

The Calgary declaration in 1998

CALGARY

THEY ran the Calgary declaration up the flagpole of the Alberta legislature, and everybody saluted. The resolution passed without a dissenting vote. Not surprising, really, since all three parties in the legislature had announced their support before consulting the public. It looks as if the declaration will pass in other provinces, too, although one never knows about British Columbia.

In spite of this support, the declaration is having zero impact in Quebec, not even on the mythical soft nationalists who allegedly would be glad to remain in Canada if they could just have a little more provincial autonomy. This is not surprising either, because the declaration does not address the consistent demand of Quebec nationalists since passage of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 — that the Quebec National Assembly be able to override the language rights enshrined in the Charter.

This is exactly what the distinct-society provision of the Meech Lake accord would have done, as Robert Bourassa once admitted in a moment of frankness. Some time this year the promoters of the Calgary declaration will move on to the next phase of their project, trying to convert it into a constitutional amendment that, whatever its precise wording, will give Quebec its desired power to get around the Charter. Alberta's Ralph Klein, Saskatchewan's Roy Romanow and Ottawa's Stéphane Dion have been remarkably candid about this from the beginning.

At this point the politics will start to get interesting because of Preston Manning and the Reform Party. Mr. Manning is the virtual godfather of the Calgary declaration, having brokered the deal last summer when he signalled that he could live with the "unique character of Quebec society" as long as it was balanced by other phrases about provincial equality. In return for supporting the Calgary declaration, he bought an unprecedented degree of acceptance for his party. The Liberals no longer attack Reform as racist and separatist, and the media are mostly reporting its activities straight up, without the constant denigration that prevailed in the coverage of the last Parliament.

But I doubt that Mr. Manning will want to travel much further along the path to a constitutional amendment. My MP is Diane Ablonczy, a founding Reformer and always a faithful exponent of Mr. Manning's think-

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"We cannot [her emphasis] allow the equality statements in the declaration to be pushed aside and have the recognition of Quebec's unique character turned into a distinct-society clause."

MR. Manning himself recently published a long essay about the way toward national unity. For him, the trail runs through a Triple-E Senate, a smaller federal government and greater devolution of powers to the provinces. What makes this problematic for Quebec nationalists is his insistence on provincial equality: "Special deals for one province are not acceptable, and any power given Quebec to help protect and develop its uniqueness must also be offered to every province."

Under the heading of devolution, Mr. Manning is quite willing to give Quebec more power over language and culture; but under the heading of provincial equality, all provinces must get the same power. And that's the rub for Quebec nationalists. They want to maintain what Lucien Bouchard once called "asymmetrical bilingualism" — an officially unilingual Quebec in an officially bilingual Canada. They hardly care whether anyone speaks French in Alberta or Saskatchewan, but official bilingualism is the key to preserving Quebec's power in Ottawa.

Ever since passage of the Official Languages Act in 1969, only Quebeckers have been prime minister for longer than a few months at a time. Leaders of three of the five federal parties are from Quebec, as are the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and the Chief Clerk of the Privy Council.

Mr. Manning caused great consternation when he alluded to these realities in the 1997 federal election campaign. He is not being so tasteless now, but the combination of provincial equality and more provincial control over language and culture remains Reform's greatest challenge to the Canadian status quo, now that fiscal responsibility has become conventional wisdom.

Because of Reform's policy, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for Mr. Manning to support a constitutional amendment of the kind that Messrs. Klein, Romanow and Dion have in mind. Since those three are unlikely to embrace Reform's policy, the most likely outcome is further stalemate.

An interesting sidebar is the question of whether the political establishment, having tentatively embraced Mr. Manning, will turn on him and try once again to relegate him to the role of populist outcast. Maybe he'll need to pull those cowboy boots and buckskin jackets out of his *après*-makeover closet.

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