

Our benign dictatorship

Stephen Harper and Tom Flanagan

Canadians will be going to the polls this year, with the Liberals seemingly headed for a second majority government. Most political pundits credit the use of clever strategies by the Liberals, saying they've moved to the right to rob Reform of the deficit issue while keeping their image as guardians of medicare and defenders of the social safety net.

Whether the Liberal strategy succeeds in the next federal election will be revealed soon enough. But those who view a second Liberal majority as a momentary opportunistic success, or as the tit for the tat of two consecutive Mulroney governments, profoundly misunderstand history. The Liberals and the Conservatives don't alternate in their control of the Canadian Parliament. For a hundred years since 1896, Liberal government has been the rule, their opposition habitually weak, and alternative governments short-lived.

Although we like to think of ourselves as living in a mature democracy, we live, instead, in something little better than a benign dictatorship, not under a strict one-party rule, but under a one-party-plus system beset by the factionalism, regionalism and cronyism that accompany any such system. Our parliamentary government creates a concentrated power structure out of step with other aspects of society. For Canadian democracy to mature, Canadian citizens must face these facts, as citizens in other countries have, and update our political structures to reflect the diverse political aspirations of our diverse communities.

Winds of Change

Conservatives tried an update. In May 1996, the Winds of Change conference organized by columnists David Frum and Ezra Levant took place in Calgary. It assembled an array of conservative activists, journalists, politicians and opinion leaders from across the country, many of whom are now creating a more permanent organization of conservative thinkers. But in its prime objective — to bring Reform and the federal Progressive Conservatives together — it had no impact whatsoever.

With the Bloc Quebecois attracting former PC voters in Quebec, and the PCs and the Reform party elsewhere dividing the conservative vote, the Liberal party appears headed for a long period of hegemony in Ottawa. It commands the support of over half of Canadian voters in public opinion surveys, while four opposition parties scrap over the rest.

Outside Parliament, however, Canadian conservatism is at its strongest level in many years. The oldest conservative institutions — the National Citizens' Coalition, the Fraser Institute, Alberta Report and its sister magazines — have been joined by new research institutes, mass organizations and publishing houses. The Donner Canadian Foundation, with real money to spend, has accelerated the growth of a conservative intellectual network.

In the media, conservative columnists are multiplying “like zebra mussels,” as Toronto Star columnist Richard Gwyn put it. Conrad Black has recently assumed control of the Southam chain of newspapers, including most of Canada’s large metropolitan dailies. Those papers, monolithically liberal and feminist under previous management, are quickly becoming more pluralistic, with a strong representation of conservative voices.

Public policy reflects the growing conservatism of public opinion. Canada is not the same country it was 10 years ago. Almost everyone in public life now takes balanced budgets, tax reduction, free trade, privatization of public enterprise and targeting of social welfare programs for granted, while critics on the left bemoan their loss of influence.

Not very long ago, the age of political conservatism also seemed to have dawned in Canada. In 1984, the Progressive Conservative party, led by Brian Mulroney, won over disparate groups, winning the election overwhelmingly — 50 per cent of the popular vote and 75 per cent of the seats in the House of Commons. Mulroney also won a reduced, but still solid, majority in 1988. His breakthrough among Quebec’s francophone voters, which had eluded the Progressive Conservative party for most of this century, underlay these victories. It took 58 of 75 Quebec seats in 1984 and 63 in 1988, compared with only one in 1980.

But the grand coalition fell apart as quickly as it was formed. Across a wide range of issues, Mulroney disillusioned his voters. In the West, the Reform party attracted the allegiance of conservative voters, once the most loyal of PC supporters. In Quebec, the new Bloc Québécois captured the majority of the francophone vote. In the 1993 federal election, Reform won 52 seats, the Bloc 54 and the PCs only 2. The huge disparity in seats stemmed from the first-past-the-post electoral system; the PCs got 16 per cent of the popular vote, as compared with 14 per cent for the Bloc and 19 per cent for Reform.

The Mulroney coalition had shattered into its three constituent parts: a populist and strongly conservative element, most numerous in Alberta and British Columbia but also present in Saskatchewan and Manitoba as well as rural and suburban Ontario; a francophone nationalist element in Quebec; and a centrist, Tory element scattered across the country, particularly in high-income urban areas and in some parts of Atlantic Canada. The differences among these elements are illustrated nearby.

