Pivot or Pirouette?

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Introduction

THE FEDERAL ELECTION of 1993 was in some ways the most peculiar election in Canadian history. To understand its oddity, you have to compare its results with those of the preceding election, held in 1988. The statistical comparison is summarized in Table I.1. First, look at the Progressive Conservatives (PCs). Having won a huge victory in 1984, they were re-elected in 1988 with a plurality of 43 percent of the popular vote and a comfortable majority of 169 out of 295 seats. Admittedly, they were down somewhat from their landslide win of 1984, in which they had taken 211 out of 282 seats, based on 50 percent of the popular vote; but that was a once-in-a-generation landslide, comparable to John Diefenbaker's great victory in 1958.[1] The Conservatives didn't do quite as well in the 1988 election as they had in 1984, but they were still easily in control. Yet in 1993, after Brian Mulroney was succeeded as leader by Kim Campbell, they were reduced to 16 percent of the vote and 2 seats – an unprecedented outcome in Canadian history. The Conservatives had been pummelled before, most notably in 1921, when they fell to third place behind the Liberals and the Progressives, but in that election they still won 49 seats and subsequently became the official opposition when the Progressives declined the honour. The election

TABLE I.1
Canadian general election results, 1988 and 1993

	1988		1993	
Party	% Vote	Seats	% Vote	Seats
Liberal	31.9	83	41.2	177
Progressive Conservative	43.0	169	16.0	2
New Democratic Party	20.4	43	6.9	9
Reform	2.1	0	18.7	52
Bloc Québécois[1]	–	–	13.5	54
Independent[2]	–	–	–	1
Total		295		295

Source: "Canadian Election Results by Party: 1867–2021," https://www.sfu.ca/~aheard/elections/1867-present.html.

1 The Bloc Québécois did not exist in 1988. In 1993, it ran candidates in every Quebec riding but nowhere else.

2 The Independent was Gilles Bernier, formerly the Progressive Conservative MP for Beauce. He was not allowed to run for the PCs in 1993 because of fraud allegations, which were subsequently dismissed. His son, Maxime Bernier, later won the same riding and became prominent in Conservative politics, but left the party after losing the 2017 leadership race to Andrew Scheer.

of 1993 was a setback like no other for the Conservatives, or indeed for any major political party in Canada.

To be sure, governing parties had been decimated before in provincial elections. In the provincial election of 1935, the United Farmers of Alberta, which had governed the province for the preceding fifteen years, won no seats at all. Similarly, the New Brunswick Progressive Conservatives, who had been in power for seventeen years, were completely wiped out in the provincial election of 1987. But such a staggering loss had never occurred at the federal level. Canada is so large and diverse that parties facing repudiation at the polls had always been able to find pockets of strength somewhere in the country to keep themselves going. The PC disaster of 1993 was truly unique in the party's loss of support almost everywhere.

Much of the previous Progressive Conservative vote in the West and in rural Ontario went to the upstart Reform Party of Canada,

led by Preston Manning, son of former Alberta premier Ernest Manning. Founded in 1987, Reform had contested the 1988 election in the four Western provinces but had garnered only 2 percent of the vote and had not elected anyone to the House of Commons. Its increase in 1993 to 19 percent of the vote and fifty-two seats was nothing short of astonishing.

Perhaps even more astounding was the performance of the Bloc Québécois (BQ), led by Lucien Bouchard, erstwhile friend of Brian Mulroney. The Bloc was founded in 1990–91 by dissatisfied members of the Progressive Conservatives together with a few Liberals. Now it won almost 14 percent of the vote nationally, which doesn't sound like much until one remembers that the Bloc ran candidates only in Quebec, where it received 49 percent of the popular vote. Its electoral concentration in francophone Quebec ridings enabled it to win fifty-four seats, making it the official opposition. Here was another first in Canadian history: "Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition" was anything but loyal; it now consisted of a separatist party dedicated to the breakup of the country.

The New Democratic Party (NDP) also experienced a surprising outcome, but in the opposite direction. In 1988, the New Democrats had achieved their best-ever result, with 20 percent of the vote and forty-three seats. But their leader, Ed Broadbent, resigned afterwards because he had fallen short of expectations. Pre-election polling had suggested that the NDP might win more seats than the Liberals and replace them as the official opposition. But then the NDP replaced Broadbent with Yukon MP Audrey McLaughlin, giving her the distinction of becoming the first woman to lead a major federal party. Unfortunately for the NDP, her leadership didn't help the party, which in 1993 was reduced to 7 percent of the vote and nine seats – three short of the twelve required for official party status.[2] Being a recognized party with twelve seats in the House of Commons may not sound like much, but it is of considerable practical significance. It gives the party's MPs the right

to ask questions in Question Period, to have seats on committees, and to get extra money for research and salaries. Falling below twelve seats is a serious loss.

In 1993, only the Liberals performed more or less according to historical norms. In 1988, they had received 32 percent of the vote and won 83 seats – not a great result, but an improvement over 1984, and good enough to remain the official opposition. Like the NDP, they felt they needed a new leader, and replaced John Turner with Jean Chrétien, who led them to 177 seats based on 41 percent of the vote in the 1993 election, which was enough for a majority government. The Liberals thus continued the tradition they had set since Confederation, becoming the government or official opposition in every election.

In one respect, however, the Liberal performance was unprecedented. In the past, their federal victories had always been anchored by winning a large majority of seats in Quebec, whereas this time they won only 19 of 75 seats in *la belle province*. The Liberals built their majority by taking 98 of 99 seats in Ontario and 31 of 32 in the four Atlantic provinces – also unheard-of results. So from a distance the Liberal victory looked like past triumphs, but a closer view revealed a different configuration of support.

