

STEPPING STONE OR PYRRHIC VICTORY? REFORM AND THE REFERENDUM

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INTRODUCTION

While the outcome of the recent referendum raises interesting questions regarding the future of constitutional reform, at the same time it raises questions regarding the long-term political effects of the vote. Insofar as Canada's two major regionally-based parties—the Bloc Québécois and the Reform Party—opposed the deal, one might initially conclude that they will obtain substantial benefit from the negative result. In this paper, I want to examine the accuracy of this conclusion with respect to the Reform Party.

I will compare the Reform Party's role in mobilizing popular discontent towards both the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords, and in doing so, will suggest subtle but significant differences in Reform's performance in opposing each. In particular, I will suggest that, unlike its actions in the period leading up to the Meech Lake Accord, in the recent referendum campaign Reform engaged in a high risk strategy of polarization without obtaining genuine political benefits. Finally, I will suggest that, in the wake of the referendum vote, Reform is riding the whirlwind of political discontent no less than any other party, and that the party's fortunes are therefore similarly uncertain.

REFORM AND THE MEECH LAKE ACCORD

The Reform Party's founding convention in the spring of 1987 occurred only days before the signing of the Meech Lake Accord.¹ The juxtaposition of the two events was not entirely coincidental. Many Reformers, and western Canadians in general, opposed the Accord, viewing it as unacceptably giving special status to Québec.² In a more general sense, the Accord was viewed by many party supporters, including party leader Preston Manning, as continuing a Central Canadian preoccupation, dating back to the 1960s, with Québec's constitutional concerns to the detriment of other issues, including the legitimate political and economic aspirations of Canadians in other regions. In effect, Reform opposed the Meech Lake Accord, but not constitutional amendments *per se*. Indeed, a central plank in Reform's political platform was a call for constitutional change. Primary among proposed changes was the idea of an equal, elected, and effective (Triple E) Senate.³

However, Reform's opposition to the Accord was sidetracked in the 1988 election by the issue of free trade. Although polls taken in the spring of 1988 showed that the Accord had lost considerable support since its signing a year earlier,⁴ the polarization around the Free Trade Agreement largely negated discussion of this and other issues. This polarization, in turn, likely blunted Reform's electoral success. Although the party did reasonably well, taking 275,767

votes, or 7.3 percent of the all votes cast in the western provinces, it failed to elect a member.⁵

This situation changed shortly after the election upon the death of a Conservative MP. Running in the subsequent Beaver River by-election, the Reform Party candidate, Deborah Grey, gained a resounding victory. A key element in her victory was opposition to the Meech Lake Accord.⁶

By this time, opposition to the Meech Lake Accord was on the rise. A Gallup poll in January, 1989, showed that, nationally, 18 percent of Canadians opposed Meech Lake while 31 percent approved of the Accord.⁷ By June, opposition nationally had risen to 31 percent (versus 30 percent who supported the Accord). Opposition to the Accord was especially high in the regions of Reform Party support. The June survey showed that in BC, 48 percent opposed the Accord versus 15 percent who supported it, while, on the Prairies, 36 percent opposed the deal compared with 23 percent who supported it.⁸

Despite these results, it is important to note that neither Preston Manning nor Reform dwelt excessively on the Accord during the Spring and Summer of 1989. That is, whatever opposition to the Accord was growing throughout the West does not seem to have been unduly fomented by the party or its leadership. Rather, the party appears to have treated the Accord, and constitutional matters in general, as only one of several issues that needed to be addressed.

It was not until Reform's Edmonton convention in October, 1989 that Manning shifted opposition to the Meech Lake Accord to the centre of the party platform. In his keynote address to that convention, Manning made his most strident attack, to that time, upon the Accord and Québec's desire for "distinct society status" within Canada:

Either all Canadians, including the people of Québec, make a clear commitment to Canada as one nation, or Québec and the rest of Canada should explore whether there exists a better but more separate relationship between the two.... Our clear preference is for a united Canada in which Québec is prosperous and culturally secure.... If, however, we continue to make unacceptable constitutional, economic and linguistic concessions to Québec, at the expense of the rest of Canada, it is those concessions themselves which will tear the country apart.⁹

Thereafter, Reform called for the withdrawal of the Accord based upon several perceived flaws, among them "the top-down,

closed-door approach to constitution making,” “the rigid amending formula,” the Accord’s “lack of substantial assurances that real progress would be made” regarding Senate reform, and the “distinct society” clause.¹⁰

Manning’s speech received front-page coverage and propelled him, and the party, to the centre of the national debate that ensued throughout that winter and the spring of 1990. Because the traditional political parties had supported the Accord, Reform was able to “stake out” an independent position that, moreover, coincided with growing popular opposition to the Accord. What was the effect of Reform’s opposition to the Accord upon the party’s political support?