Reform supporter, in addition to being the Conservative on economic and social matters, have a populist mistrust of government and view Quebec’s demands negatively. Bloc supporters are all over the map on social and economic issues. Like Reformers, they mistrust government, but their devotion to Quebec really sets them apart. PC voters more resemble the Liberals than Reform on social and cultural issues; in fact, they are often to the left of the Liberals. However, they are closer to Reform on economic and fiscal issues.

Little has changed since 1993. In a poll last September, Reform dipped to 12 per cent while the Progressive Conservatives rose to their post-election high of 17 per cent, but even that improvement (since wiped out) would have implied no great recovery. Because their votes are geographically scattered, PCs could get 17 per cent of the national vote and elect only a handful of MPs, perhaps none at all. At these levels of popular support, Reform would also fare poorly; but because its support is concentrated in Alberta and British Columbia, Reform would elect enough members to remain a

recognized party in the House of Commons. Meanwhile, Bloc Québécois support among francophone voters continues at more or less the same level. It could lose a few contests to the Liberals in the next election but will probably hold onto the majority of Quebec seats. The three fragments of the Mulroney coalition will stay in the game for the foreseeable future. Reform has enough of a territorial base to elect members. The Bloc will thrive as long as the issue of separation polarizes Quebec politics. And the Progressive Conservatives have enough money, activists and covert support from provincial Conservative parties to ensure that they will not quickly fade away.

Forestalling a second Liberal century

Canada may well remain something near a benign dictatorship. In 1995, one of us (Harper) warned that Canada might enter a one-party-plus phase, with the Liberals the only broadly based party, and the other parties representing more narrow regional, ethnic or ideological constituencies. Beneath the textbook label of having a two-party-plus system of government (the Liberals and the PCs, plus the NDP), Canada has long been moving away from democracy.

A two-party alignment of Conservatives and Liberals emerged quickly after Confederation in 1867 but began to break up in the watershed election of 1911. In that year, the Quebec journalist Henri Bourassa mobilized a new francophone voting bloc — autonomists who supported Robert Borden's Conservative government, but only conditionally. Borden lost the francophone vote entirely in the wartime election of 1917, yet still won handsomely by forming an alliance — the Union government — with the many Liberals who supported wartime conscription. That alliance proved temporary, and in 1921 many of those Liberals, who, unlike the Conservatives, advocated free trade with the United States, went on to found the short-lived Progressive party. Ever since 1921, Canada has had a multiparty system. Parties have come and gone, but not these five components to the system:

A Liberal party with a national coalition capable of governing. At times in the 1970s and 1980s the Liberals were virtually shut out of the West, as they are today in francophone Quebec, but they have usually maintained appreciable strength in all parts of the country. In winning 14 of 22 elections since 1921, they have never been out of office for more than nine years.

A Conservative or Progressive Conservative party claiming a national base, but in fact coming to power only in exceptional circumstances and then governing only for short periods of time. The Conservatives won in 1930 in the depths of the Depression but were thrown out after one term. Over two decades later, in 1957, John Diefenbaker brought them back to power for just six years. Again, they were out of office for over two decades (ignoring Joe Clark's 10-month minority government of 1979). And we have already seen what happened to them after Mulroney's nine years.

A social democratic party claiming to be national but with real strength only in Western Canada and Ontario. This element became visible as early as the mid-1920s, when a group of left-wing MPs emerged amid the wreckage of the disintegrating Progressive party. These MPs went on to help found the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in 1932. The CCF regrouped in 1961 as the New Democratic Party. At the federal level, the NDP is currently in eclipse, with only nine seats, but it continues to govern Saskatchewan and British Columbia, forms the official opposition in Manitoba, and won the 1996 election in Yukon. Social democrats will continue to influence Canadian politics.

A right-wing populist party based in Western Canada. Social Credit, the first modern example, entered the House of Commons in 1935. Despite a long history of ups and downs, it continued to elect western members through 1965. Provincial Social Credit parties governed Alberta until 1971 and British Columbia until 1992. The Reform party inherits the conservative populist tradition. Its first and so far only leader is Preston Manning, himself a federal Socred candidate in 1965 and the son of Ernest Manning, the long-serving Social Credit premier of Alberta.

