

## **THE CANADIAN FEDERAL ELECTION OF 1997**

*Michael Keating*

### **THE BACKGROUND**

The Canadian election of June 1997 was called early and without any persuasive reason, since Jean Chrétien's Liberals had a commanding majority and another year and a half of their mandate to go. It seems that Chrétien, eyeing his large lead in the opinion polls and the divided state of the opposition, could not resist the temptation, arguing rather unconvincingly that, while the legal term is five years, the conventional term is four, so that calling an election after only three and a half years was not really jumping the gun. The result was a salutary reminder of the dangers of throwing away a solid majority (in the same week Jacques Chirac gambled and lost in France). Chrétien returned to office, but with the slenderest of majorities, dependent massively on the Liberal presence in the province of Ontario.

Much discussion since has focused on the territorial dimension of the result, since it leaves a parliament polarized on regional lines, with the Reform Party dominant in the West, the Liberals in Ontario, the Bloc Québécois in Quebec, and the Conservatives and New Democratic Party (NDP) showing strongly in the Atlantic provinces. Closer examination, however, gives a less dramatic picture. The most radical changes had already taken place in the election of 1993. 1997 showed only marginal shifts in the popular vote (Figure 1), but this was greatly exaggerated by the first-past-the-post electoral system, which, given the four-party competition over most of the country, produces considerable distortions. With only 38 per cent of the popular vote, the Liberals were still able to form a majority government, with two and half times as many seats as their nearest rivals.

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Figure 1  
National vote share, 1988-97

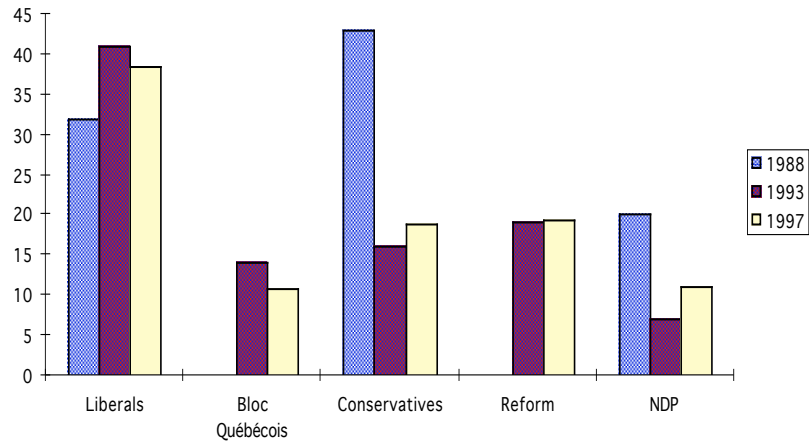
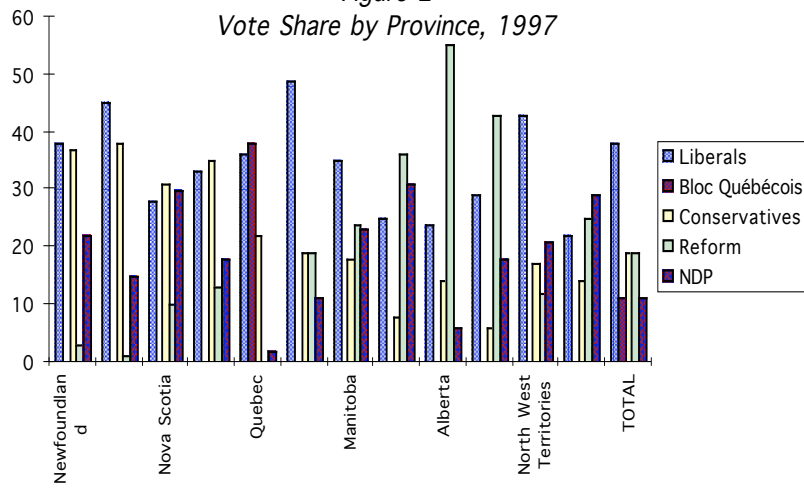