Correlation does not, of course, prove causation. Nonetheless, Gallup polls conducted in February, March, April, and May, 1990 showed a steady slippage in support for the Meech Lake Accord.¹¹ During this same period, the Reform Party gained one percentage point each month in national support.¹² In June, 1990, the month Meech Lake went down to defeat, Reform stood at seven percent support nationally, 25 percent on the Prairies and 16 percent in British Columbia.¹³

Within months, Canada’s body politic was riddled with a series of other crises, notably Oka and the onset of a grinding recession. Reform, too, faced challenges. At the party’s convention in April of 1991, Reform moved to become a national party, the slogan “The West wants in” becoming only a faint memory. It was the party’s high-water mark. That month, Reform reached 16 percent in the polls, 43 percent on the Prairies.¹⁴ But with growth also came problems.

Throughout late 1991 and early 1992, a series of reports linked extremist, even racist, elements to the party. A well-publicized attempt at corporate fund-raising fell short of its goal. The party was further embarrassed by leaked memos that seemed to hint of political dirty tricks. Finally, the party was also buffeted by a series of resignations by members claiming that Manning and the Calgary head office were increasingly acting in an authoritarian manner.

Meanwhile, the constitutional train kept moving. Spicer, Bélanger-Campeau, Allaire, Beaudoin-Dobbie: during the two years following the failure of the Meech Lake Accord, numerous hearings were held and reports produced, each attempting to make sense of the myriad visions of Canada held by its citizens. Finally, in August, 1992, Prime Minister Mulroney and the premiers announced that they had concluded a deal on constitutional reform that would now be put to the Canadian people for ratification.

For the Reform Party, the announcement of a constitutional referendum could not have come at a better time. Since 1990, the party had steadily lost support in the national polls, and now stood at only 11 percent. Even in BC and Alberta, the party trailed behind the Liberals and NDP.¹⁵ As the referendum debate got under way, some party supporters wondered if Meech Lake II — as they quickly dubbed the Charlottetown Accord — could rekindle the party’s sagging fortunes.

REFORM AND THE CHARLOTTETOWN ACCORD

Within days of the August 28 agreement, the opposing sides in the debate began to crystallize. Like Meech Lake, the contours of both support and opposition to the Charlottetown Accord defy simple political analysis, but it is perhaps worthwhile to name some of the major actors on either side.

The Accord was, of course, supported by the elected political elite who had signed it, although during the course of the referendum some appeared more willing than others to reiterate this support. To this support was added that of the federal Liberals and NDP, and most provincial opposition parties. Influential former politicians, such as Peter Lougheed and William Davis, also supported the agreement, as did much of Canada’s business and financial establishment, led notably by the Business Council on National Issues and the Royal Bank. The YES side also received endorsements from some environmentalists (for example the Green Party), some non-native ethnic groups, and various leaders in the cultural community, such as June Callwood and Pierre Berton.

The NO side presented a more variegated group. The opposition of Parti Québécois leader Jacques Parizeau and Bloc Québécois leader Lucien Bouchard was expected, as might well have been that of former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. Equally, political opposition from the opposition Liberals in Manitoba and BC and the CoR party in New Brunswick might have been anticipated. Less so was that of the Status Indian Chiefs in the Assembly of First Nations, who turned against the agreement signed by their leader, Ovide Mercredi. Also surprising to some was the opposition of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women. And while left-wing intellectuals, such as Phillip Resnick, urged rejection of the Accord, so also did several right-wing organizations, such as the Northern Foundation and the National Citizens’ Coalition.

Reform’s position on the Charlottetown Accord proved to be equally complex. While the party’s populist image required that it get a “reading” as to its members’ opinions on the issue, prominent members within the party’s executive were urging various positions based on largely political motives. For example, at least one member of the party’s national executive, Richard Anderson, is reported to have urged Manning to support the YES side, because a) the Accord would probably pass, at least in English-speaking Canada; and b) it wasn’t altogether demonstrably a bad deal and, indeed, did contain provisions for a substantially reformed if not Triple E Senate. On the other side, some party insiders urged Manning to support the NO side, because a) the agreement might not pass; b) opposing the agreement, no matter the referendum outcome, would solidify Reform’s right-wing constituency; and c) because the deal was not demonstrably good enough.¹⁶

On September 10th, Manning announced the party’s decision: Reform would oppose the Charlottetown Accord. Manning would later state four reasons for Reform’s opposition. First, the Accord did not, in the party’s view, resolve the sovereigntist threat in Québec. Second, it further divided Canadians “into such categories as French-Canadian, English-Canadian, aboriginal-Canadian, and other Canadians, rather than advancing equality of all Canadians.”

