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Norman Spector,
with Scott Reid
and Guy Laforest

Constructing an alternative to Canada's natural governing party (a.k.a. the Liberal Party of Canada)

POLITICAL JOSTLING

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NORMAN SPECTOR HAS BEEN AT THE centre of debates among pragmatic conservative intellectuals over the last two decades. Currently he is, to use his words, "perched in Victoria," from which vantage he has been writing prolifically.

During spring 2001 he adapted several of his columns into letters directed to Guy Laforest and Scott Reid. Laforest urges western leaders to defend a "thick" – as opposed to "thin" – culture of federalism. Were they to do so, they would find receptive audiences in Quebec. Scott Reid doubts any merger between Alliance and Conservatives is possible in the short run. To avoid a fourth Liberal victory, he wants the two to work out a formula whereby the weaker party, in a particular region or riding, steps down. Spector is sceptical that any such formula can work unless the two work out compromises on core issues.

31 March 2001

Salut Guy,

For a British Columbian perched in Victoria, where the trees have been in blossom for over a month, a trip to Montreal in late March was enlightening for two reasons. Fifty centimetres of fresh snow fell while I was there and this quickly reminds you that “mon pays ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver” – as the Gilles Vigneault song goes.

And a week living in French confirms that the Quebec-West axis, a key element in constructing a national alternative to the Liberals, is well ... or at least still alive.

I spent two days at a workshop, sponsored by the Institute for Research on Public Policy, discussing the Social Union Framework Agreement, something signed in 1999 by all First Ministers (except Lucien Bouchard.) That agreement left me with a strong sense of the national malaise caused by constitutional blockage. Rather than proving to Quebec that change is possible through administrative mechanisms, the agreement was such that leaders of all major Quebec parties felt it was something they could not sign. Few at the workshop saw the agreement as worthwhile, either from the perspective of Quebec or from the perspective of coordinating federal and provincial social policy.

One pleasant surprise was to run into former Quebec Liberal leader Claude Ryan at the workshop. Though he has aged, his mind is as sharp – and his humanity as sparkling – as ever. Despite repeated setbacks, he remains a committed federalist, refusing to give up on the possibility of reforming Canada.

Next stop was Quebec City, to participate in a colloquium sponsored by the commission examining the province's language laws. Speakers from around the world outlined alternatives to the individual rights approach pursued under prime ministers Trudeau, Mulroney and Chrétien. I learned that Quebecers are acutely sensitive to descriptions of them in the rest of the country as fascists, even Nazis. One participant even suggested her province was the subject of a hate campaign. She did not appear satisfied when I pointed out that stereotypes abound on both sides. Nor was the commission chairman thrilled when I publicly urged him to abandon the view of English Canada as a single homogeneous blob, and to read Cape Breton, Newfoundland and British Columbia novelists.

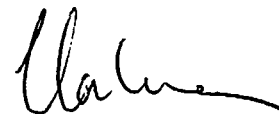
Then, back to Montreal for a meeting with Quebec's new premier, Bernard Landry. A convivial chap, particularly over the dinner that followed. He seems interested in talking to

premiers and opinion leaders in the rest of Canada, and has not given up hope on finding allies. I believe he understands it is not necessary to split Canada in order to achieve his proposed Confederation, though he still wants a strong referendum mandate to negotiate change. He is not opposed to a five-region model of Canada, and understands that Europe's democratic deficit will only be solved by an elected central government with its own revenue sources.

While I was away, Hedy Fry – following up Jean Chrétien's characterization of Westerners as “different” – informed Canadians about cross burning in my province. Though not as offensive as Elinor Caplin's description of Westerners as bigots, racists and Holocaust deniers during the last election, it was more venal for being premeditated.

I come away from the past week on the road with the feeling that Canada needs its own Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Unlike the South African body, it would not examine actual crimes. It could, however, clear up some of the deep misunderstandings that continue to infect our domestic debates. And speak truth to both sides of the language divide.

