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FLASH!

The girls are way ahead of the boys in Quebec schools

by Luc Allaire and Jocelyn Ann Campbell

WHILE OUR ATTENTION IS FOCUSED ON THE GIRLS, ARE THE BOYS falling through the cracks of our educational system? Recent data strongly suggest this. Indeed, if boys did as well as girls in school, there would have been no need for the Quebec Ministry of Education's highly touted plan of action to deal with dropouts: "Succeeding in School" ... Boys are dropping out before finishing high school in droves, and far more than the girls. The Ministry's figures reveal that of the potential graduating class of 1991–92, barely 60.6 per cent of boys obtained their high-school diploma, compared to 74.5 per cent of their female counterparts. Furthermore, the situation gets worse after that ... Of the total population of 19-year-olds in 1989–90, 83.5 per cent of the girls possessed a high-school diploma, compared to 65.8 per cent of boys ...

The higher proportion of girls does not end at high-school graduation. Female students outnumber their male counterparts

in college (CEGEP) ... Well over half of 17-year-old girls (54.2 per cent) go on to college, compared to only 38.9 per cent of the boys. In sum, less than two thirds of the boys finish high school; less than 40 per cent go on to college ...

And the differences don't stop there. Girls' grades, on average, are better, than those of boys at the college level, and grades determine access to university programs. One indicator of the girls' success is their scores on the French proficiency test required for admission to French-language universities. Sixty-one per cent of girls pass the tests, compared to only 47 per cent of boys.

According to Ronald Terril, coordinator of research at SRAM, the regional body that coordinates admissions to colleges, "Girls apply to college in higher numbers than boys, they are better prepared and they are more likely to be accepted. Once in college, they do better than their male counterparts and more of them obtain diplomas."

The university numbers bear this out. In 1960, only 20 per cent of Quebec university students were women. However, by 1992, women made up 57 per cent of the student population. Only at the doctoral level were men still in the majority ...

Is Quebec the exception? Not really. According to Statistics Canada, in 1992–93, 266,000 women attended university in Canada, compared to 231,000 men – the sixth year in a row that there were more women than men, with the gap widening each year. Women's gains in education is a phenomenon observed in all Western countries ...

Toward an explanation

Denise Alarie, a high-school teacher in Boucherville, a suburb on Montreal's South Shore, says, "I've noticed that the vast majority of girls want to pursue their studies because their goal is to become, one day, financially independent. They don't

want to be dependent on men, and they've understood that education is important if they hope to obtain a good job." Boys seem more interested in immediate rewards and less preoccupied with their future. This may explain why more boys than girls have part-time jobs. For Jean Larochelle, also a teacher in Boucherville, "Boys are still influenced by the myth of owning a car. A guy must have his second-hand car and some pocket money. Consequently, he's ready to work even if it puts his studies in jeopardy."

Many teachers agree with the fact that boys are still hung up on sexual stereotypes whereas girls are breaking them. Girls are succeeding in the educational system because they are capable of overcoming stereotypic attitudes, for example, reluctance to compete in traditionally male fields of activity or the belief that as women they could only achieve proper status through the men in their lives. In the same way, these teachers say, if boys are to succeed in school, they will have to break their male sexual stereotypes. For many boys, going to class and getting good marks have become feminine values which they reject for fear of becoming effeminate. To be popular with their peers, boys are expected to confront their teachers, disobey the rules, get kicked out of class, skip classes ... If not, they risk being perceived as "nerds" and the like.



SUMMER 1994 In this prescient 1994 article (here in abridged form), Luc Allaire, director of publications for the Quebec teachers' union, and Jocelyn Ann Campbell, now a Montreal city councillor, signalled a remarkable and worrisome development. Quebec figures showed a trend that would enter public discussion in this country and beyond. Boys are dropping out before finishing high school, with girls well ahead from primary school right through university, including the professional faculties. What will happen to the 35 to 50 per cent of boys who do not have the education needed to expect gainful employment in the economy? What kind of role models will they present for their sons?

Pressure to conform to this stereotype brings on certain behaviour which sets the boys at odds with expectations from the schools and, in turn, exacerbates existing pedagogical weaknesses. Hence the large number of male dropouts; and among those who stay, the boys tend to do more poorly than the girls. Simon Lucier, who works with potential dropouts at Mortagne School near Montreal, finds that “female students set high standards for success while boys aim at barely passing”...

The problem isn't confined to the classroom. In the words of another teacher, Jean Larochelle, “Young people imitate what they see. Today, women know where they're going in society. Forty-year-old men are

“Girls apply to college in higher numbers than boys, they are better prepared and they are more likely to be accepted. Once in college, they do better than their male counterparts.”

having trouble. Young boys nowadays have few responsible masculine role models. So they end up hanging on to out-of-date male stereotypes.”

Moreover, there is a link between fathers dropping out of their family and boys dropping out of school. In a society with more and more single-parent families headed by women, this problem is accentuated. American studies have demonstrated that divorce and separation affect boys more than girls, and that boys from these families tend to drop out of school at a higher rate than girls. As one elementary school teacher remarked, “Boys who achieve well in my class are children who take on their responsibilities and who come from families

where the father is present.” Another teacher added that “boys who have problems don't live in traditional families. They only see their father occasionally.”

Schools: The problem or the solution?

... A recent study by the Superior Council of Education suggested that the fact that women outnumbered men in university could be retraced right back to the elementary level where boys already lag behind girls. Furthermore, the report stated, the advantage girls have over boys at the elementary level is decisive for the rest of their schooling. This led the authors of the study to ask the crucial question: Why do boys have such difficulties in elementary school? One answer many teachers gave was straightforward: the absence of male role models. Female teachers make up 85 per cent of all elementary-school teachers. From the very start, elementary school seems to be assimilated to a feminine universe. Early on, boys start to identify ideal school behaviour and teachers' expectations as feminine models.

Not all teachers accept this explanation. As one teacher commented, “... I've been teaching for 26 years and schools have changed quite a lot over that period, but one thing hasn't changed: in elementary school, girls do better than boys. It is simply that girls at that age are different from boys: girls tend to work harder and show more interest. They are not more intelligent, but more mature. The boys are more restless, more aggressive, often in conflict with their peers and authority figures.” Another teacher put it bluntly: “girls respond more positively



For many boys, going to class and getting good marks have become feminine values which they reject for fear of becoming effeminate.

to what school expects of them, such as obedience, attention and cleanliness” ...

The next generation

Whereas few men are training for the traditionally feminine fields of kindergarten and elementary-school teaching, the opposite trend is occurring among women training for the traditionally male university-based fields ... Of the traditionally masculine fields of study at the Université de Montréal, the majority of students in only one, engineering, remains masculine. In every other field – law, medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, busi-

ness administration, etc. – the majority of students are women. Consider the example of the university's school of veterinary medicine. In 1975, 28 per cent of students were women; in 1992, the rate was 73.5 per cent. The first-year class today consists of 60 women (81 per cent) and 14 men.