As we will see in more detail later on, the changes in parties' fortunes were magnified by Canada's first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system, which can turn small or moderate changes in vote totals into major changes in seats. FPTP helped Reform and the BQ, whose support was concentrated in specific areas, and hurt the PCs and the NDP, whose support in 1993 was much more diffuse. The Liberals, having significant support almost everywhere, were positioned to do the best under the rules of FPTP. Ever since a seminal article by Alan Cairns in the very first issue of the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*,[3] political scientists have emphasized the impact of FPTP upon Canadian politics, and that impact was never more obvious than in 1993.

The Liberals won twenty of thirty-six elections held between 1867 and 1993, while the Conservatives won the other sixteen.[4] That seems fairly even, but most of the Conservative victories lay in the remote past. The Liberals had been dominant since the end of the First World War, winning fifteen elections against eight for the Conservatives. So if you emphasized the Liberals' result, you could say that 1993 was a pretty typical Canadian election. The Liberals, after nine years as official opposition, were restored to government, and in fact would remain in government until 2006, when they would be replaced by a reconstituted Conservative Party. So 1993 was no big deal. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

But below the level of government, the 1993 election was a political earthquake. The Liberals came to power in 1993 without regaining the Quebec base they had lost in 1984 – the first time in Canadian history that the Liberals had won a national election without also winning the majority of seats in Quebec. A brand-new party, based only in Quebec and committed to the independence of that province, was now the official opposition. Reform, another new party, which had held only one seat going into the election (based on a 1989 by-election), had won fifty-two seats, all in the West except one in rural Ontario. And the NDP had been reduced to a fringe player in the House of Commons.

It was a challenge to the prevailing views of Canadian political scientists and journalists. They had seen the Liberals, the PCs, and to a lesser extent the NDP as brokerage parties, devoted to forming national electoral coalitions based on support in every region of the country, with the goal of maintaining national unity.[5] True, the Liberals had been weak in the West for decades, and the PCs and NDP had been weak in Quebec, but all three parties made some effort to build support everywhere, nominating candidates in all ridings in the country.

Now the classic brokerage system, said to be vital to national unity, was threatened by upstart regional parties. Reform did not

nominate any candidates in Quebec and was a serious player only in the West, where it won a majority of seats. The Bloc ran candidates only in Quebec and was a serious factor only in majority francophone areas, where it won almost every seat – enough to dominate the province. Reform's leader said he wanted a national party with a Western base, but that was highly aspirational in 1993, when Reform seemed typecast as a Western party. The BQ, for its part, did not even aspire to become a national brokerage party. Its nationalist message of independence for Quebec was meant to appeal only to francophone Québécois and the small number of anglophone and allophone Quebecers who sympathized with Québécois nationalism.

In a later chapter, we will discuss the dynamics of the 1993 election campaign. They were interesting, to be sure, and help to explain the precise shape of the outcome. Campaigns do matter – a lot. But the unprecedented results of the 1993 election were heavily affected by developments that took place years before the election was even called. We must look at some political history before turning to the actual campaign.

Academic life isn't very funny most of the time, so enjoy this joke about university life: A history student delivers his first presentation in a graduate seminar. Afterwards he asks the professor, "How did I do?" "Not bad," answers the teacher, "but remember this is a history course and you have to give more background." A few weeks pass, and then it's time for the student to make his next presentation. He opens by saying, "Slowly the earth cooled." We don't need to go back to the cooling of the earth to understand the 1993 election, but we do need to go surprisingly far back in Canadian history.

Then, after looking at the background to 1993 and the dynamics of the campaign, we have to look at the aftermath. The new parties were now major players in Parliament and Canadian politics

generally. Reform played an important role in pushing the Liberals to avoid a debt crisis in 1995, leading to an emphasis on balanced budgets and restraint on federal government spending that lasted for twenty years, until the Liberals returned to power in 2015 under Justin Trudeau's leadership and deficit spending again became the norm.

The BQ exerted influence in a different direction, pushing for the independence of Quebec. Together with its provincial counterpart, the Parti Québécois, the BQ led the charge in the 1995 referendum on Quebec sovereignty. It was a close call for Canada, with the Remain side winning by only 1.2 percentage points. After that, the Bloc settled back into being a regional party representing the interests of Quebec, especially francophone Quebec.

Meanwhile, the Reform Party was also absorbed back into the system. Unlike the BQ, which ran candidates only in Quebec, the Reform Party was driven by a desire to win national elections. It thus transformed itself into the Canadian Alliance and then merged with the remnants of the Progressive Conservatives to become the Conservative Party of Canada, which, led by Stephen Harper, won the elections of 2006, 2008, and 2011 before losing to Justin Trudeau and the Liberals in 2015. The NDP had a star turn as official opposition after the 2011 election but has now fallen back to its accustomed position of a small party exercising influence but not seriously contesting for government (although a confidence-and-supply agreement with the Liberals in 2022 made it a junior partner in government).

Ken Carty, Lisa Young, and William Cross went so far as to say that 1993 saw the birth of a whole new "party system," in which regionally based parties now upstaged the brokerage parties.[6] However, such a diagnosis could be confirmed or disproved only with the passage of time. Indeed, their view seemed to be accurate for a decade, until Reform's successor, the Canadian Alliance,

merged with the remnants of the Progressive Conservatives. The merger re-established something that looked very much like the old competition between the Liberals and the Conservatives as parties of government, and the NDP as a party of influence in third place, except that the BQ continued to dominate Quebec.