Sincerely,



Norman Spector

Norman Spector is a leading conservative thinker, now living in Victoria, B.C. Over the last winter he has become a prolific newspaper columnist.

10 April 2001

Bonjour Norman,

I have read some of your recent journalistic articles on building an alternative to the Liberal Party of Canada. I salute in you one of the voices trying to find new ground for serious discussion and common endeavours in the post-1995 referendum political and intellectual context. In general, the last half decade has been characterized by reciprocal perceptions of disloyalty – by Canadians suspicious of Quebecers' loyalty and by Quebecers suspicious of Canadians' continued commitment to a federal country.

Your journalistic interventions have so far been written in the context of impending talks between Tories and Alliances (as we call them here) intended to find an alternative to the federal Liberal Party. The premise is that a one-party state in Canada – although under the umbrella of a Charter of Rights and thus within the parameters of a liberal regime – is not good for democracy. I share this view.

I write as somebody who actively supports Quebec's third party, Action Démocratique du Québec. It is trying to break the stranglehold of the *péquistes* and of the provincial Liberals on Quebec politics. The ADQ, by the way, is currently preparing a new platform on the political and constitutional future of Quebec, to be discussed at a General Council in June.

It is now a decade after the demise of the Meech Lake Accord, an event we both lament. Some of the first articles I wrote on Canadian politics were to argue in favour of ratification of the Accord. At the time, in the late 1980s, I was in the Department of Political Science at the University of Calgary. While there, I made many great friendships.

As my contribution to this discussion, I want to develop two arguments: the first concerns the state of federalism in Canada; the second deals with strategic matters.

Guy Laforest is a senior political scientist at Université Laval and advisor to the Action démocratique.

The predicament of Canadian federalism

Over the past 30 years, many factors have combined to undermine the nature and spirit of federalism in Canada. I limit myself to an enumeration, but we might undertake a more rigorous analysis at a later point.

Bureaucratic and political reorganization of the federal government has weakened the spirit of federalism

As Donald Savoie has argued (see, for example, his article in *Inroads* 9), since 1970 a great concentration of power in the hands of the Prime minister has taken place. It has weakened the collegial, and federal, spirit within Cabinet and within the crucial government agencies in Ottawa.

Globalization can work against federalism

More economic decision-making now takes place in the international arena, above the level of the Canadian state. Heads of federal states exercise tremendous pressure on subnational governments to assure swift and coherent decisions.

Heads of federal states are also on the receiving end of tremendous pressures from their peers, heads of unitary governments and also heads of international organizations. My point is that in the international political conversation, it has become tougher to behave in a federalist way.

The Internet and communications revolution can be detrimental to federalism

As Roger Gibbins argued in his presidential address to political scientists last year, when citizens use the Internet to get more efficient services, they do not pay much attention to the division of powers.

The nation-building effects of the 1982 constitution and the Charter of Rights have weakened the federation

This is what Pierre Trudeau, Tom Axworthy and many others wanted to occur. Alan Cairns, William Kymlicka, and – with humility I include myself in this list – predicted it would occur.

The threat of Quebec separation has fed the desire for centralization in Ottawa

The Liberals at times present *any* proposal for decentralization as unpatriotic exercises of accommodating separatists.

The state of the party system weakens Canadian democracy

Obviously, the state of Canadian political parties is a consequence of the previous point and the demise of the Meech Lake Accord. The absence of a credible alternate government deprives the public of meaningful debate on alternatives to the Liberal interpretation of federalism.

The authoritarian personality of Mr. Chrétien fits in this picture

He wields great power, without the appropriate checks provided by a credible opposition party that might deflect him.

The fiscal disequilibrium between Ottawa and the provinces makes matters worse

Even the four large provinces, with their large revenue bases, face tremendous responsibilities in health and education, and are often at the mercy of Ottawa's fiscal decisions.