If the absence of men in their thirties and forties in the home as responsible role models for the adolescent boys of today helps account for those boys' problems at school, what will happen to their male offspring? What kind of role models will they be able to provide for their adolescent sons 20 years from now? It's time we addressed this question. ■

How a democracy can best invest in its people

A timely proposal

by Tom Kent

If YOUR HOME IS POOR, IF YOUR PARENTS HAVE LITTLE EDUCATION, if neither home nor neighbourhood has many facilities for mental stimulation, if you go to school hungry, lethargic and resentful, then only a combination of exceptional talent and luck will take you to a good job ... For most children of the poor, the likelier outcome is unsatisfying, poorly paid work, or none ...

Income supplementation on any realistic scale will not do much to lessen youthful disadvantage. Opportunities will be made substantially less unequal only if family incomes are improved in the context of a social infrastructure that provides for poorer children some of the advantages – in health, mental stimulation, confidence, information, socialization – enjoyed by the offspring of more fortunate parents.

Such measures would target children directly. As an investment in the Canadian

future, they would be considerably more cost-effective than a massive program of income supplementation. They would have far readier public support. They should thus be appealing to politicians with sound heads as well as hearts.

Beyond cost sharing

The measures required are essentially provincial responsibilities. In the past we have nevertheless established national policies by means of federal cost-sharing for consistent provincial programs. The device is time-

honoured, and social reformers continue to call for it, but it is outworn. For 20 years the federal government has been progressively renegeing on the commitments to cost-sharing with which it induced the provinces into medicare, comprehensive social assistance, greatly expanded postsecondary education. The Chrétien government has completed the process. It will not reverse direction. For the foreseeable future there is no possibility that federal politicians will return to their 1960s' willingness to impose federal taxes and to fund programs for which provincial politicians get the credit. Indeed, even if Ottawa underwent a miraculous reconversion, the provinces would not trust it again: they would not undertake programs on a promise of federal money that again might not endure.

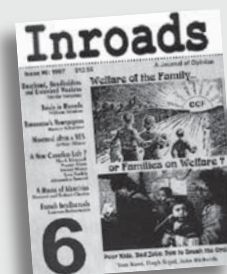
A national policy of investment in human capital therefore now requires different instruments. Given the constitution, the federal government will still be involved in financing programs delivered by the provinces. But the involvement can be directed in purpose and made politically sound. In essence, my proposal is that, instead of the old sharing of costs over the broad sweep of major provincial responsibilities – medicare, social assistance, postsecondary education – the federal government should reimburse the provinces for the full cost, 100 per cent, of certain specific services. They

will be services needed for human resource development. They will be delivered by the provinces at standards agreed with the provinces and costed by agreed methods.

There is no constitutional barrier to this. It is free from the electoral ambiguities of cost-sharing: federal dollars are not lost in the broad sweep of provincial activities but are identified with particular services to which federal politicians can point and claim credit for their full funding. By the same token, the provinces are not at risk of the unilateral downloading that has discredited cost-sharing; federal politicians will be too identified with the services to withdraw their funding without incurring the full political damage themselves.

This approach to human resource development is practicable provided federal and provincial governments maintain the attitude they have lately shown, recognizing the need for genuinely national social policy: not federal, not provincial, but policy rooted in national collaboration. This means that program standards cannot either be set by one party or be left vague; services do not have to be identical across the country, but equity for Canadians requires that what federal taxes are paying for should be clearly defined through an open process of discussion leading to a maximum of agreement.

In adopting such a course the politicians of Ottawa and nine provinces will be



1997 In its 1997 issue, Inroads featured three essays on social policy, by Hugh Segal, John Richards and Tom Kent. The introduction pointed out that the typical poor are no longer old, but rather families with children, and single-parent ones in particular – half of which qualify for welfare. Segal argued for a basic income floor, insisting that nothing less can meet the needs of an age where technology is radically transforming many aspects of life. Richards disagreed: instead of guaranteeing income, we should support federal and provincial initiatives to provide earning supplements to poor families. But Kent – former adviser to Lester Pearson and senior civil servant – had a different approach.

responding democratically to the attitudes of their constituents. A sovereigntist government of Quebec will object to the process, but that cannot be accepted as a veto on the development of Canadian policy. If Quebec will not accept programs that are otherwise agreed, the sensible course is not to give up. It is to go ahead while providing financial compensation to individual Quebecers, by allowing them extra tax credits (of the refundable kind) approximating in value the federally financed services that their provincial government will not allow them to have.

With or without Quebec, the aim is to strengthen services that will make children's opportunities less dependent on the wealth or poverty of their parents. I shall examine needs and then discuss, in the light of costs, what it would be feasible to do and the stages for doing so.

Preschool education

There is growing recognition of the need to improve elementary and secondary schooling, but it would be unrealistic to suggest an active federal involvement. Our politics are too tightly wedded to education as a provincial responsibility. Of late there have been some steps toward interprovincial collaboration in improving educational standards, and there may be a useful facilitating role for the federal government – but not more.

Before and after the term of standard schooling, however, there are ample precedents for federal involvement. Ottawa participated in subsidised care for preschool children through the Canada Assistance Plan. It was involved in university financing from the 1950s and, for a time, it provided

half the cost of all postsecondary education. It has been heavily involved in loans to postsecondary students since 1964. From the 1950s Ottawa shared generously in both capital and operating costs of technical and vocational training, and from 1967 this was converted to 100 per cent payment through the purchase of training programs, mostly in provincial institutions, and direct payment of allowances to the trainees.

Federal investment in human capital can best be built on these precedents. Primary attention should go to children. The simplest way for the federal government to undertake full financial responsibility for their early development would be to issue child care vouchers, consisting of named and dated coupons. They would be available for all preschool children from, say, the age of 18 months. The vouchers would be usable at centres established or licensed by the province to provide care of high quality – that is, not only tending the children well but introducing them to the processes of learning. Appropriate standards for the qualifications and number of staff in ratio to children, and for the centre's facilities, would be agreed between Ottawa and the provinces.

The vouchers would cover the full cost of such care, as negotiated with each province – the process that has long operated for places in training courses. Ottawa would make payment, against the coupons surrendered, to the province or its licensed agents: municipalities, school boards, nonprofit groups. Where there are existing kindergarten facilities, they could be adapted to the new system and the province or school board would be relieved of their current cost. Provinces and local authorities would have a clear incentive, backed by public opinion, to establish required new facilities.

The vouchers would be universal, but parents could use them or not as they wished. Those who did not could instead surrender them to the federal revenue department in exchange for a refundable child tax credit; its value would be substantially less than that of the vouchers, but it would provide compensation for alternative child-care costs. The existing allowance for child-care expenses – a regressive measure – would become unnecessary for preschool children.

The universal availability of vouchers should not create a benefit unrelated to income. There would be, as for Old Age Security, some form of clawback. For example, parents using the vouchers might become liable to a specific federal surtax, beginning at an income somewhat above average and rising to full recovery from large incomes. For divorced parents, the surtax would be allocated equitably in light of custodial arrangements. The alternative tax credit, for those who do not use the vouchers, would be phased out for above-average incomes at the same rate as the surtax recovery on the vouchers.