A francophone nationalist party in Quebec, such as the Bloc Populaire in 1945, the Union des Electeurs in 1949, the Ralliement créditiste in 1962 through 1979, and the Bloc Québécois in 1993. Plus nationalist parties that ran for office at the provincial level — Maurice Duplessis's Union Nationale, which replaced the Conservatives and dominated provincial politics from the 1930s until 1960; the Parti Québécois, which has governed off and on since 1976; and, most recently, Mario Dumont's Action Démocratique. Interestingly, these nationalist parties have spanned almost the entire ideological spectrum, from socialist left to monetary-reform right.

In the last 50 years, the only Progressive Conservative majority governments were John Diefenbaker's in 1958 and Brian Mulroney's in 1984 and 1988. Diefenbaker, always a populist maverick within his own party, brought in western support that the Conservatives had lacked, completely shutting out Social Credit in the West. Even more importantly, Maurice Duplessis, taking revenge on federal Liberals who had intervened to deprive him of a provincial victory in 1939, set his Union Nationale machine to work for PC candidates in Quebec on Diefenbaker's behalf. He delivered 50 seats, seats the PCs could not hold after Duplessis died. Diefenbaker was reduced in 1962 to a minority government dependent on a revived Social Credit party with seats both in Quebec and the West, and his government fell when his own followers split over nuclear weapons and Social Credit withdrew its support. Diefenbaker's chaotic, populist management style proved incapable of keeping his diverse electoral coalition together.

Brian Mulroney swept to victory in 1984 by allying with Quebec separatists. He recruited numerous well-known nationalists such as Lucien Bouchard and Marcel Masse to his cause, and received the support of many workers from the Parti Québécois machine. PQ premier René Lévesque announced that he was taking the "beau risque" of dealing with federalism in the person of Brian Mulroney, whom he found much more pleasing than Pierre Trudeau. Mulroney's downfall resulted from losing support both in Quebec and in the West. The Progressive Conservative party became a barrel tapped at both ends. Previous PC voters flooded in the West to Reform and in Quebec to the Bloc.

Essentially, the same story has been replayed since 1917. For the Progressive Conservative party to come to power, the PCs' leader has had to attract support from western populists and Quebec nationalists in addition to core Tory support in Ontario and the Maritime provinces, and the public has had to be desperate to remove the Liberals. Such a "throw them out" coalition can win an election but can't really govern, because its elements have different aspirations, which have been ignored, rather than brokered. Western populists, at least those of the right, want a smaller, more parsimonious government that treats all provinces equally. Quebec nationalists demand a federal government that offers Quebec special treatment by transferring to Quebec both revenue and powers. And eastern Tories generally want a traditional and centralist approach to government.

It might be possible to keep this coalition together in the more loosely structured American system, which has a minimal requirement for party unity. For example, segregationist southern whites and integrationist northern blacks once simultaneously supported the Democrats, although that strange alliance fell apart after southern blacks got the vote and confronted southern whites directly. But Canada's parliamentary constitution requires disciplined parties able to vote as a bloc in the House of Commons. Diverse coalitions face grave strain, because one element usually sets the party line, alienating the others. In the Progressive Conservative party, the predominant element has been centrist and eastern, anglophone and Tory, leaving western populists and Quebec nationalists feeling that the party does not represent their views or interests.

Imposing a first-past-the-post voting system upon a society with deep ethnolinguistic and regional cleavages inevitably fragments Canadian conservatism. Different political cultures — between Quebec and the rest of Canada, and between the West and the East — have repeatedly shattered the regimented coalitions necessary for political combat in the House of Commons. On the other side of the political spectrum, our system has similarly fragmented social democrats, who have never been able to put together a national electoral coalition. Starting from their Western base, social democrats have acquired genuine support in parts of Ontario, but not in the Maritime provinces or in Quebec. Quebec's social democratic impulse has repeatedly been detoured into the support of nationalist movements, most recently the Parti Québécois and the Bloc Bloc Québécois.