Apart from the existence of the Bloc Québécois, Canadian politics is now back to more or less where it was before 1984, except that the Liberals no longer have Quebec as a dependable base. The Liberals and a remodelled Conservative Party contest for government, with the outcome depending mainly on who gets the upper hand in Ontario, and to a lesser extent in Atlantic Canada, while the NDP pushes the system from the left without serious expectations of actually governing.

So was 1993 a turning point or a pirouette? It all depends on how long-term your frame of reference is. In the short run, it was a dramatic turning point, producing a Parliament unlike anything Canadians had ever seen, including a separatist party from Quebec and a populist party of the right from Western Canada. But in the longer run, from 1993 to the present, it might be considered an interesting blip that hardly disturbed the sedate course of Canadian political history. Over time, did the turning point turn into a pirouette? We'll take up that question again after looking in more detail at the aftermath of 1993.

1

Grand Coalition

DEMOCRATIC POLITICS CENTRES on building coalitions to win elections and get control of the government.[1] Historically, many philosophers have thought of politics as a distinctively human activity, but modern scientific research has shown that we share a lot of our political behaviour with our primate cousins, especially chimpanzees. A brief look at primate politics will help us understand much of what took place before, during, and after the 1993 election.

The groundbreaking work in this field was *Chimpanzee Politics,*[2] based on the doctoral dissertation of Frans de Waal, now a world-famous primatologist at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Carrying out years of careful observation of chimpanzees at the Arnhem Zoo in the Netherlands, de Waal showed that adult male chimpanzees compete for rank – to be alpha, beta, gamma, and so on down the line. The reward of higher rank consists of more frequent opportunities to copulate with mature females in estrus, thereby leaving more descendants. Of course, chimpanzees may not consciously think about this competition in analytical terms, but evolutionary pressure leads them to act as if they understood the process.

Male chimpanzees vary somewhat but not dramatically in size and strength, so two males acting together can generally defeat another in a fight. This means that the only path to becoming an alpha chimpanzee lies in building a reliable supportive coalition. If alpha, beta, and gamma males stick together, they can guarantee their positions and reap the benefits that come with rank. Such fighting coalitions, reinforced by mutual grooming and occasional food sharing, can last for years, but they suffer from an inherent instability. Being gamma is good, but beta is better, and alpha is best. Thus there is always an incentive for gamma and beta individuals to move up in rank through an attempt to overthrow the alpha individual.

What does this have to do with human politics? Almost everything. For an example, just think of Stephen Harper (beta), Gilles Duceppe (gamma), and Jack Layton (delta) ganging up to defeat Paul Martin (alpha) in the House of Commons, forcing an election in late 2005 in hopes of improving their position in the House of Commons. In the ensuing election, the NDP and Conservatives improved their seat totals substantially and Harper became the new prime minister (alpha). The Liberals lost seats, and Paul Martin resigned as leader, leaving the field entirely like an aging chimpanzee male no longer able and willing to compete for rank. The BQ stayed about the same, losing a couple of seats but retaining its gamma position. Overall, Harper was the big winner, moving from beta to alpha, but Layton also made substantial gains towards rebuilding the NDP and making it a party that could contend for the beta position of official opposition or even the alpha position of government.

Chimpanzees, along with their bonobo cousins, are human beings' closest relatives. Having diverged from the chimpanzee line perhaps six to eight million years ago, we humans have inherited certain patterns of behaviour from our common ancestors, including competition for rank and the formation of coalitions in order

to achieve it. There are, however, two key differences between human and chimpanzee politics. First, human intelligence and symbolic communication enable us to form much larger societies than chimpanzee troops numbering a few dozen at most. In these larger human societies, the struggle for rank can lead to the clash of competing coalitions, whereas in chimpanzee societies there is only one coalition of adult males dominating junior males and women. Second, human females can participate in and lead political coalitions, whereas among chimpanzees the competition for rank is strictly a male affair and all males dominate all females. In this respect, the human community is more like the society of our other primate cousins – bonobos – in which females form coalitions to defend themselves from males and sometimes even dominate them.[3]

In modern human societies composed of millions of members, there are at least three types of political coalitions.[4] At the highest level, the leader is surrounded by a tight coterie of advisers and enforcers, all known to each other in a personal way. Then there is the political party as a whole, held together not just by face-to-face bonds but by a belief system (ideology) and a desire for preferment and material benefit (patronage). And finally there is the mass electoral coalition, numbering millions of people who do not know each other at all and who cannot expect individual rewards from the leadership. Their coalitional commitment is tenuous but indispensable; it amounts merely to casting a ballot at the right time for their preferred set of representatives. Electoral coalitions are held together by a sense that their team, if it comes to power, will do things (enact policies) that will benefit people like them. Such beliefs are usually formulated in terms of pursuing a wider public interest, but people inevitably perceive the public interest through the lens of what is good for themselves and for people like themselves.

To summarize in more formal terms, a political coalition is a group of people who act together to achieve benefits for members of the in-group at the expense of those who are excluded. The motor

of democratic politics is the competitive struggle of leaders to build winning coalitions providing material and psychic benefits to their supporters.

The Importance of Quebec

A common observation about democratic politics is that minorities who feel threatened or disadvantaged tend to join mass electoral coalitions by engaging in bloc voting. It's a natural human reaction for minorities to cluster their votes around representatives whom they trust to defend their interests. Leaders play to this tendency by emphasizing how the numerical majority threatens members of the minority. Such minority electoral coalitions are extremely important in politics because, if they are large enough and if they are allied with voters elsewhere in the polity, they can be the stable basis of winning coalitions. American examples that Canadian readers will recognize include the contemporary voting behaviour of African Americans (about 80–90 percent Democratic) and the similar Democratic loyalty of white Southerners after losing the Civil War (the "solid South").

