

Election '97 UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

With Liberals, Conservatives, NDP and Lucien Bouchard lined up against them, Reformers appear to be on the right side, the side of Canada

On the pathway to power

With the Liberal, Progressive Conservative and New Democratic parties now in agreement with the separatist Bloc Quebecois and Parti Quebecois that Reform represents the greatest threat to national unity, it is inevitable that Preston Manning's party — now a permanent fixture — will break out of the West, argue Stephen Harper and Tom Flanagan in their analysis of Monday's election.

In the recent federal election, the Reform Party did not make its much-desired breakthrough in Ontario, but it certainly strengthened its support in the West. Impressive as the numbers are — 25 of 34 seats in British Columbia, 24 of 26 in Alberta, eight of 14 in Saskatchewan — they do not tell the whole story.

Almost everywhere in the West, Reform has reduced the Progressive Conservatives to a fringe party, running fourth and getting less than 10 per cent of the vote. Except in a very few ridings, the PCs simply don't matter any more, just as Reform doesn't matter in Quebec and most of Atlantic Canada.

Moreover, Reform has also displaced the NDP everywhere except in low-income areas of Vancouver, Regina, Saskatoon and Winnipeg. The NDP in the West is rapidly becoming a strictly left-wing ideological party, whereas it used to attract a much wider range of anti-establishment voters.

Preston Manning has now created the sort of populist electoral coalition of which he has consistently spoken since his founding speech in Vancouver in 1987. It is still anchored by ideological conservatives, but it is now drawing increasing numbers of voters whose chief characteristic is their distinctly western view of the country, expressed by defiance of Ottawa and particularly by resistance to Quebec's domination of federal politics.

However, things have not developed precisely as he hoped. He wanted a national party with a western base, whereas the Reform party in its present form is a western party with a tenuous foothold in rural Ontario and no serious strength in Quebec or the Atlantic provinces. Although Reform has twice shown that it can get about 20 per cent of the vote in Ontario, it has displaced neither the PCs nor the NDP as it has in the West. If Reform knew how to break into Ontario, it would have done so by now. Manning tried as hard as he possibly could this time, run-



ning a well-focused, tightly disciplined campaign. It just didn't work.

Another irony is that Manning predicted that his populist party would either come to power quickly or fade away, whereas the Reform party is becoming a permanent fixture in western Canada. Its partisans are animated by a fierce and proud loyalty that will not easily transfer to another party, least of all a party led by Jean Charest. So Reform is permanent — and yet has no obvious pathway to power, at least in normal times.

Times, however, are not normal. The conventional political spectrum of left to right is now crossed by a dimension of conflict over national identity, which was highlighted in the election campaign. Reform, with its slogan of equality of provinces and citizens, espouses the longstanding view of most western Canadians — and many other English Canadians — which John Diefenbaker called "One Canada." The Liberals and, even more so, the Progressive Conservatives, have embraced "distinct society" as a covert way of defining Canada as two nations. And the Bloc Quebecois, taking matters to their logical conclusion, wants two sovereign nations.

For the past 30 years, the Liberals and PCs have taken turns playing what the journalist Peter Brimelow called the "patriot game." That is, they have used the fear of separatism, first

Meanwhile, the West's agenda of constitutional reform is put perpetually on hold because central Canadian elites see it as a threat to their domination of the system.

As time runs out on the patriot game, the Liberals, Progressive Conservatives and New Democrats have entered into a rhetorical alliance with the Bloc Quebecois. They all agree that the Reform party is the real threat to national unity, and they vie with one another to heap abuse on Manning. Epithets fill the air — "bigot," "civil war," "party of division" and much more. This intensifies the original line of the three old "national parties," that the Bloc Quebecois and the Reform party, as "regional parties," were evil twins, equal threats to Confederation.

This equation of the Bloc — outright separatists — with Reformers, who are loyal Canadians, makes no sense. After all, if Reform did not exist, Quebec separatism would still be an enormous threat to the country.

And if Quebec separatism did not exist, western populism could still be an important political force (as it has been in the past) without imperilling the country's unity in the slightest.

Events are quite likely to come to a head within the next three years. Lucien Bouchard is now playing off the federal election results to build up to the next provincial election and referendum. Meanwhile, Chretien is reaching out to Charest and McDonough for support. All agree that Reformers are the real problem because they are "anti-Quebec." Yet the core Reform positions — opposition to distinct society and protection of Canadian interests if Quebec should attempt to separate — are widely supported outside Quebec and even by a significant constituency within Quebec itself.

As all parties continue to attack Reform, voters in Ontario are bound to start asking themselves the questions that western voters have already asked (and answered). Why is Bouchard attacking Reform so stridently? Doesn't this mean that Reform is the opponent the separatists fear the most? Doesn't that mean that Reform is on the right side, the side of Canada?

And why do the other three parties appear to be lining up with the Bloc and the Parti Quebecois? Whose side are they on? Who really speaks for ordinary Canadians?

No one has a crystal ball, but the scenario we describe is far from impossible and, indeed, seems already well advanced.

If it continues to unfold, Reform's expansion in Ontario, which now seems hopelessly stymied, will become inevitable.

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threatened by Quebec Premier Daniel Johnston in his

1965 book Equality or Independence, to control national politics. A succession of prime ministers from Quebec — Pierre Trudeau, Brian Mulroney, Jean Chretien, with Jean Charest waiting in the wings — have built their careers on "saving Canada." They have had several different approaches, and they all quite sincerely claimed to be combatting separatism. Nevertheless, they needed the threat of separatism to justify their political strategies.

Time is running out on the patriot game. It manifestly has not worked; Quebec separatism is stronger than ever.

Moreover, the patriot game has created the Reform party as its antithesis and nemesis. Summoned into life by the Mulroney cabinet's decision to award the CF-18 maintenance contract to Montreal "in the national interest," the Reform party rejects the premise of the patriot game — that the highest purpose of federal politics is to ward off separatism by making ever more accommodations for Quebec.

Up to this point, Reform has triumphed in the West, but not elsewhere, because the West loses the most from the patriot game. The dynamic economies of Alberta and British Columbia disproportionately bear the cost of the regional transfers that are supposed to keep Quebec and Atlantic Canada happy.