The potential cost of such child care, if all the vouchers were taken up, can be roughly estimated at some \$6–\$7 billion a year. By no means all of this would be a new cost to the economy; in part the federal money would replace current private, municipal and provincial costs. The new federal expense would be kept down to the extent that parents prefer to keep their children at home, since the new tax credits would cost the treasury considerably less than the vouchers and would be offset by savings on the existing expense allowance. Surtax recovery from higher incomes would further reduce the cost of the new program. Even so, a net estimate of \$4 billion to \$5 billion would be reasonable.

Postsecondary education

Ottawa's contribution to postsecondary education can be strengthened more simply and less expensively. The provinces' financing of universities is the extreme example of social policy providing handouts to the rich and not to the poor. Government provides most of the cost, but the fees and other expenses remain more than people with low and moderate incomes can afford – increasingly so. The gap can be bridged by student loans, but they create obligations that poorer families are sensibly reluctant to incur, and again increasingly so when employment is uncertain. Taxation therefore provides most of the cost of university for many students of modest ability who are there because, at the income level of their parents, it is where they are expected to go in their late teens and early twenties. On the outside are other young people whose futures would be transformed by higher education but who are excluded by the costs to their parents and risks for them.

A democratic policy of investment in human capital would provide loans, adequate for all the private costs of university or college attendance, available to those who satisfy appropriate admission standards, with repayment obligations fully contingent on the student's later income instead of any fixed schedule. There would then be no need for the current interest-free period. Interest at the government's borrowing rate (on its rolling short-term debt) could fairly be accumulated from the start of the loan. Apart from some administrative cost, the program would then be a charge to the taxpayer only to the extent that some loans were never fully repaid. That would be small, provided international agreements were made to

provide for income-contingent collections from those who leave Canada.

Comprehensive health care for children

If other social policies were in good shape, these two programs, for child care and postsecondary studies, would claim the top priority for federal financing. In fact there is one other even more urgent need for young people. Medicare is in disarray. Funding cuts are impairing physician and hospital services; and medicare has never been comprehensively extended, as was intended and should be, to prescribed drugs, home care, dental services, eyeglasses and other necessary aids.

These wrongs will not be righted, in the foreseeable future, by the provinces alone. Nor will there be a return to the old style of cost-sharing. The practicable way to make our health care what it should be is for the federal government to undertake full financing of comprehensive services for children. The provinces, of course, would provide the services, but Ottawa would fully reimburse them for costs attributable to patients under the age of, say, 18.

As a first stage, the reimbursement would be for physician and hospital care. The annual cost would be of the order of \$7–\$8 billion. It would be a powerful injection of federal funds. It would restore the federal government's power to collaborate with the provinces in ensuring that the cherished national principles of medicare are fully implemented.

The second phase would extend federal financing to the remaining items in comprehensive health care for children:

in-school medical, dental and eye examinations; prescribed medicines; nutritional supplements; dental treatments; eyeglasses and other aids; home nursing visits after hospitalization. Costing here is hard to estimate precisely, but \$4–\$5 billion a year would be a reasonable approximation. Some of it would replace existing provincial and municipal spending.

The total cost of these proposals is therefore of the order of \$15–\$18 billion a year. To put that into context, total federal expenditures in 1997–98 are projected to be \$152 billion.

Paying for these programs

Where would this – approximately 10 per cent – increase come from? Not from deficit financing. Though the condition of the economy should call for such pump-priming, the accumulated federal debt is too large; to pay yet more tax money to bondholders would make no sense. Extra spending requires extra revenue. Of that, there are two sources: economic growth and higher taxes.

Even in the sluggish economy on which [Finance Minister Paul] Martin cautiously bases his projections, growth this year should increase federal revenue (before the small tax reductions he is making) by some \$3 billion. If we ever reap the promised benefits from the pains of recent years, a buoyant economy will produce revenue growth, at existing taxes, of \$5 billion and more a year. That, however, is not enough to finance what we urgently need – for these programs and also for research, infrastructure and other social programs. Sound policy does not call for reducing taxes as urged by some politicians.

This is not a time to increase the rates of income tax or of GST. There is no need. We have only to lessen the many ways in which our tax system discriminates in favour of wealthy interests. Unlike other advanced countries, even the United States, we do not tax inheritances. We tax capital gains much less than earned income. We are absurdly generous in the tax relief allowed for upper-income pensions and retirement savings. Corporations are allowed to use untaxed income for many purposes (including political purposes) unnecessary to the businesses for which they are chartered. We give corporations interest-free loans by deferring taxation through artificially rapid depreciation. We even subsidize their borrowing to buy each other.

And so on. Government revenues could be increased by billions of dollars without adding a cent to taxes as most people experience them. And, contrary to self-interested pleas, such tax reforms would not hurt the economy. Its competitiveness and enterprise would be strengthened by a better tax system. Not, however, in a day. Constructive, careful tax reform will be put into place only over a period of years.

Phasing in the programs

It follows, not surprisingly, that all the expenditures proposed are not for this year or next. They will have to be phased in over three or four years of economic growth and tax changes. What is most important is that the commitment to investing in our children through these policies should be firm and plain from the beginning. Then people and provinces and, most particularly, health and educational institutions can confidently plan

how to manage additional resources to best advantage.

The proposals fall into three roughly equal phases: first, financing existing medicare services for children; second, preschool care; third, extended services that would make health care for children complete. The reform of postsecondary student loans could be fitted in at any stage. As the programs take effect, more youth will be ready for university and technological education; and there will be scope for more effective retraining of the middle-aged.

If, instead, government yields to the temptation to lower taxes soon, it will be repeating, in a different form, the profligate errors of the 1970s and 1980s. Then, con-

Government revenues could be increased by billions of dollars without adding a cent to taxes as most people experience them.

sumption was sustained by accumulating the vast debts to foreigners that still constrain us. If we are wiser now, we will recognize fully that, faced with contemporary technological advance and the economic globalization that accompanies it, the employment and living standards of a rich country depend on the quality of its workers, on their science and their skills. Most of the investment required is public investment, as education in democratic societies has long been. We will not make opportunities equal; we are too individualistic for that. But we will combat rising inequality, to an extent that reconciles the requirements of technology with enhancing democracy. We will enjoy the fruits of a sustainable economy and a harmonious society if we have the good sense to invest in securing their foundations. ■

The flight from politics

Why neither Left nor Right plays the game any more

by Reg Whitaker

SINCE THE CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS CAME INTO effect in 1982, there has been both praise and criticism of its effects on Canadian democracy. Enthusiasts claim the Charter has been inclusionary, helping make room for previously excluded or marginalized citizens, thus widening and deepening democratic participation. Critics have blasted the Charter and the “rights talk” that has come in its wake as inherently undemocratic. Puzzlingly, this criticism has come from critics on opposite sides of the ideological divide. Marxist legal scholar Michael Mandel has excoriated the “legalization of politics.” Yet from the Right, Ted Morton and Rainer Knopff are equally hostile. They see the Charter facilitating the evasion of democratic political negotiation ...