The most important example in Canadian political history is the voting behaviour of French Canadians in Quebec, who, though a majority in the province, constitute a linguistic and religious minority in Canada and in North America. The status of Roman Catholicism doesn't matter much anymore in Canadian politics, but the minority status of the French language in Canada is as important as ever.

There are, of course, other examples of durable bloc voting in Canadian politics. Albertans have voted overwhelmingly for a party of the right – Progressive Conservative, Social Credit, Reform, Canadian Alliance, and Conservative Party of Canada – ever since John Diefenbaker became Progressive Conservative leader in 1956. The voting pattern reflects a feeling of being under siege from the rest of Canada, due to the province's oil wealth. But even after years

of steady growth, Alberta, with 4.4 million residents and 34 out of 338 seats in the House of Commons, is not big enough to be the linchpin of a durable winning coalition. That distinction has always belonged to Quebec.

In the thirty-four elections from 1867 through 1988, the Liberals won a majority of Quebec seats in twenty-six instances, the Conservatives in only eight. Other parties never came out on top; they made significant showings only in 1945 (Bloc Populaire) and 1962–79 (Ralliement des Créditistes). More importantly for our purposes, five of the eight Conservative victories were in the nineteenth century, when Sir John A. Macdonald was the Conservative leader.[5]

The Liberal dominance of Quebec based on francophone bloc voting began developing in 1891, when native son Wilfrid Laurier first led the Liberals in a national election, and really took hold after the First World War. In 1917, in order to gain support for conscription of men for overseas service, Conservative prime minister Robert Borden invited Liberal leader Laurier to form a government of national unity, as had been done in Britain. When Laurier declined, Borden succeeded in attracting some individual Liberals to sit in cabinet, supported by a large number of Liberal backbenchers. This "Union Government" won a large majority of seats in the 1917 election, but fell apart after the end of the war. Its legacy was overwhelming Liberal dominance in Quebec, where conscription for overseas service had been extremely unpopular, which in turn led to Liberal rule in Canada. As Ken Carty has written: "It turns out that the story of Canada's twentieth century is the story of the Liberal Party and its quite remarkable dominance of the country's political life."[6]

The Conservatives won more seats than the Liberals in Quebec only three times in the period from 1891 through 1988. The first instance was in 1958, when Quebec's Union Nationale premier Maurice Duplessis decided to go all out in support of the

Conservatives led by John Diefenbaker. Duplessis, himself a former Conservative, had always favoured the Conservatives in national elections; now he decided to avenge a grudge that he had nourished against the federal Liberals since 1939, when they helped their Quebec cousins defeat his Union Nationale in the provincial election. Using money and his Union Nationale campaign workers, he targeted fifty ridings, and the Conservatives won exactly those fifty constituencies.[7] Unfortunately for the Conservatives, the alliance with the Union Nationale did not endure. The only two subsequent instances when the Conservatives won Quebec were in 1984 and 1988, when Brian Mulroney performed the near-miracle of shifting francophone voters' allegiance en masse from the Liberals to the Conservatives. It was a shift of loyalty, but it was still bloc voting in support of a mass electoral coalition. We shall see below how the miracle was accomplished.

Moreover, until Mulroney worked his magic, the Liberals did not merely dominate Quebec; they virtually *owned* it. Between 1917 and 1980, there were fourteen elections in which the Conservatives won only five or fewer seats in Quebec. In the five elections held after Pierre Trudeau became Liberal leader in 1968, the Conservative seat totals in Quebec were four, three, two, two, and one, respectively.

The key to Canadian politics from 1867 through 1988 was that whoever dominated the francophone vote in Quebec dominated Canada. Only in eight elections out of thirty-four did the party that took fewer seats in Quebec win the overall election and form a government. Four of these were short-lived Conservative minority governments (1925, 1957, 1962, 1979), and two were during the First World War, when the Liberal Party was internally divided over the conscription issue. For all practical purposes, the rule held true: if you controlled the francophone vote, you controlled Quebec; and if you controlled Quebec, you controlled Canada. To quote Carty once more, "Quebec was the lynchpin of the party's successive national electoral victories."[8]

The only question was whether the Liberals or Conservatives would exert control in Quebec. Mostly it was the Liberals. The Conservatives were able to win in Quebec in the nineteenth century only under Macdonald, and in the twentieth century once under Diefenbaker (1958), when Duplessis was in his corner, and twice under Mulroney.

Prior to the selection of Mulroney as their leader in 1983, the Conservatives were perennially frustrated by their inability to win seats in Quebec, even though they were, in effect, the majority party outside Quebec. Look at the record from 1963 through 1980, when the Liberal leaders were Lester Pearson and then Pierre Trudeau. In these seven elections, the Conservatives won more seats than the Liberals outside Quebec every time except 1968, when Trudeaumania swept the nation. Yet the Liberals won so many seats in Quebec that they formed the government every time, except for Joe Clark's short-lived minority government in 1979. Weakness in Quebec was obviously the Conservatives' Achilles heel, and parties that aspire to form government will sooner or later try to deal with such a weakness. Enter Brian Mulroney. The perennial Conservative weakness in Quebec furnished his great opportunity.