Quebec's lack of participation in federal relations and its lack of strategic imagination contributes to the predicament of federalism

Here I distinguish between "thin" and "thick" federalist political cultures. Historically, Quebec federalist governments have promoted a "thick" approach to federalism. When Quebec opts out of the pan-Canadian conversation about federalism, "thin" approaches become dominant in the other provinces.

Since the 1930s, English-Canadian historians – I'm thinking of those writing for the Rowell-Sirois Commission, the works of Donald Creighton, A.R.M. Lower, F.R. Scott, Frank Underhill and others – have ignored or minimized the originality and value of the "thick" federalist political culture. In Upper Canada (later Ontario) this "thick" culture is associated

with the names of Robert Baldwin, George Brown and Oliver Mowat. Some recent academic work – Christopher Moore, Paul Romney, Janet Ajzenstat and others – are trying to re-establish balance. In a bizarre turn of events, many of the Quebec sovereignist intelligentsia – Henri Brun, André Tremblay, Jose Woehrling – have systematically bought the ul-

tra-centralist interpretations among English-speaking Canadian academics as to the nature of Canada and have themselves ignored "thick" federalists outside Quebec.

The Canadian Senate and judicial systems are not structured to foster the federalist elements in the political system and in our political culture at large

In his recent book, *A State of Minds*, Tom Courchene takes note of this, as did Ron Watts some years ago.

Canada lacks mechanisms to coordinate interprovincial and federal-provincial relations

André Burelle has often lamented the absence in Canada of really federalist mechanisms of coordination between the central and provincial governments. How do we run federal-provincial conferences? The answer is that we run them with no respect for federalism. We run them the way Westminster used to run Imperial Conferences: London alone decided when

these conferences took place; London dictated the agendas, and the British Prime minister alone oversaw their daily operations. This is not about good versus bad guys, noble decentralists versus wicked centralists. We simply must pay more attention to the influence of history on our contemporary institutions.

Beyond the distinct society clause, I now think the provision of the Meech Lake Accord which would have exercised the greatest influence on our federalism was that establishing a mechanism for regular, annual, federal-provincial conferences.

I will not spend time trying to synthesize these various factors. Obviously, many of them reinforce each other and create a formidable obstacle to change. However, if I thought that nothing could be done, I would not be participating in this exchange.

A matter of strategy

Where should we start? Your efforts so far have dealt mostly with the party system in Ottawa. On this score, I note that Mario Dumont, leader of the ADQ, is on record saying the Bloc Québécois has become a "nuisance." It no longer serves the interests of Quebecers who have decided to stay in Canada.

Beyond changing the configuration and ideological discourses among the present parties, it would help if some of the new, about to be elected, and some of the old, recently reelected, provincial voices in Western Canada – I have in mind Gordon Campbell in B.C. and Ralph Klein in Alberta – embraced a "thicker" approach to the political culture of federalism. In a complex federation such as Canada's, it is unthinkable to be without regular, entrenched mechanisms of federal-provincial interaction. There should be annual meetings between the prime minister and provincial premiers dealing with the state of the federation and current issues. We do something comparable among ministers at the sectoral level. *A fortiori* we should do so at the higher level.

This should be a matter of fundamental principle in a federation. If western voices fought more vigorously for change, they would catch the attention of many Quebecers. At the ADQ, our phones and our computers are open.

Enough. Amicales salutations,

Guy Laforest

20 April 2001

Dear Norman,

Norman, you asked us to reflect on what is required to construct an electorally viable alternative to the federal Liberals.

Politics, as they say, is the art of the possible. Those of us who would like to replace the current Liberal administration with a right-of-centre government could achieve our Nirvana most effectively if there were a single conservative party, formed by a merger of the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives. But such a merger may not be possible, or the sacrifices involved may be too high to justify the cost.