In this configuration, the Liberal party should be understood not as a centre-left party, like the American Democrats or British Labour, alternating in office with a centre-right alternative. Rather, it is a true centre party, comparable to the Christian Democrats in Italy, the Liberal Democrats in Japan, and Congress in India, standing for nothing very definite but prevailing against a splintered opposition. It avoids definite ideological commitments and brings together people simply interested in exercising power and dispensing patronage. The left-leaning period under the leadership of Pierre Trudeau was an historical aberration, its interventionist innovations now energetically being rolled back.

Parties are pulling us apart

All of Canada's opposition parties are on single-handed crusades to drive the Liberals from office and form a majority government. (In the case of the Bloc Québécois the goal involves altering the national boundaries.) The logic of this quest requires each party to distinguish itself from the others as well as from the government, further entrenching a fragmented party system. The liberal elements of the PCs and the populist elements of Reform both seem determined to take this risk in an emerging war of attrition between them. At its August convention in Winnipeg, the PCs positioned themselves definitely in the centre, even to the left of the Liberals on some issues. The PC leader, Jean Charest, completely ignored Reform, refusing even to utter the word in response to journalists' questions, hoping that Reform voters will drift back to the Progressive Conservatives as the PCs rise in the polls and again become the only viable alternative to the Liberals.

This Red Tory line of reasoning is fragile. If Reform has done anything, it has taught conservative voters that they do not have to be content with Toryism, that they can have their own party, that such a party can elect MPs and that it can influence the political agenda in Ottawa. The current Liberal

government is more conservative on most issues than the previous Progressive Conservative government. Whatever the Liberals do seems moderate because Reform urges them to go further and faster. Conservative voters are getting better results as outsiders influencing a Liberal government than they did as an inside influence within a Progressive Conservative government.

In effect, the Reform party in the 1990s is playing the role of the NDP in the 1960s and 1970s, when it set an economic and social agenda for the Liberals to enact. Although Reform officialdom decries the “NDP of the right” label, it is the effectiveness of principled opposition, not the pretension of wannabe government, that holds many voters to the party. In all likelihood, enough Reform voters will stay with their party precisely to let it continue to exercise this influence and, at a minimum, to elect MPs from Alberta and British Columbia. By running candidates in Ontario, Reform will also hobble Progressive Conservatives’ efforts to elect anyone there.

On the other hand, the Reform party is unlikely to drive the PCs out of business. After the 1993 election, Preston Manning shunned conservative ideology to pursue his concept of a trans-ideological populist movement. Instead of consolidating the conventional right, he purged terms like “conservative” from the party’s official vocabulary. Ironically, his concept’s vagueness has had the perverse effect of allowing the party’s most right-wing elements to define its image in the public eye. Despite some by-election advances, Reform has so far acquired only shallow support east of Ontario, where its 1993 beachhead is also suspect. Reform seems confined to its western base.

An unknown factor in this equation is the Reform leader himself. Preston Manning has always maintained that if Reform doesn’t quickly come to power, it will quickly fade away. This may be an accurate commentary on populist parties, or it could be an excuse for creating a temporary personal vehicle rather than a permanent organization. However, even if Reform collapsed in chaos some successor movement would likely emerge, given the historical roots of western populism. With many conservative interest groups and mass movements now flourishing, there is no shortage of potential leaders to make another foray into the broad right of federal party politics.

If Reform and the Progressive Conservatives continue their war of attrition, they could keep each other in check for a long period of time without ever delivering a coup de grâce, segmenting the right into two parties with different ideologies and demographic bases. In that scenario, the Liberals will continue to govern, even if an NDP resurgence were to cut into its majority.

Ideologically, the present Liberal party has pitched an exceedingly broad tent. On one side, it holds those who on specific social or economic issues are as right-wing as any Reformer, and on the other, it holds those with egalitarian and interventionist views who would vote NDP if social democrats had any chance of coming to power. When Brian Mulroney was in office, the Liberals in opposition sounded like a centre-left party; but once they got in control, they continued his key policies of the GST, low inflation, free trade and privatization, and in fact moved much farther and faster than Mulroney’s government ever did on deficit reduction and downsizing the civil service. “Campaign from the left, govern from the right,” still works as a Liberal formula.