The Grand Coalition

Mulroney was born in 1939 in Baie-Comeau, Quebec, a paper-mill town founded by Robert McCormick, publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*. His father was an electrician who worked at the mill. He grew up not just fluent but idiomatic in both French and English, and earned a law degree from Laval University. Active since his teenage years in Progressive Conservative affairs, Mulroney ran for the leadership in 1975–76 but lost to Joe Clark; it was round one of their long rivalry. Mulroney won round two when he defeated Clark for the leadership in 1983. His biggest selling point was a credible claim to be able to lead a breakthrough in Quebec. When he won the leadership at the nominating convention in June 1983,

he spoke about "our area of weakness in French Canada, time after time, decade after decade, election after election, depriving the country of prominent Conservatives such as yourselves of serving in government and influencing the course of our history."[9] The Albertan Clark had worked hard to learn French and could speak it reasonably well, albeit with an accent, but history shows there is no substitute for being from Quebec if you want to win votes in that province.

Mulroney was also an overwhelming personality. He could be venal as well as visionary, vindictive as well as generous. Everything he did seemed larger than life. His extraordinary political gifts helped hold together the outsize coalition that he built. I have met former Progressive Conservatives who spoke with reverence about the way he would phone party workers to congratulate them on their or their children's birthdays. Some of them even kept recordings of these calls so they could listen to them over and over.

I never knew Mulroney personally, but I did witness one example of his passion for politics. On May 17, 2005, former Conservative leadership contestant Belinda Stronach made a highly publicized floor-crossing to the Liberals. As Conservative campaign manager, I was in Ottawa, racing frantically to prepare for the election that we had hoped would follow defeat of the Liberal minority government, but Stronach's defection undercut those plans by moving the Liberals closer to a narrow voting majority in the House of Commons. I happened to be in Stephen Harper's office when a phone call came in from Brian Mulroney, and his resonant baritone filled the room. What was remarkable was that Mulroney had suffered from a variety of ailments in the first part of 2005, including a case of hepatitis from which he nearly died. Yet he still found time and energy to buck Harper up over the telephone. Having endured many defections himself, he knew what it was like to be a leader in those circumstances. I had disliked some of Mulroney's policies in past years, but that phone call gave me a new respect for the man.

Ironically, it was Pierre Trudeau who gave Mulroney the opportunity to make good on his promise of electing a government by winning seats in Quebec. Trudeau had been a member of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation but accepted an invitation to enter federal politics as a Liberal in 1965, and won the Liberal leadership and became prime minister in 1968. He was motivated by a vision of protecting Quebec's French language and culture while also increasing Quebec's influence in the national government. The adoption of official bilingualism at the national level was an early manifestation of that vision. But Trudeau also sought to entrench Quebec's enhanced position in the constitution, and that proved more difficult to achieve. It did not happen until 1982, with the adoption of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which included some guarantees for French language and culture. But the provincial politicians in Quebec – both the Parti Québécois government, led by René Lévesque, and the Liberal opposition – refused to support the Charter, claiming a veto power over constitutional amendments even though that view had been rejected by the Supreme Court of Canada.[10] In the end, Trudeau got his constitutional amendment package ratified with the support of the federal Parliament and nine out of ten provincial governments. It was a great political victory for Trudeau in its day, but the exclusion of Quebec would provide Mulroney with the wedge he needed to break up the hitherto solid coalition of Liberal support in Quebec.

Trudeau and the Liberals had won seventy-four of seventy-five seats in Quebec in 1980, so they thought they represented public opinion in the province, but pushing through the constitutional amendments lit embers of resentment that Mulroney could fan into open flames. The opportunity came during the 1984 election campaign, in which Mulroney squared off against new Liberal leader John Turner. In the French-language leaders' debate held on July 24, Mulroney spoke of the need to "have Quebec's signature on our constitutional agreement, with honour and enthusiasm."[11]

Immediately afterwards, the Conservatives, who had begun far behind in Quebec, climbed rapidly in the polls, especially among francophones. Mulroney was helped by René Lévesque, whose separatist Parti Québécois was in power provincially. Lévesque decided to take *le beau risque* (literally, "the beautiful risk," perhaps better translated as "the tempting chance") of tacitly supporting the Conservatives, believing he was more likely to get constitutional concessions from them than from the Liberals.[12] In the end, the Conservatives won 50 percent of the popular vote in Quebec and fifty-eight of seventy-five seats. It was a remarkable improvement over 1980, when they had won only 13 percent of the vote and one seat in Quebec. Even more remarkably, the Conservatives won a majority of seats in every province and territory, a feat never before accomplished in a Canadian election.[13]

For anyone familiar with Canadian politics, it was an awe-inspiring result. The political science department at the University of Calgary held an election-results-viewing party on the evening of September 4, 1984. Neil Nevitte, now professor of political science at the University of Toronto and a distinguished student of elections and public opinion, called a francophone friend in Quebec to find out what was happening there. You could hear the cheering in the background as Neil's friend said, "We're all Tories now!" Although that incident occurred almost forty years ago, it is still relevant, because it shows how everything in Canadian politics seemed to have been turned upside down.

Mulroney's great triumph in Quebec was matched across Canada. The Conservatives won more votes and seats than the Liberals in every province, collecting 50 percent of the popular vote and 211 of 282 seats. It was one of the greatest landslides in Canadian history, second only to Diefenbaker's phenomenal victory in 1958, when the Conservatives, helped by Duplessis in Quebec, won 208 of 265 seats, with almost 54 percent of the popular vote. Now, however,

Mulroney, like Diefenbaker, had to face the challenge of managing a larger than necessary coalition.