In the event that a formal merger proves to be impossible, a workable alternative will be needed to avoid a fourth consecutive Liberal majority in the next election. I suggest an asymmetrical coalition between the Alliance and the Conservatives, in which each of the two parties would forbear from running candidates in any riding in which the other party's candidate did better than its own candidate in last year's general election. Such a proposal would likely yield a fresh crop of new seats for the right, and would create a workable coalition. It has worked in at least one other jurisdiction (Australia), and it can work in Canada too.

Before delving into the merits of this proposal, it is worth casting a glance at the problems involved in formally merging two independent parties.

Problems with formal merger

The first problem is ideology. There is much that brings members of the Alliance and the Conservatives together, but also much that separates them. Both parties are nominally fiscally conservative, but the PCs campaigned successfully in Atlantic Canada in both the 1997 and 2000 elections by arguing that Liberal spending cuts were too deep. The parties also differ dramatically over the unity issue. The Alliance, and before it the Reform Party, has been a strong defender of the equality of provinces, and has firmly rejected any special status for Quebec. The Conservatives, by contrast, have been the champions of special status since 1967, when "deux nations" became part of their party's platform.

The greatest policy difference, however, probably relates to issues surrounding populism and direct democracy. Just as the promise of patronage is the cement that binds together Liberals who do not agree on many issues, populism is the glue that holds together the Canadian Alliance. Since its inception, the party has linked together a coalition of individuals with mutually incompatible views on several critical issues, of which the most notable

are abortion and capital punishment. These incompatible views are set to one side because all participants accept that under an Alliance government, any changes to the legislative status quo on these issues would occur only by means of a citizen-initiated referendum.

Moreover, all Alliance members know that any changes to the party's policy on these potentially divisive issues will be dealt with by means of a populist decision-making process in which policy proposals must be initiated at the level of individual constituency associations and then voted upon by delegates at a national assembly. A double-majority provision in the party's constitution ensures that even if an issue does make it onto the ballot at a national convention, a narrow majority will be insufficient to change party policy.

Although the membership and the parliamentary caucus of the Progressive Conservatives also contain individuals who disagree with each other on the very same issues, the accepted method of dealing with contentious issues is to show deference to a party leadership that remains intentionally ambiguous as to how it would act if it were in a position to actually legislate on these issues. Participants on either side of these internal policy disputes apparently feel confident that once the reins of government have been regained, their own side could control the leadership's actions on these issues. There appears to be a considerable fear that direct democracy would destroy this ability to control the agenda from the centre. Therefore, many Conservatives feel that populism must be opposed at all costs.

In addition to these possibly insurmountable policy differences, each party has its own hierarchy, its own bureaucracy, and its own leadership. At least one of the two leaders and one of the two sets of party bureaucrats would have to step aside for a formal merger to work. Historically, this factor alone has been enough to stymie virtually every attempt at a multiparty merger in Canada, the United States, Australia or Britain. Attempts at fusion have almost always led to the emergence of splinter groups unable or unwilling to buy into the permanent compromises of principle or power that are necessary to create a merger. It is difficult to identify the magic that would make the Alliance-PC merger exempt from this historical rule.

The coalition solution

By contrast, coalitions have a long and successful history in many countries. In a coalition, two or more parties agree to cooperate either during an election or in its aftermath. The most successful coalition in the English-speaking world, and the one that could serve as a model for the Alliance and the Conservatives, has been built by Australia's National Party (formerly known as the Country Party) and the Liberal Party of Australia. This two-party coalition has governed the country for more than half of the post-World War II period.

The Liberal/National coalition grew out of the ruins of a party system in which a monolithic and highly disciplined centre-left opponent, the Australian Labor Party, faced a series of fairly transitory conservative and nationalist parties, which tended to fragment and coa-

Scott Reid is one of two Ontario Alliance MPs elected in last year's general election.

lesce, and then fragment again. An urban, mostly middle-class voter base formed the foundation for the “Fusion” Liberal Party (1909-16), the Nationalist Party (1917-31) and the United Australia Party (UAP) (1931-44). Each of these parties had been formed by shuffles and reshuffles within Parliament, and each one proved to be unstable and short-lived.

