitution Act. The agreement had complicated proposals for political reform that attempted to address the demands of both the

West for equality, and of Quebec for a special place as a founding nation. New guidelines for federal/provincial power divisions in the areas of immigration, labour-market development, culture, and regional development were established. The accord also worked out the basics of Native Canadian self-government.

The Reform Party vigorously campaigned against the accord. True to his party's ideals and his grassroots support, Manning rejected the deal as he rejects special status for any province—balanced federalism is his primary goal. Manning's stand on the constitutional issue and his fresh approach to politics gained him much support in the 1993 election campaign.

Criticisms and Challenges Facing the Reform Party

Reform's youth as a political party is a large hurdle Manning will have to overcome. Critics point out that Reform's



The Great Depression on the Prairies: ravaged crops and abject poverty.
[Provincial Archives of Alberta]



Demanding political action: Hunger March in Edmonton, 1932. [Provincial Archives of Alberta]

policies are theoretical and ideological, and the party must substantiate its proposals and show that they are workable.

Until now, "Reform" and "Manning" have been interchangeable words. Yet if the party is to succeed, it will have to stop being a one-man show; a broader base of people must be able to speak for Reform authoritatively. And many critics accurately point out that Reform's candidates are a very motley and volatile bunch. Already certain individuals have embarrassed the party with racist statements or ignorant ravings unfit for a national party which views itself as a government in waiting. The basic warning is that the Reform Party had better grow up fast, or else self-destruction could be imminent.

The most serious charge of intolerance—toward minorities, the needy, immigrants, alternative lifestyles—will have to be addressed. Many interpret Reform's proposed immigration policies, for example, (which would see numbers drastically reduced, and based on economic criteria) as having a hidden racist agenda. Reform's stated animosity towards multiculturalism as a government policy draws similar responses.

Manning's "New Canada" has been called the Canada of the white, privileged male. Indeed, as Manning crossed the country during his election campaign, the majority of Reform's supporters in fact turned out to be white, middle class males. In light of Manning's fervent belief in the literal truth of the Bible and his espousal of traditional families, another real concern is that a Reform government would quietly send women back into the domestic subservient roles of yesterday.

If Reform is indeed the national party it claims to be, it will have to create fiscal policies, as well as social ones, that do not frighten people into thinking that the social net of Canada will be taken out from under their feet. Manning and his party have a lot of work to do to inspire trust in their ideals.

A Simple Solution, A Complex Marriage of Ideals

In defense of his proposals to remove government funding from many sectors such as bilingualism and multiculturalism, Manning argues that he works from the notion of unconditional equality of all people: since the Reform Party is committed to this ideal, no minority or special interest group in Canada

should need or receive special support. One of the goals of the Reform Party is to create a Canada where people are individuals and Canadians—all defined the same way and with the same opportunities. This type of simplicity and purity of political dogma are what characterize the Reform Party, with its agenda made up of a list of basic principles.

One important Reform ideal is freedom from government and the consequent freedom to individuals that forms the basis of conservative ideology.

Another principle is Manning's envisioned grassroots political democracy: out goes the big, bureaucratic middleman of parliamentary procedures, thus making the democratic process of Canada truly democratic.

These goals are married to those which stem from Manning's regional base where the Western protest vote supplied him with much of his power.

Manning claims the Canada of two nations created at Confederation has failed, and he seeks to replace that with the "New Canada" built around his ideal of balanced federalism. Ultimately, an ideal Canada would be composed of equal provinces inhabited by equal citizens—Reform's stated goal is as simple as that.

It all seems so easy: unconditional equality needing no supporting action, individual freedom, grassroots democracy, and little government, which all add up to a united, fair, prosperous Canada. But as yet it is unclear whether this will work—whether a functioning political system can be built around this complex combination of basic principles.

In such a pivotal time for the politics of Canadian politics, and the future of the nation, the Reform Party is a force to watch. If Manning builds up his party and its support, and finds himself in office next term as he so confidently predicts, these musings may turn out to be more than a leisurely, distant look at the growth of a regionally based fringe party. ●

Suggestions for Further Reading

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