Third, the agreement weakened "a reformed Senate by allowing it to be overridden by an enlarged House of Commons on all subjects other than French language and culture, and perhaps natural resource taxation." And fourth, because it gave every province a veto over future institutional changes, it made future reform of the Senate, House of Commons, and Supreme Court "virtually impossible."¹⁷

Unlike its somewhat peripheral position in opposing the Meech Lake Accord, Reform's opposition to the Charlottetown Accord placed the political spotlight directly upon the party. The heat of that spotlight somewhat tarnished Reform's image. For starters, the days following Manning's announcement of the party's decision brought complaints from some party members that the decision had been hastily made by Reform's executive without listening to the people. Indeed, some members complained that they had only received their ballots on the day the decision was announced.¹⁸ Later reports that Manning had considered supporting the deal, but changed his mind after receiving advice from the party's American pollster, further damaged Reform's populist image.¹⁹

Reform's image of honesty and integrity slid further as the campaign proceeded. Early on, Manning urged his followers not to attack personalities or any part of the country in opposing the deal.²⁰ Yet, mid-way through the referendum campaign, Reform launched a series of television ads and speeches in which the Charlottetown Accord was referred to as "the Mulroney deal." This rather transparent attempt to render the agreement guilty by association with an unpopular leader was condemned by many people, even within the party.²¹

Manning may also have lost some credibility in suggesting that the Accord, if passed, would hurt the Canadian economy.²² The assertion seemed as out of place as similar hyperbolic threats made by the Accord's supporters warning of economic disaster if it was defeated.

In the end, the NO side won, of course. The Charlottetown Accord went down to defeat in six provinces, including all of the western provinces, and the Yukon. Nationally, 54 percent of Canadians voted against the Accord.²³ The question remained: what effect would the referendum results have upon Reform Party support?

REFORM'S UNCERTAIN FUTURE

As we have seen, Reform received an initial "bounce" following the failure of the Meech Lake Accord. Within two years, however, this support had levelled off and was in actual decline when the referendum of 1992 came along. Would the referendum results bring Reform renewed political support?

Those believing that the referendum result would politically benefit Reform claimed three reasons for their contention:

1. If you want to be elected, you must be different from your opponent. By positioning itself on the NO side, Reform distin-

guished itself from the other leading political contenders in English-speaking Canada.

2. By correctly "reading" the mood of the electorate, Reform was able to align itself with the winning side in the referendum, thereby gaining in public credibility and support. A corollary of this is that the other parties, as a result of supporting the losing side, lost credibility and support.

3. The referendum result particularly damaged the already embattled governing Tories. To the extent that the majority of Reformers were, at one time, Conservatives, the Reform Party constitutes a natural "home" for those fed-up with the Mulroney government.

Within days, however, of the referendum, these assumptions were thrown for a loop by an Angus Reid poll showing that the Reform Party had risen only marginally, to 13 percent of the national vote. More damaging was the poll's finding of a rise in Preston Manning's disapproval rating among voters from 34 to 44 percent.²⁴ Finally, even the marginal gain in national support vanished the following month when a Gallup poll showed Reform once again at 11 percent.²⁵ What had gone wrong? Despite apparently favourable conditions, at least two factors appear particularly salient in negating any potential gains for Reform resulting from the referendum vote:

1. Unlike the situation with the vastly more disliked Meech Lake Accord, public opinion on the Charlottetown Accord was mixed. At least some Reform members voted YES, while many non-Reformers voted NO. Hence, Reform was unable to stake out an unambiguously "winning" position.

2. The party's head office was itself riven with conflict over the party's decision to oppose the agreement.²⁶ These divisions were exacerbated by Reform's performance during the referendum, a performance that also damaged the party's greatest asset: Preston Manning's credibility. Immediately following the referendum vote, and apparently linked to these internal conflicts, Reform was stunned by the departures of several key party insiders, including communications manager Laurie Watson, speech writer George Koch, and policy director Tom Flanagan.²⁷

In short, the referendum debate damaged existing support for the Reform Party while gaining few new supporters and, indeed, perhaps even harming Reform's credibility among potential supporters who had previously viewed the party as less politically motivated than other parties. In effect, Reform won the referendum battle, but may have lost the political war. Where does the referendum vote now leave the party?