But in 1944 and 1945, Sir Robert Menzies, a former UAP leader who had served briefly as prime minister, chaired a series of conferences which resulted in the creation of a strong extra-parliamentary party, which was named the Liberal Party of Australia. The process was not dissimilar to the series of conventions between the 1997 and 2000 elections that produced the Canadian Alliance. The new Liberal Party drew together almost all remnants of the former UAP, as well as members of other generally conservative non-parliamentary groups. Because it had a base of strong and well organized constituency associations, the new party brought to its caucus a coherence and discipline that had never previously existed on the Australian right.

The Liberal Party of Australia did not, however, successfully attract the members of the well-organized and independently run Country Party, which had held seats in Parliament since 1919. The party had emerged in the wake of electoral reforms that had replaced the first-past-the-post electoral system with a system of single-member electoral districts. (In this system each voter lists the candidates in order of preference. If no candidate in a constituency receives over 50 per cent of first-place votes, the candidate with the fewest such votes is eliminated and his or her second-place votes are awarded to the remaining candidates based upon the second choices indicated on the redistributed ballots.)

The Country Party held a solid base of rural and small-town constituencies, and had its own entrenched leadership and party bureaucracy. Its members saw no virtue in joining this new and untried partisan vehicle, and besides, there were important ideological differences between the Country Party and the mostly urban Liberals. The Country Party’s independence had allowed it to gain considerable influence over government policies in the pre-war era by entering into ad-hoc coalitions with the Nationalists and then with the UAP. Now it proposed to do the same with the Liberals. The Liberals accepted.

The general election of 1949 produced the first in a string of victories that kept the Liberal/Country coalition in power until the mid-1980s, with a brief Labor interregnum in 1972-75. (In 1982 the Country Party became the National Party.) Power was lost from 1983 to 1996, but has since been regained.

What is most striking about this history is the stability of the two coalition partners throughout this long period, given that they openly disagree on some issues. Agricultural subsidies are a particular source of dissension, and the Country/National Party has tended to be more socially conservative than the Liberals. But both partners recognize the need to

work things out in open caucus, or in cabinet, and each party’s leadership knows that there are limits as to how much can be conceded to the other, before a revolt will take place in the ranks. Each party has maintained a reliable voter base, and both parties have consented to limit their electoral competition as much as possible. They are helped in this by the clarity of the natural cleavage between their respective bases of support in urban and rural areas. The National Party could never be a serious contender in the three-quarters of Australian constituencies in urban centres, and the Liberal Party cannot hope to make inroads in most agricultural areas.

It should be added that the electoral reforms of 1918, which have remained in place to the present day, have made it possible for Liberal and Country candidates to run against each other in the same district without splitting the vote and allowing a Labor candidate to steal the seat. This has greatly helped the coalition to function, without having to produce a clear and pre-ordained division of the country between the two parties.

Applying the model to Canada

Now consider the situation in Canada. Since we have no such electoral system, the job of coalition building is harder. It is not impossible. As in Australia, the two parties are united on most issues. The issues that divide the Alliance and the Conservatives may be sufficient to prevent a formal union, but they are probably not so great as to make impossible a cobbled together united platform in any given election. They do not appear, at any rate, to be any more substantial than those that divide Australia’s coalition partners.

Moreover, the parties have now clearly divided the country on regional grounds. East of Quebec, the Conservatives won more votes than the Alliance in 31 of 32 ridings. West of Quebec, the Alliance came ahead of the Tories in 176 of 191 ridings. Quebec and the Territories present a mixed picture: of 78 available seats, the Alliance beat the Tories in 49 and the Tories came ahead of the Alliance in 29.