Peter Russell, writing from a more centrist position, issued an early warning of the effects of transferring policy-making from

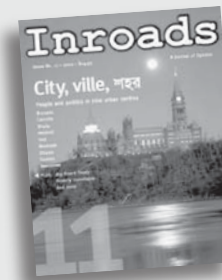
the legislative to the judicial branch. This would, he argued, represent “a further flight from politics, a deepening disillusionment with the procedures of representative government and government by discussion as means of resolving fundamental questions of political justice.” I take Russell’s words as my text, noting that he referred to a “*further* flight from politics” and a “*deepening* disillusionment with the procedures.” The flight from politics is a deeper, wider and more worrying phenomenon than scholars squabbling over the Charter of Rights have usually allowed.

Morton and Knopff see the emergence of a Court Party, a leftist amalgam of centralizers, “equality seekers,” “social engineers,” civil libertarians, and “postmaterialists,” all intent on winning enforceable victories in court that they have failed to win through the electoral and legislative processes. This party is, they assert, fundamentally authoritarian, since it has failed to win consent in the democratic marketplace. This is a partial view. There is a flight from politics, but it is more widespread than Charter litigation alone. Nor is it simply a left-wing phenomenon. The Right, too, has attempted to flee the political arena rather than fight democratically, and to impose its preferred policy solutions upon the country by fiat. This has largely taken the form of locking Canada into global economic regulatory regimes, international commercial agreements and binding dispute resolution mechanisms which impose neoliberal agendas and constrain governments, both federal and provincial, from using a variety of collective policy instruments. This too is a “legalization of politics” and generates many of the same antidemocratic effects, although for different purposes.

The specific origins of this general flight from politics can be situated in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was in this period that emergent trends in Canada coincided

and reinforced one another. The challenge to federalism of Quebec nationalism moved into a new phase with the sovereignty movement. At the same time, a long-term decline in deference to hierarchy and authority had begun in the rest of Canada, undermining the existing mechanisms of elite accommodation that had served to hold the country together in the past, and exacerbating the task of meeting the sovereigntist challenge. This was the specific Canadian variant of a legitimacy crisis, but there was another crisis, more widely based, in this period.

Conservative thinkers and business-oriented think tanks (such as the Trilateral Commission) began developing an “ungovernability” argument, that democratic governments were being swamped by “demand overload,” as previously quiescent sections of the democratic citizenry began raising their voices and the stakes of redistribution. Retroactively, conservatives waging the cultural wars of the 1980s and 1990s looked back at the 1960s and 1970s as the era when consensus broke down, anarchy broke out and the delicate fabric of social and cultural order was seriously rent. Left-wing observers have been more sanguine, even romantic, about the last era when social justice seemed a leading priority, and new possibilities were opening up after the stifling conformity of the 1950s had begun to dissipate. Dispas-



2002 In 2002, it looked as if Liberal domination of the federal political scene would go on forever. Reg Whitaker, longtime member of York University’s political science department who had recently moved to Victoria, B.C., saw the one-party nature of federal politics as part of a broader phenomenon he called the “flight from politics,” which he explored in a major article in *Inroads*. Both the Left and the Right participated in the flight from politics, he argued. Unable to command electoral victories, the Left substituted rights talk. The Right, not content to have won many electoral victories over the last two decades, sought to constrain government discretion by ambitious international trade agreements. The result was a serious democratic deficit. Here we present an abridged version of Whitaker’s article.

sionately, we can say, whatever spin one puts on it, that this period was one in which the political ante was being dramatically upped, at the same time as the rules of the game were being challenged. This was an explosive combination. We are still feeling the fallout.

The Left's challenge: Embedding social rights

Morton and Knopff's picture of the Court Party is a bit of a caricature, but they do have one good point. The Left in Canada never made the transition from the margin to the mainstream through building a mass socialist or social democratic party capable of seriously contesting national political office. The New Right did do this, with the rapid emergence of the Reform/Canadian Alliance, a party that not only showed remarkable growth capacity, starting from scratch, but also appropriated "democracy" from the Left in the process. While the Alliance now seems stalled outside the corridors of power, its past performance in helping transform the dominant political discourse in Canada should not be discounted.

The Left did change the discourse as well, but failed to follow up with the kind of political work that has made Reform/Alliance so influential in policy terms. Having placed culture, identity, gender, ethnicity, race and sexuality on the agenda, the Left was largely diverted from political action in the traditional parliamentary sense, and instead focused on consciousness raising, protest, rights recognition and the pursuit of litigation rather than legislation. The ironic result has been that the new identity politics has generated a reaction in the form of

right-wing populism that has been relatively more successful in the electoral arena, and has impeded, although not defeated, the Left's attempt at winning cultural hegemony for its ideas. However, the New Right has been more or less a sideshow in relation to the larger response of the neoliberal Right, described later. There is a huge literature on Charter litigation. I am more interested in the wider political implications and effects of the rise of rights talk as a dominant left-wing discourse. At any rate, rights talk preceded the Charter. One could even argue that the Charter was the result of the rise of rights talk, rather than the reverse.

Situating the Charter in its political and historical context, it is evident that its appearance on the agenda was as a political tool enabling the Trudeau government to partially divert attention away from a different kind of rights talk that had begun to dominate constitutional discourse in Canada: the right to national self-determination of Quebec and its potential for either breaking up federalism or forcing its radical decentralization. When eight premiers opposed Trudeau's patriation plan in 1981, the proposed addition of the Charter to the package focused popular support. A wide variety of groups testified about what ought to be in a Charter, subtly shifting attention away from what had been the primary question – certainly for Quebec – of the legitimacy of unilateral patriation itself. But the widening of the constitutional field beyond the traditional question of the collective rights and jurisdictions of governments to encompass the rights of individual citizens and groups in civil society could not have been as successful a political tactic, had not the ground already been prepared by a prior and fundamental shift in the society.

It is not difficult to understand the motives that led the Left of the post-1960s toward emphasis on rights over parliamentary politics. The old social democratic Left had opted primarily for the parliamentary route, embodied in the organic relationship between the trade unions and the NDP. Its successors were generally marked by a pervasive sense of exclusion or at least marginalization from political institutions. In reality, trade union affiliation with a political party stalled indefinitely in third-party status in national politics was a sign not of the influence of the union movement but of its ineffectuality.

The new groups seeking to place their concerns on the political agenda could not fail to note that business, by playing both of the two mainstream brokerage parties, and by bringing influence to bear directly on the policy process via pressure groups and business associations, had incomparably more success than labour. Feminists, Aboriginals, environmentalists, racial minorities, gays and lesbians did not abandon the party political field altogether. There was, however, a tendency to concentrate on mobilizing pressure to bear on the institutions of policy-making, often directly on the bureaucracy, or indirectly on the parliamentary parties through organizing demonstrations of their supporters. This had the advantage that purity of ideals and fidelity to group interest could be maintained more easily. Activists who opted for party politics were condemned as sellouts by their former comrades.

There was another reason to bypass political parties, although in retrospect this appears as a warning sign of problems for the Left. Parties, even self-styled "democratic" parties like the NDP, are inevitably, in plural-

ist societies, brokerage institutions, despite their ideological tag and their trade union affiliation. Getting minority-group policy concerns onto the party platform usually involves the kind of policy brokering, the tradeoffs and compromises, that previously marginalized groups have identified as structural barriers to their recognition. Faced with the gritty reality of making deals and playing old-fashioned coalition politics even in pursuit of movement ideals, many shrank back in revulsion ...

