

Party pushed social issues to periphery

# Reform needs coherent policy

*It took the Reform Party less than 10 years to move from concept to official Opposition in the House of Commons. But can it ever form a government? Today, Tom Flanagan, professor of political science at the University of Calgary and former director of research for the Reform party, tries to answer the question.*



**Tom Flanagan**

## ISSUES & IDEAS

**B**ORN IN Winnipeg in October 1997, the Reform Party of Canada has now lived out its first 10 years and obviously plans on growing much older.

In its short life, and without ever having formed a government, the party has had an extraordinary influence upon the direction of Canadian public policy.

Reform has helped shape a new consensus that governments must balance their budgets, pay down debt and reduce taxes. Ten years ago, the Mulroney Tories talked that way but didn't act upon it when they were in power, presiding over huge deficits and dozens of tax increases, both overt and covert. No other political party even paid lip service to fiscal responsibility.

Today, most people in politics agree on it, even many in the NDP. Reform has also stiffened the country's spine in dealing with Quebec separatism. Ten years ago, all the parties were asking, What can we give Quebec now? Different questions predominate today. How do we uphold the rule of law? How would we counter a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI)? Would Quebec be partitioned in case of separation?

Reform contributed greatly to this new, more realistic mood by refusing to salute when distinct society was run up the flagpole.

Finally, Reform has begun to introduce elements of direct democracy into Canadian federal politics.

It is no accident that Alberta and British Columbia, which have adopted a mandatory referendum procedure for approving constitutional amendments, are the two provinces where Reform is strongest. And it was the requirement for a referendum in these provinces that forced the Mulroney government to hold a national referendum on the Charlottetown Accord, leading to the rejection of that package deal.

Reform's success in bringing about fiscal, constitutional, and democratic change is due largely to the coherence of the party's policies in these fields. In each area the party has an elaborate, interlocked set of policies

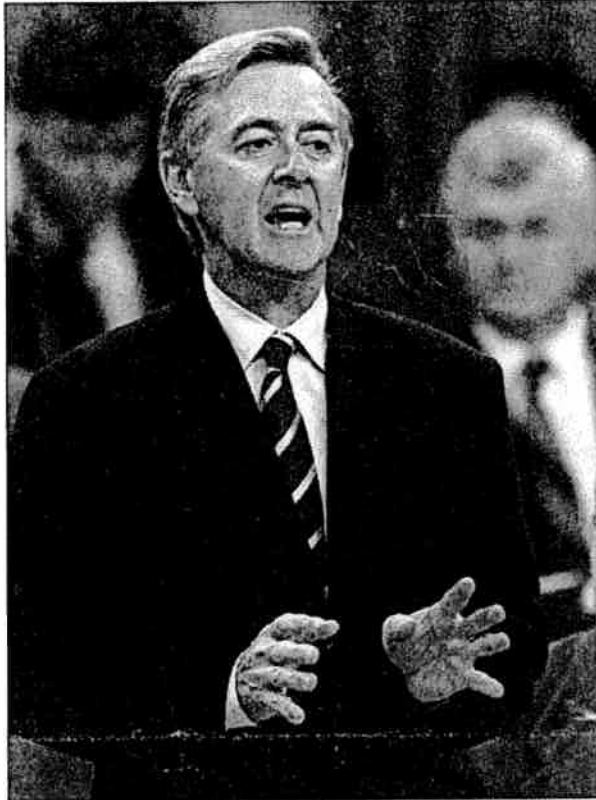
that have gone through a lengthy development process, have been formally approved by the membership, and are consistently espoused by Preston Manning and the other MPs.

The policies are not universally popular; most, such as the Triple-E Senate or recall of elected legislators, are in fact highly controversial. But their clarity and consistency allow Reform to keep pushing for them. And in our system, when the governing party has no particular agenda of its own, a determined smaller party can exercise great influence by relentlessly pushing the government. Ask the NDP. Like the CCF before it, the NDP played the game for decades and now Reform is getting results the same way.