The simplest solution, therefore, would be for the Alliance to forbear from running candidates in any seats east of Quebec and for the Tories to forbear from running any to the west of the Ottawa River. The two parties could divide Quebec and the North between them, with each party running candidates only in those seats where it had performed better than the other in the 2000 election. This would allow for strong, unified campaigns in most of English-speaking Canada – particularly if each party were to give its blessing to ad hoc alliances at the constituency level, and if each party were, for example, to permit card-carrying members of the other party to participate in nominating local candidates in the ridings which had been assigned to it.

This solution would allow all the established interests which might otherwise become insurmountable barriers to be set aside. The Alliance and Conservative party bureaucracies would remain intact and thus have no reason to oppose a coalition. Each party’s policy manual would remain intact, assuring that ideologically motivated party members have no cause for opposition. Members from across the country could continue to make financial contributions to their preferred party, even if that party was not running a candidate in the

province in which that elector happened to reside. The multi-million-dollar Tory debt – a deal-breaker in itself – would cease to stand in the way of cooperation. Both party leaders could remain in place, with the understanding that after an election victory, the leader of the party winning the greater number of seats would become prime minister and the leader of the lesser party deputy prime minister.

There is another advantage to a coalition over a merger. Special provisions would have to be made for Joe Clark and Manitoba's Rick Borotsik. Otherwise, all incumbent MPs from either camp would be assured of the right to run again under their own party's banner. Indeed, with the other right-of-centre party out of the way, their own prospects of reelection would soar. In my own riding (Lanark-Carleton, in eastern Ontario), my narrow victory (38 per cent to 36 per cent over the Liberal candidate, with 19 per cent of the vote going to the

PC candidate), would probably become an outright majority over all other candidates combined. In numerous near-miss ridings across the country, elimination of vote-splitting would guarantee the victory of coalition candidates.

This is not to suggest that there would not be some painful adjustments – particularly for the Conservatives. The party leader would have to accept that his career prospects no longer include becoming prime minister, and the party faithful would have to accept that they would almost certainly be junior partners in any future government. But this is to formalize a harsh reality that has existed since the electoral implosion of 1993. Besides, several posts in a coalition cabinet – along with a possible doubling or even trebling of the PC seat count in the Commons – is considerably better than the purgatory of perpetual fifth-party status in the House.

All of this would be a great deal easier – indeed, it would perhaps be inevitable – if Canada employed the alternative ballot system that Australia uses. Alliance voters would naturally tend to list Conservatives as their second choice, and Tory voters might do the reverse.

Politics really is the art of the possible. Setting realistic goals is the first step towards achieving them. There has been a fair bit of unreality in much of the talk of formal merger.

All participants in the Unite-the-Right discussion need to take a deep breath and get used to the idea that knockout punches and one-party domination of the right half of the spectrum may prove to be impossible. The reward for realism could be huge: forming the next government of Canada.

Sincerely,



The most successful coalition, one that could serve as a model for the Alliance and Conservatives, is Australia's two-party coalition, which has governed for more than half the post-World War II period.

2 May 2001

Dear Guy and Scott,

I read your letter, Guy, with great interest. You raise the same point that Bernard Landry raised with me in our recent meeting in Montreal, namely, are there any interlocutors in the rest of Canada interested in dialogue with Quebecers.

Scott, Tom Flanagan has floated a similar idea to yours about coalition building (in the National Post). I also suggested this possibility (in the Globe and Mail in 1999). My models were the coalition governments in B.C. in the 1940s, which grew up in a very similar political context as prevailed in Australia. In fact, the single transferable ballot was used in B.C. during this period. It was finally done away with in the early 1950s, after W.A.C. Bennett eked out a thin victory. He figured that doing away with it was part of the recipe for holding power for 20 years.

I must say, however, that my line of division was placed differently, and I would still argue that the Conservatives have the greater growth potential everywhere west of Manitoba because of their brand name. And, with the greatest respect to you, Scott, I would say it is Day who is toast, not Joe, though it would certainly be essential to keep Joe to his commitment to leave the leadership in due course.