As the political history of the past decade shows only too clearly, however, extraparliamentary activity imposes a different set of costs. Groups operating from relatively

Faced with the gritty reality of making deals and playing old-fashioned coalition politics even in pursuit of movement ideals, many shrank back in revulsion.

narrowly defined bases can be perceived as "special interests" opposed to the public good. However infuriating this designation may be to movement people, and however much the application of the special interest category has been decried and denounced by writers in, or sympathetic to, the movements, this interpretation has in a sense defined the terms of political discourse on behalf of the new Right. Reform/Alliance formulates a concept of the general will of the people that is directly opposed to the selfish, albeit fragmented, minority wills of the special interests. Moreover, the Right has largely succeeded in popularizing its own partial view. When neoliberal governments intent on imposing their agendas face weak, fragmented opposition in parliaments, opposition spills into the streets and labour

disruptions, as in Ontario during the initial wave of the Common Sense Revolution from 1995 to 1999, or in British Columbia in 2002 under the Liberal government of Gordon Campbell. The “special interest” focus of the street opposition tends to be utilized by the government in its own defence, emphasizing successfully that it alone speaks for the general or public good.

As for the tactic of acting directly on the bureaucracy, liberal bureaucrats quickly learned how to absorb and co-opt some of the energies of the social movements with special targeted programs and largely symbolic representational gains. Feminists were put in charge of programs targeting women’s groups. Multicultural programs were, and are, a relatively cheap way of paying off party supporters in the ethnic communities with taxpayer dollars and minor positions on boards and panels, etc. Pay and employment equity programs are representational ghettos for minority spokespersons. Representation becomes something of an end in itself, partially displacing more substantive policy goals, and is more easily satisfied by government, at a lower price tag.

In this context, it is not surprising that the Left has laid heavy focus on rights. For previously marginalized groups seeking favourable policy outcomes, but suspicious of using the route of party politics, rights are a kind of currency to be deployed for strategic advantage. Capital may hold the big properties on the Monopoly board, but rights are also properties on the same board ...

Rights-driven political discourse on the Left has a number of victories to its credit, enough that activists continue to lean heavily on rights talk. The paradox is that

it is precisely these victories that generate ever more concerted opposition from the Right. Morton and Knopff are right that the “Court party,” taking this characterization at face value for the moment, is a result of political failure, and rights talk a substitute for confronting the Right in the electoral arena. But in any event, the Right had a more powerful riposte in store than politics alone.

The Right’s answer: “Economic constitutionalization”

By the mid-1970s, the “ungovernability” of liberal democracies had fostered the monetarist revolution that swept through Western treasury departments more rapidly and completely than Keynesianism had in the 1940s. The coincidence of high inflation and high unemployment (“stagflation”) discredited Keynesian fiscal management, but more importantly, monetarism, or supply-side economics, concealed a thinly veiled *political* response to the political forces that had grown to threaten business ascendancy in the earlier decade. Thatcherism and Reaganism represented the political counterattack to trade unions and social movements, first seizing the Conservative party from the “wets” and the Republican party from the “liberals,” then taking command of the national policy agenda to strike at their opponents. They were not, however, content simply to win the immediate battles, and then settle in for the inevitable swing of the pendulum back in the other direction.

Instead, faced with a new sense of “entitlement,” a rights consciousness on the part of those groups previously marginalized, and stiff resistance to rollbacks and downsizing

of the welfare state and the power of unions, they sought ways of placing their neoliberal agenda beyond the reach of politics and politicians. The Right had come to believe that democracy itself could be a threat to capitalism if social rights and entitlements were permitted to become a permanent part of the structure of democratic decision-making. It was, however, now considered equally futile to combat this threat by the ordinary politics of compromise and negotiation (the post-Keynesian consensus politics of the 1950s as practised by the Churchill-Macmillan Tories and the Eisenhower Republicans), or to contest it on the Left’s own terrain, that of the embedding of social rights.

Globalization is an important part of the Right’s riposte, which is why, in the early 21st century, “anticorporate” and “antiglobalization” movements are more or less synonymous. As is well understood on all sides, economic globalization takes policy tools out of the hands of democratically accountable governments and places them beyond the reach of political parties, activists and the associations of civil society to lobby or influence. Even if the “wrong” people get in charge of national states, they can do less damage than they could in the past because they have fewer tools with which to do damage. The pressures of international competitiveness are insistent and, from the point of view of the Left, insidious in sapping the capacity of political actors to even imagine credible collective solutions to social inequalities, let alone set in motion redistributionist forces that might undermine competitiveness.

Globalization need not be an abstract concept. It is embodied in specific international agreements binding on the signatory states. In Canada’s case, we might

start with the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, expanded into NAFTA and perhaps next into the proposed Free Trade Agreement of the Americas. When the original bilateral deal was being negotiated in the late 1980s, Ronald Reagan provided a prescient metaphor when he declared that the proposed agreement would form the “economic constitution of North America.” Constitutions are the fundamental laws, the ground rules, structuring the roles of the governors and the governed, majorities and minorities, and the relations between individuals and groups. Neither party to the

Economic globalization takes policy tools out of the hands of democratically accountable governments. Even if the “wrong” people get in charge of national states, they can do less damage than they could in the past.

first agreement wanted anything to do with political superstructures, *à la* Europe. But they were quick to see the advantages of an “economic constitution” in structuring the roles of the public and private sectors and setting enforceable limits on public policy that would constrain future governments from acting irresponsibly and threatening free markets ...

Once in place, crucial clauses in these trade agreements closed certain doors forever to policy-makers in Canada. Most notable are the continental energy resource rules that clearly make another National Energy Program, like that of the Trudeau Liberals in the early 1980s, not merely politically impractical, but illegal (“unconstitutional,” in effect). Of course, the Trudeau-era NEP was

a policy disaster unlikely to be repeated. But the general point is significant: *any* future energy resource policy that is designed to serve primarily the Canadian national interest, as opposed to continental and global markets, is not permissible. In the early 1980s, Alberta fought Ottawa bitterly over the NEP, and the Mulroney Tories pledged to scrap the entire program.

Once in office, they were better than their word – with the FTA in their pocket, they insured that no subsequent government could ever mount anything like the NEP again. Thus the ordinary politics of give and take have been trumped by the extraordinary politics of fundamental rule setting, by the constitutionalization of politics.

Any future energy resource policy that is designed to serve primarily the Canadian national interest, as opposed to continental and global markets, is not permissible.

In the immediate aftermath of the implementation of the FTA, there was another telling example of constraints imposed on Canadian policy-makers. Privatization of state enterprise and the ascendancy of the market over “politics” are high on the neoliberal agenda. Although existing Crown corporations are protected, any future attempt to use this policy instrument runs afoul of clauses permitting American corporations operating in Canada to sue for compensation for future business lost when government enters the market to provide goods or services. The Ontario NDP had a longstanding promise to nationalize private automobile insurance if elected. The NDP had done just that in Manitoba, Saskatch-

ewan and British Columbia. (Parenthetically, it might be noted that even free-market economists acknowledge that public automobile insurance can reduce costs by rationalizing administrative infrastructure, and consolidating insurance with licensing, government safety checks, etc.) Yet when the NDP won the Ontario election of 1990, they did not press ahead with their promise. Instead, they hired Canada’s former free trade negotiator, Simon Reisman, to assess the potential liability to American private insurers under the FTA if Ontario proceeded with nationalization. On Reisman’s advice, the NDP dropped the plan altogether. This has obvious implications in other potential areas for public enterprise. Thus an important element in the social democratic policy agenda has been permanently blocked, and the neoliberal market-driven alternative has been enshrined in the “constitutional” fabric ...