Figure 2  
Vote Share by Province, 1997



### *Scottish Affairs*

To understand this, we need to go back to the Conservative government of Brian Mulroney between 1983 and 1993, a coalition of traditional central Canadian Conservatives with westerners and Quebeckers, both alienated by the policies of the Trudeau Liberals. For the west, the main grievance was the National Energy Policy, which had forced them to sell their oil cheaply in the east. The Quebeckers were moderate nationalists, prepared to give renewed federalism a chance but antagonized by the failure of the Trudeau Liberals to make good on their pledge of change after the vote against sovereignty in the 1980 referendum. This uneasy coalition had sundered in the early 1990s, notably over Quebec's demand for recognition as a 'distinct society', which was anathema in much of the west, and the west's demand for a 'triple E' (equal, elected and effective) Senate to enhance their power in federal politics. The Meech Lake Accord, which recognized Quebec's distinct society, proved a difficult sell in the west, and the Charlottetown Accord, which followed its failure, went down to defeat in both regions. From the west, there arose the Reform Party, a right-wing populist formation led by Preston Manning, while in Quebec Lucien Bouchard, who had resigned from the Mulroney Cabinet just before the failure of Meech, formed the Bloc Québécois. Reform and the Bloc proved objective allies in the campaign against Charlottetown and have tended since then to feed off each other. In the 1993 federal election, the Conservatives collapsed, reduced to two seats, and Reform and the Bloc came to dominate their respective regions. The Bloc, having the edge in seats, became the official Opposition. In 1994 the nationalist Parti Québécois (PQ) came back to power provincially in Quebec and staged the 1995 referendum in which 'sovereignty' was rejected by the narrowest of margins (see **Scottish Affairs** no.14, winter 1996 and no.17, autumn 1996). This was followed by the resignation of PQ leader and Premier Jacques Parizeau and his replacement by Lucien Bouchard. The Bloc was led for a while by Michel Gautier but his lacklustre performance led to his replacement by Gilles Duceppe, who was to prove no more inspiring.

### **THE CAMPAIGN**

The 1997 election was not fought on the issue of who would form the government, since only the Liberals were in a position to do this. Before the campaign, riding high in the polls, they had even dreamed of extending their grip, especially in the west. Reform aimed to break out of its western redout into Ontario and eastern Canada, and to achieve the status of official Opposition. The Bloc Québécois sought to preserve its position, maintaining a nationalist presence in Ottawa while awaiting the next referendum on

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sovereignty. The Conservatives under Jean Charest hoped to regain official party status and had high hopes in Ontario. Although Charest had been identified with the moderate and socially-oriented tradition within the party, he opted to move strategically to the right, with a tax-cutting platform, to undercut Reform and benefit from the tide which had brought Michael Harris' provincial Conservatives to power in Ontario. The NDP under Alexa McDonagh also hoped to recover from the devastation of 1993 and to advance in its traditionally strong areas of the west and industrial Ontario. Traditional NDP themes of defending the welfare state and social spending were stressed, against the deficit-fighting or tax-cutting priorities of the other parties. Since the Bloc does not contest outwith Quebec and Reform does not contest seats in Quebec, there was a four-party pattern of competition in most parts of the country, forcing the contestants to make complex strategic choices. As their campaign progressed, Reform took a more stridently anti-Quebec line, with a controversial advert pointing to the dominance of Quebec personalities in national politics. Jacques Parizeau, making a foray into the campaign, hastened to agree with Manning that Canada should have no more prime ministers from Quebec! This anti-Quebec line, however well it plays in the west, goes down badly in Ontario, and led to some internal controversy in the Reform ranks.

### **THE RESULTS**

British Columbia and Alberta are Reform strongholds. Alberta's Conservative Premier Ralph Klein personally backed Charest's federal Conservatives, but many of his Cabinet and most of his voters opted for Reform, which carried 55 per cent of the vote and 24 of the province's 26 seats. In British Columbia, the unpopularity of the NDP provincial government reflected on the federal party and it failed to regain the position it had held in the 1980s, with only 18 per cent of the vote and 3 out of 34 seats. In Saskatchewan the NDP provincial government is relatively popular, and the party gained 31 per cent of the vote, but came second to Reform, with 36 per cent. Manitoba showed a more even pattern, with all four parties making a respectable showing and winning seats.