It is instructive to compare this string of achievements with Reform's record in the arena of social policy. By social policy, I refer to government activities designed to affect how people relate to one another in civil society. Government spends money and delivers services in pursuit of many social goals, such as the safety, health, and enlightenment of citizens, and the strength and permanence of families.

Reform can boast of a few modest accomplishments in this area. The annual intake of immigrants has been stabilized at a little over 200,000 (still very high by historical standards). Selected parts of the Criminal Code and the Young Offenders Act have been slightly toughened. And the federal government has terminated the Canada Assistance Plan, giving the provinces more discretion to clean up their welfare rolls.

In spite of these few successes, Reform would also have to admit that it has suffered many failures and even reversals in the area of social policy. Reform not only failed to stop inclusion of gay rights in the federal



The wave has not rolled in for Preston Manning and Reform.

Human Rights Code, it suffered a disastrous internal split over the issue. Even in alliance with aboriginal leaders, Ontario, and the Prairie provinces, Reform failed to block the Liberals' gun control legislation.

Canada has made no progress toward a more market-based provision of health care, and Reform has virtually given up pushing in that direction. The federal government continues to spend more every year on aboriginals and to avow the inherent right of aboriginal self-government, in spite of Reform's opposition.

One could easily compile a much longer list. The Canada Pension Plan, affirmative action and pay equity go on as if the Reform party had never existed. Reform has policies in all these areas, but they have had no effect.

As an opposition party, Reform

obviously doesn't have the power to pass the legislation required to make changes. But neither did it have the power to pass a balanced budget, or to refer the question of UDI to the Supreme Court, or to hold a referendum on the Charlottetown Accord — yet these things happened.

So why has Reform been so much more influential in some areas than in others?

**C**RITICS OF Reform claim that the party's social policies are so far out of touch with public opinion that they are doomed to be ineffective, but I doubt that is true. Mike Harris successfully campaigned against affirmative action when he won the last Ontario provincial election.

More profoundly, Reform's fiscal, constitutional and democratic policies were all minority positions 10

years ago, and yet Reform successfully faced down withering attacks in the course of bringing them into the mainstream of public opinion.

The problem is rather that Reform's social policies are not coherently tied together by a clear theory of individual responsibility in a free society. Given this lack of clarity, members are often confused about what precisely the policies are; and Manning's pronouncements, when he talks about these issues at all, often work at cross purposes with those of other MPs.

Why does this situation persist? The answer has much to do with Preston Manning's intellectual formation. His political views crystallized in the early 1960s before the present crop of social issues emerged. Manning, a highly intelligent and well-educated man, has the tenacity of a bulldog; but this admirable quality, which helps account for his success, also limits his ability to assimilate new perspectives.

From the earliest days of the Reform party, Manning has counted on riding to power on a wave of democratic dissatisfaction with the federal government, brought on by the evil twins of unrestrained deficit spending and Quebec separatism. Thus he has pursued policy development on those issues while tending to regard social policy as peripheral, perhaps even dangerously distracting.

Ten years have now passed and the wave has not rolled in. Reform's popular support is essentially what it was in the summer of 1991, when the party commissioned its first national poll: dominant in British Columbia and Alberta, competitive in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, marginal in Ontario, and irrelevant in Quebec and Atlantic Canada.

The metaphor for Reform should be that of a traveller on a long march, not a surfer in quest of a wave. Within that perspective, a coherent social philosophy is essential.

A mature, enduring party has to know where it stands on the great issues of civil society. Until that philosophy is developed, Reformers will continue to be disappointed in their party's relative lack of influence upon the direction of Canadian social policy.

*Tom Flanagan is professor of political science at the University of Calgary and was director of research for the Reform party in 1991-92. In 1995 he published *Waiting for the Wave: The Reform Party and Preston Manning*.*