The anxiety of capital to move rule-making out of the reach of meddling at the national state level is driven by ideology, of course, but also by the more straightforward concern for predictability. Investment is future-oriented and thus risky; it also leaves investors exposed to changes in the rules that may affect their returns. Thus binding international rules are like entrenched charters of rights for capital. The adjudication of these rights has taken an interesting turn that reinforces the argument I am making. Increasingly, disputes arising from international business activities are being resolved by binding resolution mechanisms. Some of these are institutionalized in agreements like NAFTA and the WTO. Decisions, however distasteful they may be to individual parties and at whatever cost to national practices, have to be accepted.

Less widely noticed than these treaty arrangements is the equivalent growth of supra- (or extra-) national dispute resolution mechanisms for conflicts arising among transnational corporations, none of whom are willing to see their disputes submitted to the legal jurisdiction of any particular state. Out there, in the global space of flows, is a burgeoning case law for what amounts to transnational corporate jurisprudence. There is thus a double democratic displacement at work – not only are the “constitutional” rules being drawn up out of the reach of democratically accountable institutions, but the adjudication of this new body of global “rights” is also taking place out of reach of democratic oversight ...

Halting the flight?

There is some reason to believe that the flight from politics may finally be drawing to a close. Incessant rights talk on all sides has resulted in an impasse, and a growing revulsion against a democratic deficit that is multifaceted and innocent of particular ideology. The very domination of national politics by one party, itself an indication of democratic malaise, bears within it the seeds of democratic regeneration. The political success of the Liberals has been defined against the background of the turn in party politics in 1993 toward new programmatic, ideological parties. The BQ and Reform were in a sense both products of the flight from the old brokerage politics of compromise and negotiation, and each arose on the ashes of the Mulroney Tories, the brokerage that failed. Reform has changed its name, twice changed its leader, splintered, and is now seeking to reestablish a sense of direction.

The split between the CA and the PCs remains. The BQ’s sole ideological *raison d’être*, sovereignty, is going nowhere, and the BQ is drifting with it.

The Liberals have succeeded in this landscape not simply because their opponents are fragmented and hopeless, but because the Liberals have seized the potential ground from them. They have done this because they alone have kept alive the brokerage principle and the arts of political prudence and compromise. Unfashionable as these arts have appeared since the 1960s, and however fatal they proved to the Tories, they remain practical requirements for national governance in a pluralist society. In aid of one-party rule, they appear to bolster the democratic deficit. But they also offer the way forward for the return of party competition and a healthier democratic debate. For this to happen, the rhetoric of rights must be ratcheted down, and the constitutionalization of politics rolled back. The self-interest of party politicians may be the best reason to believe that such a development will take place ...

If there is any positive effect of the terrible events of September 11, it has been to refocus attention on the health of the community as a whole, and on the state as an instrument with a positive role to play in protecting and supporting the civil society – not privileged parts of it, but all of it. When everyone begins to realize that the entire enterprise of placing their own interests out of the reach of others, and thus out of the reach of political negotiation, is self-defeating, the sooner we can return to the prosaic terrain of ordinary politics: the compromises, tradeoffs and half-loaves that indicate mutual respect and the recognition of one’s own limits. ■

Ideology and the media

An insider's look at how newspapers work

by Harvey Schachter

WORKING IN A LARGE NEWSROOM QUICKLY SHOWED ME HOW limited the scope of my supposedly wide interests were, as I met people obsessed with things that I had little time for. It taught me to be very broad-minded in making news judgements and to listen to others when I became a senior editor, because no one person can make good judgements for the vast audiences that the mass news media hope to serve, even though many editors delude themselves into thinking they can.

If you ponder the classic (and sexist) picture of a newspaper arriving in a home, with the husband lunging for politics and business, the wife for the lifestyle section and local news, the son for sports and the daughter for entertainment, you realize that journalists are serving very wide interests. A story that may seem ludicrous to you on the front page or even in the paper at all can be exactly right for someone else. It's

easy to call the editor a fool or the publisher money-hungry or the whole bunch of them ideological zealots when you see something you don't like. It's harder to acknowledge that the person opposite you at the breakfast table, or your neighbour or colleague at work, may approve of their judgement.

Too often we get upset when we find something we don't like in the newspaper, and we want to suppress it. Leftists don't want articles about how to make money in the stock market; the right doesn't want to hear about the deteriorating environment. And generally, they are drawn to the things

they hate like moths to a light. Often without actually reading those articles, people mark them in their memory as a daily outrage and a sign of the bias or stupidity of the editors. When I was editor of the Kingston Whig-Standard, many people went out of their way to tell me they hated the humour-family columnist – for, among other things, his columns on his sweetheart making him cheesecake. “Don't read his column,” I would tell them. “Lots of people love it but you can skip it. There's a lot of other stuff you'll like in the paper.” But that just proved to them how dumb or blind I was.



The tyranny of time

To understand the news media, it is necessary to realize just how quickly everything is put together ... The vast majority of the journalism you read or hear is done in one work shift, and sometimes much less.

Think back to the last significant report you wrote at work and then imagine that, like a journalist, you were given the assignment at 9 a.m. and expected to file at 5 p.m. Then imagine that the subject is something you know little about, as is the case for

“general” reporters, those not regularly covering a specific subject.

Noam Chomsky talks about compression – how the media tighten and shorten everything, distorting reality. Indeed, but another key form of compression is that of the time within which journalists work ...

As someone who had always worked for afternoon papers, I can remember my shock when I attended an all-candidates debate in

Montreal for the 1989 NDP leadership race. Former British Columbia premier Dave Barrett had just entered the race, creating real competition for the front-runner, Audrey McLaughlin, and giving the evening some glitz. It would also be the first opportunity for the media to assess the candidates' ability under fire in French. The event started at 7 p.m. – after the candidates, in recognition of deadlines, were briefly scammed by the reporters. When the second speaker had finished, my friend Ross Howard, covering it for the Globe, started tapping on his portable computer, mystifying me. Then he whispered, “Do you have a lede?” I responded, “A lede? We've only heard two speakers and McLaughlin and Barrett are scheduled to speak fifth and sixth. It's too early for a lede!”



WINTER/SPRING 2003 Harvey Schachter, the former Toronto Star reporter and Kingston Whig-Standard editor who has moderated the Inroads listserv since its inception in 1997, is a thoughtful observer of media in all their forms (see his reflections on electronic communication in general and the Inroads listserv in particular on p. 30). His extensive newspaper experience has made him skeptical of simplistic explanations of how journalistic decisions are made, and he expressed that skepticism in an illuminating article in the Winter/Spring 2003 issue, an abridged version of which is presented here.