On its surface, a coalition based on a formula of reciprocal standing down in particular ridings to avoid vote-splitting is attractive. Rather than dealing with all the problems – particularly ideological ones – of uniting disparate forces before an election, the Alliance, Tories and others would sit down after the election and form a coalition.

Since I wrote my piece in 1999, a federal election has intervened, making it even clearer that we are headed to a one-party state if nothing is done to end the party fragmentation. However, after watching the last campaign unfold, I have changed my mind and now believe that a coalition would not work.

Why would it not work? Because any such alliance would be open to Liberal attack on process grounds (it looks too clever by half) and, more important, on policy grounds. Imagine Joe Clark having to defend Stockwell Day's proposition that sensitive issues should be subject to referenda, or defend Day's confused position on two-tier medicine. Imagine Stockwell Day having to endorse Joe's view that the abortion issue is settled. The Alliance-PC coalition would be sitting ducks.

I have come to the conclusion that there is no way for the parties to escape compromises on policy, organization, leadership, etc. As you correctly note, Scott, this is no simple matter. Which is the purpose of our little exchange.

At the time of writing, Stockwell Day is starring in a soap opera of internal dissension among his caucus, and Joe Clark has rekindled ambition since the Tories have edged above the Alliance in a recent opinion poll. It is more obvious than ever that making up is hard to do – certainly harder than breaking up. And even if they eventually overcome the leadership tangle, the Tory and Alliance parties will still have to bridge their policy differences.

Stockwell Day – and you, Scott – hope to sidestep this problem. Your riding cooperation proposal would enable the Liberals to attack each party for the unpopular features of the

other's policies. On the other hand, the Tories' traditional strategy of saying little of interest while waiting for the government to fall has become a recipe for perpetual Liberal government.

There are no shortcuts. First, a joint conference to fashion an agreed-upon program is necessary. If properly managed, it is the least-risk option for the two parties. As an additional benefit,

once common ground was identified, both parties would have an elegant way to turn to the question of leadership.

Does common ground for a conservative party exist? I am convinced it does. At present, the Liberals occupy too much of the political spectrum, and are correspondingly vulnerable. For example, the summit among Western hemisphere leaders in Quebec last April showed splits in the centre-left over globalization. There is rich hunting ground here for conservatives. But, to mix metaphors, you don't win by playing in your end of the rink. Conservative-minded politicians must first end divisions amongst themselves. The two parties should focus on economic, fiscal and governance issues, where agreement is most apparent.

It is also essential to reconcile on controversial matters such as abortion. The Alliance's referendum proposal has caused more problems than it solved. We Canadian conservatives should look to the U.S., where conservatives accept a half-loaf, and thereby allow the Republican Party to win elections. Most Canadians would support a ban on partial birth abortions, for example.

In summary, I submit, the "PC" brand has pan-Canadian appeal, including the potential to attract disaffected Liberals. It remains the shortest and surest route to power. Recreating the Quebec-West coalition is the right recipe: both Quebec and the West need constitutional changes to protect themselves against outside majorities, be they of a different language or simply consumers of energy rather than producers of it.

While "PC" remains the brand and the Quebec-West coalition the recipe, the ingredients should be changed relative to the 1980s. Brian Mulroney's tactics entailed putting a Liberal

gloss on the Conservative Party. The Conservative debate over capital punishment, for example, sent a negative signal to social conservatives. His continuation of Liberal brokerage politics delayed progress in fighting the deficit, while exacerbating divisions within his coalition over Quebec. Mulroney also failed to develop an alternative language policy to that of Trudeau. Instead, he told his caucus that the way to power was to "out-Trudeau the Liberals."

In return for accepting the "PC" brand, Alliance members should insist on a western conservative leader. Mike Harris has proved that a mix of more blue and less red could attract voters. Ontario, the third vital component of the coalition, increasingly views itself as a region. (That is the thesis of Tom Courchene in his penultimate book.) Even the Atlantic region is ripe for a conservative approach.