Ontario was the site of the bitterest fighting between Reform and the Conservatives, each seeking to establish itself as the principal party of the right in Canada's most populous province. Here, as in Alberta, a provincial Conservative government depended on voters who supported Reform federally, and Premier Harris had opted for neutrality in the national campaign. Supporters of the two parties disrupted each others' meetings and

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Charest declared, in response to pleas for a united right, that he would never be able to work with Reform. All this served the Liberals well, and they swept the province with 49 per cent of the vote and 101 of the 103 seats, the other two going to a dissident Liberal and a Conservative.

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**Table 1**  
**Seats by Province, 1997**

	Liberal	Reform	BQ	NDP	Con.	Ind.
Newfoundland	4	0	0	0	3	0
Prince Edward Island	4	0	0	0	0	0
Nova Scotia	0	0	0	6	5	0
New Brunswick	3	0	0	2	5	0
Quebec	26	0	44	0	5	0
Ontario	101	0	0	0	1	1
Manitoba	6	3	0	4	1	0
Saskatchewan	1	8	0	5	0	0
Alberta	2	24	0	0	0	0
British Columbia	6	25	0	3	0	0
North West Territories	2	0	0	0	0	0
Yukon	0	0	0	1	0	0
Total	155	60	44	21	20	1

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In Quebec, the disappointing performance of Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe was a factor in their loss of support. Charest (a local MP) was able to pick up seats for the Conservatives, and the Liberals also made some progress. It would be a mistake, however, to see this as a rejection of nationalist politics, since the polls continued to show, as they had since the 1995 referendum, that the population was divided almost evenly on the issue of sovereignty.

The Atlantic provinces saw the biggest shifts of support. This region suffered most severely in the recession of the early 1990s, unemployment is high, and it is hit hardest by reductions in federal transfer payments. There may also have been a reaction to the efforts by provincial Liberal governments to cut back on the entrenched traditions of patronage in the search for economy and efficiency in government. The NDP, running on the defence of social

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programmes and regional transfers, did very well despite the lack of an NDP tradition, aided by the local presence of party leader Alexa McDonagh who, standing federally for the first time, captured her own seat in Nova Scotia. The Conservatives also did well, reflecting in part a revival of provincial Conservatives across the region and the absence of a strong Reform presence to divided the right-wing vote.

### **THE IMPLICATIONS**

Canadian politics remains fractured by party and by region. Five parties now have official status in the House of Commons. The Liberals continue to tower over the rest but with two thirds of their seats in Ontario their national credentials are damaged. Yet as long as the right is divided, there is little prospect of an alternation in power and as long as the right-wing parties fight over Ontario there is little prospect of a united right, despite the efforts of Michael Harris to broker a deal. Reform is now the official Opposition but has little presence west of Manitoba and none at all in Quebec. If it sticks to its right-wing populist and anti-Quebec line, it may consolidate in the west but has little chance of growing beyond it. The NDP are now also in the unusual position of being a party of territorial defence, having benefited from the failures of the Liberal strategy in the Atlantic provinces. There is now a stronger federalist presence in Quebec and federalist parties were quick to point out that the nationalist option was in an electoral minority, but this depends on the unlikely assumption that all non-Bloc voters are federalist.

Canada is one of the few countries that still uses a single-ballot, first-past-the-post electoral system. Even more than in the United Kingdom, this is out of line with the political reality, distorting not only the party balance but also the regional one and benefiting the most polarizing of the parties, Reform and the Bloc Québécois. Reform and the Conservatives each gained 19 per cent of the vote, yet Reform won 60 seats and the Conservatives just 20. The Bloc and the NDP were both on 11 per cent of the vote, but the Bloc took 44 seats to the NDP's 21. Yet surprisingly, the issue of proportional representation has hardly been raised and is not the official policy of any party. If Canada is to prevent further regional polarization, this issue must surely be addressed.

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