Wrong. “I have to file for the early edition in half an hour,” he informed me. I had often seen radio reporters leave meetings to file and would often pity the Globe reporter at education board meetings when she had to sneak out to file at meetings that ran late. But the NDP incident made a special impact because it struck me that that story was going to be in an archive, stumbled upon by some researcher who would wonder how the Globe could cover a leadership debate and not quote the two main candidates. Obvious bias against the NDP by the corporate press, right? ...

I didn't know how accurate those fears were until about five years later, when a fellowship at Queen's University gave me the opportunity to familiarize myself with

A story that may seem ludicrous to you on the front page or even in the paper at all can be exactly right for someone else.

the academic literature on the media. In the many supposedly learned studies on the news media, time was generally dismissed in a sentence or a phrase as a minor factor in explaining why the media did what they did, on those rare occasions when it was mentioned at all.

The academics were missing something important. When you see something dumb in newspapers, start with the premise that time could well have played a significant role. While I was editor of the Whig-Standard, it joined the North American shift to morning delivery of newspapers. This meant that I would come into the office about 8:30 a.m. as the early-bird reporters were receiving their assignments. I attended a news meeting at 11 a.m. in which we discussed evolving

stories and identified new ones to be foisted on unlucky reporters. We were back at 5 p.m. to hear how those stories were faring, guess what might happen at meetings taking place that night, and decide what would go on page one.

It was rare that we would have read any stories at this point, although we might read some before going home. Most of them were still being written, and then there were the events yet to take place: the famed dinner speaker, whom we had to judge by his or her track record, or the council meeting, whose importance we would guess at by the agenda, leaving a hole to be filled on page one. (Council meetings are important to a small newspaper. Afternoon delivery allowed the reporter to stay until the end of the meeting and often write until dawn to get all the information to readers. Now the reporter had to leave the meeting at 10 p.m., while the councillors were still sparring, and return to the office to write whatever he or she could by 11:30 p.m., with one eye to the television set broadcasting the meeting.)

I'd leave the office somewhere between 6 and 7 p.m., with a second team – not privy to the full details of our early morning discussions, since they were asleep at the time – left to close the paper and handle any news that occurred that evening. There were many mornings when I would look at the front page over my breakfast to find things that astonished or depressed me – no doubt, just as they did many readers. And, of course, much of the guts of the paper beyond the main stories would be unknown to me, put together by subeditors. News is a 24-hour-a-day operation, done hastily, and while it can be controlled in some aspects, in other aspects it is totally out of control of the editor or publisher.

The issue of time is becoming even more important as more newspaper and television outlets turn to the Web to deliver breaking news. Everything is getting faster and faster. The style of radio – quick bursts of updated information – is the only way to operate in such circumstances: more mistakes, fewer insights. In a Web future, that style could predominate ...

The New York Times's pro-Palestinian photos

Let's close with a test – another real-life incident. The New York Times recently came under attack for its coverage of two demonstrations on a Sunday, one pro-Palestinian and the other pro-Israeli. The page one picture of its Monday paper was of the Palestinian demonstration and the largest picture inside when the story continued was yet again of that same demonstration, rather than the pro-Israel group.

Obvious bias, from a paper that has taken to criticizing Israel's actions in its editorials?

Let me tell you how I interpret something like this. I immediately seize on the fact that it's Monday. Monday is the least important paper of the week. Editors, like most people, prefer to work Monday to Friday, but the Times also needs some strong people on Saturday, putting out the prize Sunday edition. Few senior editors are around late Sunday afternoon judging pictures – a competent team is present, but not in the same league as late afternoon during the week.

I have never seen a photographer or photo editor judge a picture by its political context. They look at what grabs people. Most editors act the same way. When all the possible

pictures are laid out side by side on a photo desk, certain ones leap out at you. If another one leaps out at somebody else, there's an argument – but it's over which catches your attention, and why. Sometimes the place the picture appears will enter the discussion, because you don't want the direction the key person in the photo is looking to turn readers away from the story.

The fact that there were two demonstrations by opposing groups – and, in effect, opposing readers – would only insert itself in the decision-making if somebody, generally a senior editor, was thinking politically, aware of the howls of outrage that he or she would field unless each side got roughly equal coverage.

The New York Times apologized the day after. But the real questions are:

- Did it make a mistake?
- Did it make a political decision?
- Would playing one photo big from each demonstration, to reflect the outside politics, have actually have been a more political decision than what actually occurred?

I don't know. But I hope that you ask similar questions when you next encounter a journalistic outrage. Like all other organizations in society – think of where you work, for example – news operations are inhabited by less-than-perfect souls, can be blinkered, and can screw up. Yes, political ideology plays a role in journalism in editorials, columns and even news decisions and news writing. But other factors – notably time, journalistic norms, the ideology of oppositionalism and confusion about what is news – are often more important factors in giving us the media we love to hate and rarely understand. ■

The NDP under new leadership

Still a bit player unless institutions change

by Henry Milner

THERE ARE THREE PARTY LEADERSHIP CONTESTS GOING ON IN Canada. The most immediate, if not the best publicized, is that of the NDP. The New Democrats have three experienced, competent and articulate candidates, working hard to be chosen for a job that the prevailing wisdom regards as thankless as well as hopeless. Yet there are many, and not only within the NDP, who would like the prevailing wisdom to be wrong, and hope that new leadership will change the fortunes of the NDP. Indeed, given the state of federal politics today, who could not wish to see a more forceful NDP presence?

When it comes to basic values, the NDP is not really off in left field. Generally speaking, Canadian values are closer to those of Sweden, poster child of the Left, than to those of the United States. For example, in response to a question posed by the International Social Survey Programme as to whether “the government should provide

everyone with a guaranteed basic income,” 43.3 per cent of Swedes said yes, quite a bit higher than the 34.2 per cent of Americans in agreement, but *lower* than Canada’s 48.3 per cent. Bill Blaikie was not far off the mark when he launched his leadership campaign on the theme, “We are a country with a social democratic majority. Why shouldn’t we be governed by those values?”

Why not indeed? Except that the question was just as meaningful when the NDP chose Alexa McDonough as leader not too many years ago. Has anything fundamental changed since then to render possible the

NDP’s emerging as a key political player on the federal scene? I don’t think so. The real obstacle lies neither in the quality of the NDP leaders nor in its program, but in Canada’s political institutions. Given the nature of Canada, the present institutional structure leaves little room for a party like the NDP. If I am right, then those who wish to see the NDP occupy a significant place on Canada’s national stage have first to change the country’s political institutions.

Let’s begin with ideology. NDP members vary from Blairist – as found in the policies of the NDP governments of Saskatchewan and Manitoba – to the anti-globalism of the New Politics Initiative. Not wishing to antagonize potential supporters, leadership candidates steer clear of identifying with either. In search of international inspiration, they look neither to London nor to the streets of Seattle or Genoa, but to Stockholm and Berlin.

As a longtime sympathetic observer of Scandinavian and European social democracy, I can only approve. But acting on that inspiration is problematic: continental European social democratic parties operate in a different institutional context. Unlike us, they are not prisoners of the British (Westminster) institutional model and its first-past-the-post (FPTP) system of winner-take-all elections. With local variations, FPTP imposes a two-party system – in Britain, Australia, the United States and Canadian provinces.

