

# Direct democracy: Western roots, Eastern fears

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## National referendums exacerbate enduring cleavages

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For pundits poring over election results, the conventional wisdom has been that the Canadian Alliance failed to break through in Ontario because its brand of social conservatism is too extreme for that province. There is indeed a grain of truth in this explanation; but as usually stated, it is more wrong than right. It suffers from two main difficulties.

First, voters in Ontario and Western Canada do not diverge very much in their views on matters such as abortion, gay rights, capital punishment and immigration. As the Canadian National Election Study team has shown, the regional differences are either small or non-existent, depending on the issue.

Second, the Canadian Alliance does not profess social conservatism. Neither the statement of principles adopted in January, 2000, nor the campaign platform took a position on abortion or capital punishment. On gay rights, the party's position is the same one the Liberals expressed in a House of Commons resolution passed in the last session, which states that the legal status of marriage should be reserved for heterosexual unions. The Alliance cannot renounce social conservatism because it has never endorsed it.

From the birth of Reform in 1987 onward, the party's stance on moral issues favoured process over position. It called for national referendums, or, if that was impossible, free votes in Parliament in which members would represent the wishes of their constituents, not their own personal opinions.

Preston Manning worked out this process approach before he entered politics. It became crucial to the Reform party because it allowed members to put aside their differences on social issues (Reformers were as divided as other Canadians on matters such as abortion and gay rights) in order to co-operate in advocating fiscal, constitutional and political reform. It amounted to suspending disagreements, with the understanding that they would eventually be decided by direct appeal to the people.

Naturally enough, this led to adopting as party policy the holy trinity of direct democracy — referendum, initiative and recall. This might have happened anyway because direct democracy has been part of Western Canadian political culture since the Progressive era of the early 20th century, but it also served to avoid wrangling over issues of morality.

Although commitment to direct de-

mocracy did not make the party officially social conservative, it created an unofficial image of social conservatism. Advocates of traditional morality joined the party, attracted by the opportunities that direct democracy offered them to work for the causes in which they believe. Largely through espousing direct democracy, the Reform party quickly became perceived as social conservative, regardless of its official policies; and the Canadian Alliance inherited that image along with the Reform party's bank account, staff and membership.

This relationship was highlighted at a critical juncture in the recent campaign when the media obtained the Alliance candidates' briefing book, which contained the former Reform party policy that a voters' initiative would require the signatures of 3% of eligible voters in order to place a referendum question on the ballot at the next general election. Discussion focused initially on the fact that the 3% threshold had not been carried forward as Alliance policy, but political opponents quickly linked the entire concept of direct democracy to social conservative issues, especially abortion.

Unfortunately, Stockwell Day, the new Alliance leader, could not muster an effective defence of direct democracy. Not having been active in the Reform party in its early days, he may not have appreciated the central position of direct democracy in the constellation of party policy. Be that as it may, he appeared to back away from the issue, leaving the party's opponents to characterize direct democracy as a stalking horse for a hidden agenda of social conservatism. Re-

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### FROM 1987, THE REFORM PARTY'S STANCE ON MORAL ISSUES FAVOURED PROCESS OVER POSITION

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gardless of whether it was Mr. Day's fault or not, the damage was done. Direct democracy, which Reform had always considered an electoral asset as well as a central portion of its platform, was transformed into an electoral liability, at least in eastern Canada.

As Lenin so delicately put it, what is to be done? If the Alliance wants to remain a predominantly Western party, it doesn't need to do anything at all. Direct democracy is in reality a powerful vote-getter in the populist political culture of Western Canada. But if the Alliance wants to move forward in eastern Canada, it will have to revisit its commitment to direct democracy.

I was never in favour of recall, although it was part of my job to defend it, and even to develop detailed policy for it, when I was employed by the Re-

form party. Recall may be a useful idea in the American system, where office-holders run and are judged as individuals; but it meshes poorly with the parliamentary system, according to which Members of Parliament run — and are largely judged — as a party team.

Now I am having second thoughts about applying the referendum and the initiative at the federal level of Canadian politics. In the United States, these devices are extensively employed at the state and local levels, but not federally. In advocating direct democracy for Canada as a whole, the Reform/Alliance went much further than the American model from which it drew inspiration.

The problem with direct democracy at the national level is its tendency to exacerbate enduring cleavages. When people are asked to vote on policy matters in a referendum, or to draft policy in an initiative, they readily filter things through their linguistic, ethnic or regional identities. This happened in all three national referendums that Canada has held (1898 on prohibition, 1942 on conscription, 1992 on the Charlottetown accord). In each case, a yawning gulf emerged between Quebec and the rest of Canada. The two sovereignty referendums within Quebec also produced this kind of gap between francophones and anglophones in that province.

If the Alliance wants to pursue its dream of power, it should seriously ponder this self-described "view from the trenches" sent to me after the election by a campaign manager in an Ontario riding: "Citizen-initiated referendums are a counter-productive issue, and should be dropped altogether from the Alliance platform, with the idea of government-initiated referendums retained only for truly national and major constitutional issues (Meech Lake, Charlottetown, Quebec separation, etc.)."

This would approximate the Australian practice of using referendums for constitutional amendments, not for ordinary legislation. It would also be a genuinely conservative approach inasmuch as it would require popular approval for major institutional changes and therefore make them difficult to achieve, as they ought to be. Finally, it would allow each province to experiment with direct democracy as much or as little as it chose.

"Paris," said Henry of Navarre, "is worth a Mass." Changing his religion from Huguenot to Catholic, he went on to become Henry IV, King of France. Before it can hope to win a national election, the Alliance may have to decide whether Ottawa is worth a recommitment to parliamentary democracy, with direct democracy reserved for the special case of major constitutional amendments.

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