Canadians are turned off by power struggles between governments. Accordingly, they will not fight for more power to provincial legislatures. Canadians would, however, support a lowering of federal taxes that thereby downsized Ottawa. While Canadians are not ideological, they do want effective and efficient government.

If Canadian conservatives emphasize fiscal discipline and the market over politics, they will minimize the chances of another CF-18 explosion. (As you recall, Mulroney's awarding of the CF-18 contract to Montreal-based Bombardier over a superior bid by a Winnipeg-based firm was the catalyst that helped Preston Manning launch the Reform Party.) As proponents of competition, conservatives should give provinces wide berth to experiment, leaving it to the market to judge whether Alberta's model or Quebec's – or some other province's – is superior. Furthermore, a territorial language policy would prevent needless misunderstanding when a western MP questions federal bilingualism policy or Quebec next legislates to promote its French character.

Unfortunately, many Quebec nationalists have mistakenly seen the anglo-Canadian left as their allies. The NDP introduced medicare in one province, but its leaders have forgotten or no longer accept their party's actual history. They now seek to impose what Tommy Douglas described as the "new Jerusalem" from Ottawa, not from the provincial capitals. They have written off Quebec, at most hinting to Quebecers that asymmetrical federalism may be achievable. As for the federal Liberals, they are deeply antagonistic to federalism. They see nothing amiss in telling provinces how to deliver health services – and how not to. The Liberals paint themselves as the only party that can keep the country together, encouraging each of the two solitudes to see the other as bigots.

Those Westerners who bolted the Conservatives to form the Reform Party bought the Liberal line on the two solitudes. Rather than looking backward, we should be looking forward and seeking solutions.

It is, however, reasonable to point out that Preston Manning failed in his principal objective. The West is no more "in" today than when he entered politics with "the West wants in"

as his slogan. Chrétien, with three successive majorities, has been the winner over the last decade. (Our dollar has been the loser.) Manning's great error was to surf the wave of anti-Quebec sentiment that washed across the country in the wake of the Meech Lake Accord debate. Instead, he could have allied with Quebec – and against Pierre Trudeau – to break the status quo.

Manning never understood, or chose not to understand. The Meech Lake Accord did not go far to satisfy Quebec's historical demands, and it affirmed, at the last minute, the equality of the provinces. The distinct society clause was mainly symbolic, though it would have given some boost to Quebec's arguments before the courts over constitutional interpretation. The true importance of the Accord lay in future constitutional discussions when

provinces made claims for additional powers.

Unlike Manning, Alberta Premier Don Getty did understand the implications of the Accord. It would have enabled his province to exercise a veto and trade its support for things Alberta wanted. Getty shrewdly computed

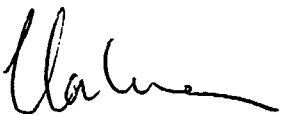
that, at the end of the day, Quebec would accept a triple-E Senate in return for commitments on decentralization. Lucien Bouchard also understood this dynamic, which is one reason he quit the Mulroney government.

Robert Stanfield used to say that nothing is easier than to turn English and French against each other. Ironically, the easy route turned out to be a dead end for Preston Manning. Ontarians looking for a prime minister to keep Quebec in its place generally prefer a franco-phone for the task. Chrétien, not Manning, reaped the political rewards of the Clarity Act.

Admittedly, it is difficult to get Quebec and the West on the same wavelength – and keep them there. But it can be done. Brian Mulroney managed it and scored back-to-back majorities as his reward. Had he avoided the mistakes discussed above, he or his successor might have secured a third mandate.

Conservative-minded Canadians will ultimately learn these lessons, hopefully before the next election. As Abba Eban once said, history teaches that men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives. ■

Best,



Norman Spector

The Tories' traditional strategy of saying little of interest while waiting for the government to fall has become a recipe for perpetual Liberal government.