The two-party system works extremely well – for the two parties. If you are one of the two big parties in such a system, the strategy for winning power is simple: stay the course. Sooner or later, the electorate will want to “throw the bums out,” and you’ll get your turn. Depending on the circumstances, you can speed up the process by altering your program – as the British Labour Party did toward the end of Thatcher’s reign. Or you can ignore reality and be punished for it – like Lionel Jospin’s French Socialists. Either way, you are the government-in-waiting.

But if you are a “third party,” like the British Liberal Democrats, you await a turn that never comes. A third party can defy the relentless logic of our electoral system only if and when it can seize a rare political opportunity to replace one of the two big parties. Such an event marks a historical watershed, the last one of which was labour’s entry into the electorate in the first half of the 20th century, which made it possible for social democratic parties in Britain, Australia and New Zealand, as well as in Saskatchewan and British Columbia, to break through.

In continental Europe, labour’s entry into Parliament brought with it the consolidation of a different set of institutional arrangements built on the principle of proportional representation (PR). In PR electoral systems, party representation in the parliament – and government – reflects support in the



WINTER/SPRING 2003 This editorial, written in late 2002, blends two themes dear to the heart of Inroads’ co-founder, and, coincidentally, taken up frequently – in different guises – in various issues. The first is learning from practical European social democrats; the second concerns the need to reform our political, especially electoral, institutions.

population. The votes parties receive reflects the overall support for their program, and the seats they get reflect those votes. Every vote counts equally irrespective of the party's local strength or weakness. Social democratic parties and social democratic principles have thrived in this institutional environment. For one thing, it brings more people with lower levels of education and income to the polls – people more likely to vote for social democrats and benefit from their policies. Moreover, by guaranteeing them fair representation even if they fall into third place or worse, a PR institutional environment allows parties united by principle to express, discuss and develop their programs in a time frame well beyond the next election. And by making room for Green and doctrinaire left-wing parties, PR takes the pressure off social democratic parties: they do not have to appeal to single-minded pacifists, Greens, feminists, etc.

Over the long haul, the combination of practicality and ideological consistency allowed by the continental institutional environment has been the European social democratic parties' key to success. It has meant that whether they do well – as did the Swedish Social Democrats this September, winning 40 per cent of the vote – or badly – as did their Norwegian cousins a year earlier, winning barely a quarter of the vote – they are assured of remaining key players.

Unfortunately, inspired as the NDP may be by the ideas of continental social democrats, their strategy is not available in Canada. In our winner-take-all institutional environment, the NDP has to be concerned first and foremost with winning enough seats to survive – and that means allocating limited resources to those local contests that

it has a chance of winning, and the local issues surrounding them.

Penetrating the two-party system is simply not an option. From the 1920s to the 1960s, as the welfare state was being consolidated and the Westminster countries produced a two-party system with liberal/conservatives on one side and social democrats on the other, Canada was left out. The federal CCF-NDP missed its chance during those decades, not because its leaders were inferior to their counterparts in Britain and its former colonies or because Canada is inherently more conservative, but because a party based on class was even then ill-suited for the Canadian-style regional brokerage politics played so well by the Liberals and, occasionally, the Tories. And if it was ill-suited then, it is completely off the radar screen today: with the level of redistribution more or less fixed, and large portions of the working class doing quite well, class is not a strong enough basis for the alternation needed for a two-party system, especially in a country with deep regional cleavages.

The logic of the system favours the hegemony of a single national party, the one that best captures whatever exists of a national consensus. In Canada, this is undeniably and (alas) unalterably the Liberal Party, given its resources and experience. Over the years, the Liberal Party has so well wrapped itself in the layers of Canada's national consciousness that no party can hope to dislodge it. Indeed, the other parties, associated as they are with differing regional aspirations, and further frustrated by the first-past-the-post system which exaggerates parties' regional strengths and weaknesses, have no hope of replacing the Liberals as the "Canada party." Given the electorate's

occasional desire to "kick the bums out," the Liberals can still lose an election – though as Paul Martin's anticipated anointment demonstrates, the Liberals have learned that they can stay in power even when the bums are kicked out. But even if one of the opposition parties could effectively seize on Liberal scandals to win a plurality of seats, this would only usher in a brief interregnum, certain to be shattered by its regional contradictions as was the last such interregnum, Brian Mulroney's alliance of the West and Quebec.

In any case, this is a game that Bill Blaikie, Jack Layton and Lorne Nystrom are no better equipped to play than Stephen Harper. Like the Alliance, the NDP lacks the ideological elasticity of the old parties: power in and of itself counts far less for rank-and-file NDPers than it does for their Liberal and Tory counterparts. The NDP is condemned to being a party of ideas in an institutional environment where ideas count for little.

What is the new leader to do? He must embrace institutional change ... As the next federal election draws near, the new leader will have no choice but to return to the old game: try to win a few more seats and thus gain a bit more public credibility for the party. But, in the meantime, there is something else that must be done, and that is to mobilize creative energies toward attaining institutional reform. Concretely, the party must seek a formal agreement of all the opposition parties both to move toward electoral reform *and* to refuse to support a (Liberal) minority government that does not act to change the electoral system. And it must be prepared to campaign on this program as a means of making Canada more democratic.

Proportional representation, as noted above, helps social democratic parties by bringing people low in resources to the polls. But democracy must also be an end in itself. Under PR, the door to elected office would be opened wider for the NDP but also for the Conservatives, the Alliance and perhaps even the Greens. The true beneficiary would be democracy. Unhappily, the Canadian Left has been all too ready to sacrifice democracy for "progressive" causes, for example in its use of the Charter and the courts to circumvent the legislatures in pursuit of the rights of various groups. Thus democracy,

The Canadian Left has been all too ready to sacrifice democracy for "progressive" causes, for example in its use of the Charter and the courts to circumvent the legislatures in pursuit of the rights of various groups.

already weakened by our virtual one-party system, has suffered further.

There is clearly a public perception that something is wrong with Canada's democratic institutions. Myriad nonpartisan organizations have been formed recently to champion PR, and even the Liberals talk about institutional reform – Paul Martin claims it as a central concern, though on the crucial electoral reform dimension he is as silent as the Chrétienites.

What of the NDP? Will the new leader have an impact on the federal scene? The true test of his leadership will be his willingness and ability to place and keep electoral reform at the top of the national agenda. ■

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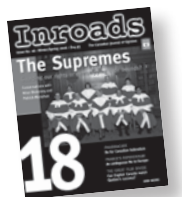
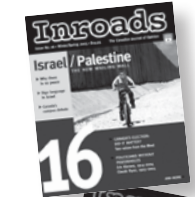
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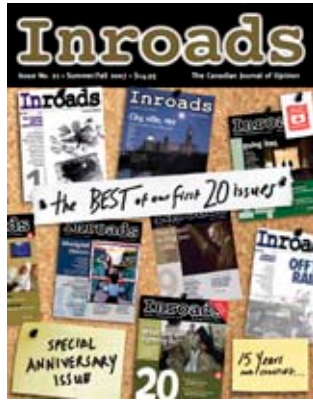
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