At the same time, national unity has been shrinking the Liberal tent. Francophone nationalists in Quebec, many of whom voted Liberal when Pierre Trudeau was the leader, have transferred their allegiance to the Bloc Québécois, leaving Liberals with Quebec’s anglophones and older francophones

worried about the costs and trauma of attaining sovereignty. In all likelihood, the Liberals have permanently lost the francophone vote that they controlled for almost a century. If so, they will find it difficult to continue winning a majority of Commons seats, even if they remain the largest single party.

Courting the three sisters

Along the Trans-Canada Highway from Calgary to Banff lies a prominent mountain called The Three Sisters. Legend has it that an Indian chief placed each of his three daughters on a separate peak to keep them away from unworthy suitors. The strategy succeeded so well that the three daughters died up there. Canadian conservatism is also a family of three sisters fated to perish in isolation unless they descend from their mountain tops and embrace more realistic expectations.

In more prosaic language, the central question for Canadian conservatives is this: Can Canada ever have a version of the Thatcher-Reagan phenomenon — a broadly based, centre-right party committed to a moderate but definite and consistent conservative philosophy, and able to govern? The prospect for reuniting the three sisters is bleak at the moment. The Bloc Québécois, though it attracts many conservatively minded voters, is a nationalist movement, not a conservative party. The conservatism of the Progressive Conservative party simmers on some back burner as its current leadership advertises itself as a B Team for the governing Liberals. And the Reform party seems content to confine itself to the populist tradition.

A merger between Reform and the PCs, though still discussed, seems to us out of the question. Too many careers would be at stake. Political parties almost never merge in the true sense of the term, and the gap between today's opposition factions is simply too great.

After the next federal election, Canadian conservatives may begin to encourage limited cooperation between Reform and the PCs, leading to a system of sister parties. Outside the United States and the United Kingdom, such alliances are actually the norm in the democratic world, three examples being the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Christian Social Union (CSU) in Germany, the Liberal-National coalition in Australia and various centre-right alliances in France.

But this enumeration raises the question of the electoral system. Each of these countries uses something other than first-past-the-post voting. Australia has a preferential ballot for the House of Representatives, allowing Liberal and National candidates to run in the same constituency without hopelessly dividing the right-wing vote: Voters can rank their choices to ensure that the winner receives 50 per cent of the vote. Germany has a mixed-member-proportional voting system that delivers a highly proportional result. The CSU operates only in Bavaria, while the CDU does not go into that province; but even if the two parties were to compete head-to-head, the electoral system would protect the existence of both. France has a two-stage run-off system that allows the Gaullists and the traditional centre-right parties to test their strength on the first ballot and make alliances for the second ballot.

First-past-the-post voting encourages parties to engage in a war of attrition. Yet there is an exception to its Darwinian voting logic — territorial concentration — which has allowed smaller parties to survive in Canada despite the electoral system. In effect, territorial concentration has produced several regional two-party systems instead of a national two-party system. Both the Reform party and the Bloc

Québécois, or even the PCs, could go on for decades without ever becoming national parties; and through their survival as regional parties they could prevent the emergence of a national conservative party.

Reform and the PCs could cooperate if their supporters, seeing that the war of attrition does not work under Canada's particular conditions, push their leaders against the logic of the electoral system. The two parties could begin by agreeing to advocate electoral reform through the run off, preferential ballot, or mixed-member-proportional system, which would be in the interest of both parties. They might further agree on a territorial split at the national level, with Reform running in the West and the PCs in the East, or Reform in rural areas and the PCs in the cities. Or they might base candidacies on standing in opinion polls or success in the previous election. Or, as briefly discussed at the Winds of Change conference, they might hold joint nomination meetings, allocating candidacies riding by riding, depending on the strength of local party organizations. The parties might also agree to common platform items and limited cooperation in Parliament. No doubt other models of cooperation could be designed; the machinery is not a problem if the will to cooperate exists.