The American political scientist and rational-choice theorist William Riker made a fundamental contribution to political science in his book *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (1982). He argued that political leaders should aim to form a "minimum winning coalition," that is, a group just large enough to control the decision-making system, with a cushion to allow for uncertainty. Riker applied rational-choice theory to the question of how self-interested coalition members will think and behave. If there are more members than necessary in the winning coalition, he argued, there are more supporters to share the spoils of victory, and the per capita share is reduced.[14] Hence supporters of a larger than necessary coalition will have incentives to defect to new coalition partners who offer them a greater share of the rewards.

For simplicity, let's say that Mulroney had constructed a grand coalition. In the strict terms of rational choice, a grand coalition implies the cooperation of all players, but in ordinary political analysis, an overwhelmingly large coalition is often called a grand coalition, even if it does not literally embrace all members. In the real world of politics, as opposed to the abstract world of mathematical models, leaders cannot calibrate the size of their coalitions precisely. Special conditions existed in 1984, because Trudeau's Liberals had offended some Quebecers by imposing constitutional amendments and had enraged the West through the National Energy Program, which transferred oil revenues from Alberta and Saskatchewan to the federal government.

The stated intention of the National Energy Program was to give Canada more control over oil and gas at a time when political strife in the Middle East was driving prices rapidly higher. The Liberal government wanted to cushion consumers against the effect of price shocks caused by international politics rather than by any shortage

of resources. But the consequence of protecting consumers was to transfer billions of dollars from the oil-and-gas-producing provinces of the West, particularly Alberta, by setting domestic prices below international prices. And the transfer was neither unforeseen nor undesired:

> Energy minister Marc Lalonde later said the motive was what Albertans had suspected all along: "to transfer wealth from Alberta to Central Canada. The major factor behind the NEP wasn't Canadianization or getting more from the industry or even self-sufficiency. The determinant factor was the fiscal imbalance between the provinces and the federal government."[15]

With Quebec and the West both aroused against the Liberals, the Conservatives overshot the mark, winning 211 seats when the minimum winning coalition would have been 142 (50 percent plus one of 282 Commons seats). That was a surplus of 69 seats, far more than needed to cushion their parliamentary majority against possible defections, deaths, or retirements. With 28 percent of the vote, the Liberals won 40 seats, only 10 more than the NDP. The Liberals became the official opposition, but just barely.

A coalition as large as Mulroney's is impressive but potentially unstable because its great size reduces the per capita benefits that members receive. The challenge is magnified when the coalition is internally stressed by members who have incompatible goals. The American game theorist Robert Axelrod coined the term "minimum *connected* winning coalition" to highlight the problem.[16] Coalitions, he wrote, are costly to build and maintain; they require frequent negotiations between allies to find areas of common ground. The further apart the coalition partners are situated, the less "connected" they are, the more difficult and costly the negotiations become, and the less likely the coalition is to form and endure.

That is why, for example, the Conservatives and the NDP have never been able to cooperate in Parliament to form a government even when between them they had a majority of votes. They have occasionally gotten together to defeat the Liberals on a confidence vote to force an election, but that is as far as their coalition building has ever extended. The reason is that the Liberals are located ideologically between the NDP and the Conservatives; so the NDP, being more "adjacent" to the Liberals, would rather support a Liberal minority government than try to work out a deal with the Conservatives.

The factual situation of Mulroney's grand coalition was different, but the same principles applied. The Conservative caucus after the 1984 election had three main, equal-sized pillars: fifty-eight members from each of Quebec, Ontario, and the four Western provinces. The Quebec members were mainly concerned with winning benefits, particularly constitutional amendments, for their own province. The Western members wanted the repeal of the National Energy Program as soon as possible, plus a more market-oriented approach to economic policy – lower taxes, privatization of Crown corporations, deregulation of the economy, and reduction of federal deficits, which had skyrocketed during the period of Liberal government. Quebec members and Western members weren't necessarily hostile to each other's objectives, but they were preoccupied with their own concerns. Mulroney's task was to hold this volatile mix together, moving on both fronts without making members of either the Quebec pillar or the Western pillar feel their concerns were being ignored. The coalition was weak on connectivity, and it took a political magician like Mulroney in his heyday to hold it together.

The classic danger in such situations is that a political entrepreneur will make an approach to the disenchanted members of the coalition, offering them a better deal through a package of policies

tailored to their special concerns. In the end, that is exactly what happened to Mulroney's grand coalition: his Western pillar was seduced by the Reform Party, while his Quebec pillar defected to the Bloc Québécois.

The Pillars Start to Crumble

Mulroney's victory was greeted with euphoria in the West, but euphoria gradually turned to disappointment as the expected changes were slow in coming. Finance Minister Michael Wilson, formerly a Bay Street investment executive, wanted to tackle the deficit, but Mulroney's famous comment that social programs were a "sacred trust" slowed him down.[17] The government gradually balanced the federal operating budget (money spent on programs), but high interest payments on the large debt inherited from the years of Liberal government meant that the deficit and debt kept growing under the Conservative government.[18] In essence, the government was borrowing money to pay the interest on previously borrowed money.

And interest rates were indeed high. I can remember from those days having a first mortgage on our house at 12 percent, a second mortgage at 14 percent, and an equity-takeout mortgage on our former condominium unit at 21 percent – rates that are inconceivable today. Such high interest rates were a response to inflation, which had reached 11 percent in 1980.[19] By 1984, inflation had come down to a range of 5–6 percent, but debt incurred in earlier years often still carried higher rates of interest. Due to such interest payments, the federal government's annual deficit remained high, though some progress was made in reducing it as a share of gross domestic product.