CONCLUSION

Throughout 1989 and 1990, the Reform Party by and large rode the political coattails of general discontent accompanying the Meech Lake Accord. Under Preston Manning's tutelage, Reform pursued a low-risk strategy in opposing the Accord that, moreover, reinforced perceptions of the party as an otherwise politically

disinterested and honest representative of the people. By contrast, Reform's hard-line position opposing the Charlottetown Accord involved considerably more risk insofar as the party was placed at the center of the debate. In the end, Reform's performance during the referendum reaped the disfavour of those put off by either the party's position, strategy, or tactics. At the same time, the party received few, if any, political benefits from its stance.

In the short term, the internal conflicts and damage to the party's public image resulting from the referendum campaign may abate. More problematic for the party, however, may be certain long term effects of the referendum. First, the mere holding of the referendum, combined with general public fatigue, has sidelined the Constitution as a major plank in Reform's political platform.²⁸ Second, Reform also expended considerable scarce financial and other resources in waging the NO campaign, even while alienating many in the business community whom Reform had hoped to win to its side.²⁹

Finally, Reform may be harmed by a third factor: voter unrest. Popular forces once unleashed are not easily contained. Since the party's inception, and certainly throughout the referendum campaign, Reform has attempted to run as the consummate outsider, the "non-political" political party. This was the essence of the inverted logic that Manning conveyed to voters during the referendum when he said: "If you vote YES, you are following the politicians. If you vote NO, you will be leading them"³⁰ implying that he was not a politician. In this season of political discontent, however, there is no safe haven, as shown by one ironical result from the referendum: Although the Charlottetown Accord was passed in only one Alberta riding, that riding was the one in which Preston Manning will be running in the next federal election.³¹

Trevor Harrison has recently completed his doctoral thesis in Sociology, University of Alberta, dealing with the Reform Party, and will be convocating in the Spring of 1993.

1. For a general history of the party, see M. Dobbin, *Preston Manning and the Reform Party* (Toronto: Lorimer and Company Ltd., 1991); and S. Sharpe and D. Braid, *Storming Babylon. Preston Manning and the Rise of the Reform Party* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1992).

2. See, for example, F. Winspear, *Out of My Mind* (Victoria: Morriss Printing Company Ltd.) at 188.

3. See P. Manning, *The New Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan Canada, 1992).

4. *Gallup Poll* (28 April 1988).

5. *Report of the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada on the 34th General Election* (Ottawa: Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, 1988).

6. Manning, *supra* note 3.

7. *Gallup Poll* (16 January 1989).

8. *Gallup Poll* (22 June 1989).

9. Quoted in Manning, *supra* note 3 at 223-24.

10. *Ibid.* at 239.

11. *Gallup Polls* (8 March, 24 March, 26 April, and 18 May 1990).

12. *Gallup Polls* (22 February, 22 March, 19 April, and 17 May 1990).

13. *Gallup Poll* (28 June 1990).

14. *Gallup Poll* (25 April 1991).

15. *Gallup Poll* (13 August 1992).

16. *The [Toronto] Globe and Mail* (24 October 1992) A5.

17. *The Edmonton Journal* (22 October 1992) A4.

18. *The St. Albert Gazette* (26 September 1992) 6.

19. *The [Toronto] Globe and Mail* (24 October 1992) A5.

20. *The Edmonton Journal* (2 October 1992) A3.

21. See analysis by Chris Cobb in *The Edmonton Journal* (16 October 1992) A3; and the apologetic comments of Reform's director of communications, Laurie Watson, in *The Edmonton Journal* (24 October 1992) A4.

22. *The Edmonton Journal* (9 October 1992) A3.

23. Results reported in *The Edmonton Journal* (27 October 1992) A1.

24. See Norm Ovenden's column in *The Edmonton Journal* (14 November 1992) G1.

25. *The Edmonton Journal* (4 December 1992) A12.

26. See, for example, *The Edmonton Journal* (26 October 1992) A3.

27. *The Edmonton Journal* (5 November 1992) A3.

28. Prior to his departure from the party, Reform's policy director, Tom Flanagan, stated that, because of the referendum: "We've now got to put the constitution aside." Quoted in *The Edmonton Journal* (24 October 1992) B8.

29. For example, both Jim Gray, co-founder and vice-president of Hunter Oil, a long-time Reform supporter, and Elmer Brooker, former president of the Edmonton Chamber of Commerce, broke with the party during the referendum. *The Edmonton Journal* (26 October 1992) A3 also relates Reform's financial troubles to the referendum, particularly the drying up of corporate funding.

30. *The Edmonton Journal* (6 October 1992) A3.

31. *The Edmonton Journal* (28 October 1992) A4.

VISITING SPEAKER

Stephen Elkin

Department of Government and Politics
University of Maryland

"Constituting Republican Regimes"

Friday, March 12th, 1993

12:00 noon

Faculty Lounge, Faculty of Law
University of Alberta