A Reform-PC alliance might get 30 per cent of the vote — too little to win an election, but enough to make the alliance the official opposition, with far more seats than the Bloc Québécois or the NDP. It would become the obvious alternative to the Liberals. Indeed, forming at least a minority government might not be that far away. With the Bloc Québécois controlling a majority of seats in Quebec and keeping them out of play, a party can form a government with meagre support in that province, as the Liberals did in 1993 with only 19 of 75 Quebec seats. If the Bloc maintains its strength, a swing of less than 10 percentage points from the Liberals to a Reform-PC alliance would make the latter the government. Because of the organizational weakness of the right, many voters who voted for Brian Mulroney's PCs in 1984 and 1988 now support the Liberals. Some of them might well switch if they saw an effective coalition on the right.

In the longer term, however, and assuming that Quebec remains in Canada, the alliance would find it hard to form a stable government without some Quebec support. Although Quebec has lost importance — in the next election, its share of Commons seats will fall below 25 per cent for the first time in Canadian history — it nevertheless remains second only to Ontario and much larger than any other province.

If Quebec stays in Confederation, the Bloc will either disintegrate or become an autonomist party, participating in federal politics as a representative of Quebec's specific interests. Philosophically, it is logical for liberals to offer Quebec money and privileged treatment, while conservatives find it easier to offer autonomy and enhanced jurisdiction. On that basis, a strategic alliance of Quebec nationalists with conservatives outside Quebec might become possible, and it might be enough to sustain a government.

None of this will be easy or even likely. But experience shows that a monolithic conservative party is unworkable; so conservatives who are unhappy with a one-party-plus system featuring the Liberals as the perpetual governing party may have little choice but to construct an alliance, at least of the two anglophone sisters, and perhaps ultimately including a third sister. An alliance would face many difficulties, to be sure, but it would also have two great advantages. It would reflect the regional and

cultural character of Canadian society, and it would give that character an institutional expression. Also, it would allow leaders of the regional parties to defend necessary compromises as precisely that — necessary compromises. In a single national party, compromises have to be defended as party policy, which tends to drive dissenters out of the fold.

If cooperation is ever to work, the fragments of Canadian conservatism must recognize that each represents an authentic aspect of a larger conservative philosophy. Reformers will have to realize that there is something genuinely conservative in the Tory penchant for compromise and incrementalism. Tories will have to admit that compromise, to be honorable, must be guided by underlying principles, and that Reformers are not extremists for openly advocating smaller government, free markets, traditional values and equality before the law. And both will have to recognize that Quebec nationalism, while not in itself a conservative movement, appeals to the kinds of voters who in other provinces support conservative parties. The Bloc Quebecois is strongest in rural Quebec, among voters who would not be out of place in Red Deer, except that they speak French rather than English. They are nationalist for much the same reason that Albertans are populist — they care about their local identity and the culture that nourishes it, and they see the federal government as a threat to their way of life.

It may be that the third sister can never be brought back in. In the last century, Quebec nationalists, content with provincial autonomy and cultural preservation, could participate in Sir John A. Macdonald's Liberal-Conservative Party — a single party in name but a coalition in substance, always with a strong "Quebec lieutenant." But now that Quebec nationalists have discovered sovereignty, they may never again see merit in a conservative coalition.

Should that become the case, both conservatism and Canada become the losers, for interventionism is losing its ability to hold the country together. There is little money to bribe Quebec, and voters in the rest of the country are turning against special privilege for Quebec (or anyone else). Bereft of carrots, the Liberal government is resorting to ever heavier sticks against separatism. In our view, only a conservative vision that takes government back to its proper role, and thereby concedes to Quebec the space required for its own civil society, can hold the country together for the long term.

Whatever happens, Canada will need some kind of effective political formation on the right. Given the repeated failures of our national conservative parties, conservatives should ponder a coalition of the right. Even if all three sisters can never be brought together, a working alliance of the two anglophone sisters would be worth having for its own sake.

Foundations for a mature democracy

The stresses and strains of the Canadian State have led to many proposals for structural and constitutional change. Yet, to be accepted, structural changes must benefit a very large segment of the political community. Most recent proposals are too obviously the particular aspirations of certain regions, specific ideologies or individual political leaders and their parties to ever gain wide acceptance.

Although we, as conservatives, are concerned in the first instance about creating an effective conservative coalition, we believe that our line of thought has broader significance for Canadian

politics. No one who cares seriously about ideas, whether conservative, liberal or socialist, should be happy with the thought of prolonged one-party government by the Liberals. Countries governed for a long period by a centre party drift into cronyism, corruption, cynicism and a period of chaos, as has happened recently in Italy, Japan and India.