Privatization of thirty Crown corporations, including giants such as Petro-Canada and Air Canada, did come later, but there was little action on that front in the first couple of years of Mulroney's term in office. The National Energy Program was repealed in stages,

but by the time it was completely abolished in 1986, world oil prices had fallen precipitously, leading to cynical comments in the West about how Ottawa wanted the surplus revenues when prices were high but was happy to back out when prices were low. The Mulroney government's incremental approach may have made good economic sense, but it risked causing disappointment in the West, where expectations of a Conservative government were high after two decades of Liberal rule.

The flashpoint for Western discontent came in October 1986, when the federal government awarded the maintenance contract for the CF-18 fighter plane to Canadair in Montreal rather than Bristol Aerospace in Winnipeg, even though Bristol's bid was cheaper and had been judged technically superior by an adjudication panel of civil servants. The official explanation that giving the contract to Canadair was in the "national interest" hardly worked in the West. Saskatoon *Star Phoenix* columnist Les MacPherson captured the Western mood with a satirical op-ed that began: "The federal government today announced it would award the Stanley Cup to Quebec, even though Alberta's Calgary Flames won the competition."[20] Mulroney later wrote that the decision to grant the contract to Canadair was sound but had been poorly communicated, because the government was also planning to give a different contract to Bristol for other work. If the two contracts had been announced at the same time, he thought, Western anger could have been avoided.[21] Maybe so, but if there is a general rule of politics, it is that politicians tend to blame their mistakes on miscommunication rather than on the essence of the action.

Be that as it may, the political damage had been done. As seen through Western eyes, the National Energy Program had been devised by a Liberal prime minister from Quebec to benefit the consumers and taxpayers of Eastern Canada, especially Quebec. Now a Conservative prime minister from Quebec was making a decision about industrial policy calculated to benefit Montreal at

the expense of Winnipeg. The conclusion seemed obvious to many in the West: their interests would always be subordinated to those of Quebec. In retrospect, this can be identified as the point where the political alliance between the West and Quebec, so essential to Mulroney's great victory in 1984, really started to crumble.

The CF-18 incident gave Preston Manning the opportunity he had been waiting for. Here we need to look at a little history to understand what happened – not the "cooling of the earth," but going back a few decades. The Reform Party was not born out of nothing; it probably would never have gotten off the ground except for Preston Manning's background in Alberta.

Preston was the son of former Alberta Social Credit leader Ernest Manning, who served as premier from 1943 through 1968. Ernest Manning was the protégé of William Aberhart, a Calgary school principal and fundamentalist preacher who founded the Alberta Social Credit League in the depths of the Depression and swept to power in the provincial election of 1935. The term "Social Credit" was derived from the eccentric theories of British monetary reformer C.H. Douglas. Scorned by conventional economists, the theories of Douglas, as expounded by Aberhart, nonetheless gave hope to Albertans rendered desperate by unemployment, low agricultural prices, and staggering debt loads during the Depression.[22]

To be implemented in Alberta, Social Credit theory would have required the province to opt out of the Canadian financial system and distribute its own means of exchange, ridiculed as "funny money" by its detractors, based on the potential "social credit" of the province rather than on conventional bank reserves. Social Credit policy was unconstitutional because it challenged federal control over money and banking,[23] and it proved impossible to implement in practice, so after Aberhart's death in 1943, Ernest Manning steered the province in a more conventional centre-right direction. The transition was eased by the discovery of oil at Leduc in 1947, which

enabled Manning to pay off the province's debts and introduce the best-funded array of public services in Canada.[24] The name Manning became synonymous in Alberta with prosperity, prudent administration, and traditional values, bolstered by Manning's evangelistic role on the "Back to the Bible Hour" radio broadcast.

In the mid-1960s, towards the end of his career in office, Ernest Manning worked on a project to unify the federal Progressive Conservative Party with the federal wing of Social Credit, to build a party that could compete on equal terms with the Liberals. He also contemplated a merger of the Alberta Social Credit League with the provincial Progressive Conservatives, whom he saw headed for a revival under their new leader, the charismatic young lawyer Peter Lougheed. Manning enlisted his son Preston to work in behind-the-scenes negotiations and to help write a book about the proposal.[25] Preston was a rather wonkish young man, well suited to research, writing, and confidential discussions with Lougheed's assistant, Joe Clark.

After the merger failed, Ernest Manning retired from politics at the end of 1968 and founded a consulting firm in partnership with Preston, who developed his father's dream of a merger of existing parties into a vision of a new national party based in the West, modelled on populist forebears such as the United Farmers of Alberta, the Progressives, and Social Credit. For Preston, the CF-18 incident provided the opportunity to found a new party. He had powerful media support in that endeavour from Ted Byfield's *Alberta Report*.[26] Probably few remember it today, but the *Alberta Report* was a stoutly conservative and Western populist provincial news magazine with high circulation in Alberta and to a lesser degree in the other Western provinces. Manning pulled together discontented people from several provincial and federal parties and from all four Western provinces for the Western Assembly on Canada's Economic and Political Future, held in Vancouver at the

end of May 1987. That assembly led to foundation of the Reform Association and then the Reform Party of Canada, incorporated in 1988 at a convention in Winnipeg. It was a new party, to be sure, but it also incarnated political ideas that had been percolating in the West, especially Alberta, for decades.

Initially, the Reform Party's main concern was the perceived mistreatment of the West. The demand for a "Triple-E Senate" – equal, elected, and effective – became its great rallying cry. The idea was that an elected Senate, in which each of the four Western provinces would have as many seats as Ontario or Quebec, would be a bulwark against policies like the National Energy Program, which had been supported by voting majorities in Central Canada. In the tradition of populism, Reform also stood for direct democracy – referendum, initiative, and recall – as a supplement to parliamentary government. It advocated balanced budgets, reminding voters that the Mulroney government was not making as much progress on that front as it had promised. Policy details were provided by the young Stephen Harper, born in Ontario but now a graduate student in economics at the University of Calgary and a sessional lecturer at Mount Royal College.[27] Appointed Chief Policy Officer by Manning, Harper put together an entire Blue Book of Western-oriented policies, which remained the party's de facto campaign platform until Reform morphed into the Canadian Alliance in 2000.