Each case has its own peculiarities, but the pattern is broadly similar. A governing party enjoying an indefinite lease on power encourages its supporting interests to become closely interwoven with the state. This may entail not only corruption on a grand scale, as in India and Italy, but also policies that bankrupt the public treasury (Italian pensions, Japanese pump-priming in the 1990s) and hamper the economy through favoritism (Indian export and import licences) and protection of producers at the expense of consumers (Japan). Of course, these things can happen in any democratic system, but they are virtually inevitable if one-party rule continues for a long period of time. Absence of effective competition is just as bad in politics as it is in economics.

Political chaos ensues when the other parties eventually band against the centre party, which itself dissolves into personal and ideological factionalism. The resulting political anarchy, in which no governing party can deal effectively with pressing national problems, has been bad enough for Italy, Japan and India. It could be literally fatal for Canada, because of the depths of its regional fissures.

Reform of the electoral system is one of the old chestnuts of Canadian politics. The Progressives advocated the alternative ballot and enacted it provincially in Alberta and Manitoba. The NDP has long had a theoretical commitment to proportional representation, though it failed to follow through when in power at the provincial level. Pierre Trudeau spoke favorably of proportional representation, without acting on it in practice.

But it is seldom in the short-term interest of the party in power to carry out electoral reform; by definition, the system worked admirably for those now in power and changing the system might benefit the opponents next time. However, the incentive would change if an explicit coalition of conservative sister parties advocated electoral reform as part of a common platform. The partners would then have to carry through as part of their commitment to each other, and at least some of the partners would also want to, knowing their own futures would become more secure in the process. The NDP should also support electoral reform, allowing even a minority conservative government to pass the necessary legislation. The Liberals might also support it if weakness in francophone Quebec prevented them from winning a majority of seats in the House of Commons.

Electoral reform would help build a conservative coalition, but it might also turn the Liberal party into an explicit federation. Federal Liberals are weak today among francophone voters in Quebec, and they are often at loggerheads with the provincial Liberals. If Quebec Liberals could do so without committing political suicide, they might prefer to have a party of their own cooperating with the national Liberal party, like the arrangement between the CSU in Bavaria and the CDU elsewhere in Germany.

We are conservatives, and it is not our place to speculate at length about what the left could or should do. Yet voters on the left are as much entitled as voters on the right to effective elected representation. Electoral reform might well revive the left. It could, for example, lead to cooperation between the NDP

and the left-leaning wing of the Liberals, perhaps producing a national social democratic vehicle with a genuine chance of governing, or at least participating in a coalition cabinet.

Of course, none of this can be foretold in detail; political change always produces unexpected and surprising consequences. But we believe there is good reason to think seriously along these lines. In today's democratic societies, organizations share power. Corporations, churches, universities, hospitals, even public sector bureaucracies make decisions through consultation, committees and consensus-building techniques. Only in politics do we still entrust power to a single faction expected to prevail every time over the opposition by sheer force of numbers. Even more anachronistically, we persist in structuring the governing team like a military regiment under a single commander with almost total power to appoint, discipline and expel subordinates.

Among major democracies, only Great Britain so ruthlessly concentrates power. In the United States, President Clinton cannot govern without making concessions to the Republicans in Congress. In Germany, Chancellor Kohl needs to keep the support not only of the CSU but of the Free Democrats. In France, the presidency and the national assembly are often controlled by different party coalitions. In most of the rest of Europe, proportional representation ensures that coalition governments routinely form cabinets. In Australia, the Liberal prime minister needs the National Party for a majority in the House of Representatives and, often, the support of additional parties to get legislation through the Senate. In New Zealand, which used to have a Canadian-style system of concentrated power, the voters rebelled against alternating Labour party and National party dictatorships: electoral reform now ensures coalition cabinets.

Many of Canada's problems stem from a winner-take-all style of politics that allows governments in Ottawa to impose measures abhorred by large areas of the country. The political system still reverberates from shock waves from Pierre Trudeau's imposition of the National Energy Program upon the West and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms upon Quebec. Modernizing Canadian politics would not only be good for conservatism, it might be the key to Canada's survival as a nation.

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