In the short run, the damage to the Progressive Conservatives was minimal. Although Reform ran seventy-two candidates in the 1988 election, the party got only 2 percent of the vote and failed to elect anyone. Mulroney's decision to give the CF-18 contract to Montreal-based Canadair rather than Winnipeg-based Bristol Aerospace seemed to have received political validation. But that was in the short run. In 1993, only five years later, Mulroney's electoral prospects had become so poor that he resigned as leader, setting the stage for the repudiation of the Progressive Conservatives under their new leader, Kim Campbell.

Switching focus now to Quebec, Mulroney turned to constitutional reform to cement the support of that pillar. In the 1985 provincial election campaign, won by the Liberals, Premier Robert Bourassa had outlined five conditions for Quebec to approve the constitutional amendments of 1982. These included recognition of Quebec as a "distinct society," a Quebec veto over constitutional change, a provincial role in the appointment of Supreme Court justices from Quebec, greater provincial control over immigration, and limits on the federal spending power.[28]

At a first ministers meeting in Edmonton in 1986, Mulroney got the premiers to agree to a "Quebec Round" of constitutional changes based on Bourassa's five conditions. They reached unanimous agreement at a meeting at Meech Lake (the prime minister's vacation retreat outside Ottawa) on April 30, 1987. The Meech Lake Accord, as it became known, incorporated all of Bourassa's five demands, though the constitutional veto for Quebec was provided by extending the reach of the unanimity rule for approval of amendments. That is, Quebec would have a veto because all provinces would have a veto. Compared to the later Charlottetown Accord, the Meech Lake Accord was a relatively short document almost entirely focused on Bourassa's five conditions, which constituted Quebec's reply to the enactment of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms against the wishes of the provincial government in 1982.

Meech Lake seemed to be a good start towards Mulroney's goal of pacifying Quebec and solidifying his grand coalition. All ten provincial premiers were on side, as were the national leaders of the Liberals and the NDP, John Turner and Ed Broadbent. But former prime minister Pierre Trudeau soon upset the applecart. In extravagant language, he condemned Mulroney as a "weakling" and the premiers as "snivelers."[29] Yet in spite of signs that opposition would grow, Mulroney and the premiers formally signed the accord in Ottawa on June 2, 1987, after a difficult nineteen-hour meeting.

The Achilles heel of the Meech Lake Accord was that it required approval by a formal vote of all ten provincial legislatures within three years. The designated date for completion was June 22, 1990. That provision proved to be the cause of the accord's failure because in those three years, elections would result in a change of government and of the legislative majority in Newfoundland, Manitoba, and New Brunswick. The newly elected governments and MLAs were less enthusiastic about the accord than their predecessors; indeed, some were openly opposed. For the time being, however, conditions seemed propitious for the upcoming 1988 federal election. Mulroney had seemingly delivered on his promise to Quebec of constitutional changes that would meet the demands of the province.

Another arrow in Mulroney's quiver was the Free Trade Agreement with the United States. Though the details were vague, President Ronald Reagan had announced his openness to free trade with Canada. Encouraged by Alberta's Premier Peter Lougheed, Mulroney changed his mind about free trade with the United States. In line with the position of many past Conservative leaders, he had opposed it in his 1983 leadership campaign,[30] but he entered into negotiations with the United States in 1986. The result was a draft agreement that became the centrepiece of the 1988 election campaign in Canada.

NDP leader Ed Broadbent came out strongly against free trade, so much so that Liberal leader John Turner, fearing the NDP could displace the Liberals as official opposition, also went all out against the agreement, even though free trade with the United States was the historical position of the Liberal Party. Of course, there were other issues in the campaign, but free trade came to dominate everything. In effect, the 1988 election became almost a referendum on free trade with the United States.[31]

From an electoral point of view, that was a good thing for Mulroney and the Conservatives. They were the only party supporting

free trade, while the Liberals and the NDP vied with each other over who could oppose it most vocally. At all times, polls showed a majority of Canadians opposed free trade with the United States, but those opposing votes were split between two parties, while the largest single bloc of votes went to Mulroney's Conservatives. Also, free trade was an issue, perhaps the only issue, that could bring the Quebec and Western pillars of Mulroney's grand coalition together. It was devastating to the prospects of the Reform Party in the West. Reform couldn't oppose free trade outright without renouncing its general free market orientation, so Manning criticized it on the grounds that it hadn't been "honestly communicated."[32] As a voter who might have been interested in Reform, I decided to stick with the Conservatives, because I thought it was more important to approve the free trade agreement. Many other Western Conservatives who eventually came over to Reform as I did thought the same way in 1988.

The 1988 election results appeared to vindicate Mulroney's management of the issues. The Conservatives maintained a healthy majority of seats, with 43 percent of the popular vote and 169 of 295 seats. They increased their Quebec results to 53 percent of the provincial vote and 63 seats. They lost some ground in the West, dropping from 58 to 48 seats, but that was still a majority of the 86 seats in the region. Overall, it seemed that the Conservative grand coalition was still standing, albeit slightly battered. Within five years, however, it would fall apart completely as all three pillars – the West, Ontario, and Quebec – came crashing down.

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