Canadian party politics collapsed in the early 1990s. This book is about that collapse, about the end of a party system, with a unique pattern of party organization and competition, that had governed Canada’s national politics for several decades, and about the ongoing struggle to build its successor. Our questions are simple: What caused the collapse of the party system? How is the new one going to differ from its predecessor? Although these question are simple, our answers take us into the ambiguities and uncertainties of a new Canadian party system for the twenty-first century: one that is still emerging. Although the final mould of this new party politics has yet to be cast, we can discern its emerging outlines in the forces that are giving it shape.

Making sense of Canada has always meant making sense of its party politics. That is inevitable in a country first put together, and then kept together, by party politicians who must compete in electoral contests to win support and office. We can trace the country’s history through the shifting rhythms of its politics, and through the shocks to its party system, which has periodically been set off in new directions. Though the pendulum has swung, rather unevenly, between Liberals and Conservatives for over a century, the patterns of the wider party system have twice before been dramatically reconstructed. Long periods of rather predictable political alignments and party life have suddenly been overturned, and then rebuilt in new ways in the matter of a few years. Our argument is that the 1993 general election marked the beginning of one such convulsion, and the first step in the establishment of the fourth Canadian party system.

The very idea of a party system, and, more particularly, a series of them, focuses our attention on the character of individual political parties and
the nature of their competitive relationships with one another. The most obvious characteristic of a party system is the number of parties and the nature of the issues that divide them. Together, these simple characteristics reveal much about the electoral choices that voters face, for the parties’ most basic tasks consist of nominating candidates and conducting campaigns on their behalf. And on these grounds there is a superficial case for saying that the Canadian party system has changed rather little since Confederation, given that the country’s first parties (the Liberals and Conservatives) have successfully persisted as little more than two great, sprawling, seemingly indistinguishable machines for vacuuming up votes. However, a portrait of the party system as little more than the alignment of electoral forces misses much that is important and revealing about a country’s democratic life. How do the parties organize and operate? How do they provide individual voters with the institutions and opportunity to participate in their government? How do they conceive of their representational responsibilities? How do they mobilize support, and with what consequence for the underlying political equations that govern the nation’s politics? How are they financed? How do they structure the communication necessary for democratic debate and choice? Answers to questions like these, to questions about the party’s organization and activity as instruments of an active citizenry, reveal as much about the real essence of a working party system as do the number, names, and positions of the parties in it.

This much richer conception of a party system allows us to recognize the distinctive fashion in which parties respond to the complex set of political and governing challenges that distinguish particular historical eras. It also enables us to mark the great turning points in our democratic practice and experience. For Canada, as for the United States, this conception of a party system highlights the essential features of several sequential, and distinctive, party systems otherwise masked by the impression of unchanging continuity suggested by the dominance of the same old political parties. Thus, Kenneth Carty, focusing on the organization and activity of Canadian parties; Richard Johnston, exploring the cycles of party mobilization of the electorate; and David Smith, approaching party politics from the perspective of how parties have gone about governing when in office, have recognized three distinctive political eras, three distinctive Canadian party systems that have marked the country’s democratic experience.

Parties exist to solve the organizational problems of linking society to
state in electoral democracies. Canada’s history of successive party systems is the story of how parties responded to the peculiar challenges of doing just that as both the character and the demands of Canadian society, and the responses and activities of the state, changed over time. This perspective provides us with both the theoretical and the historical framework for understanding the great party-system collapse in 1993. In their day, previous party-system crashes were just as dramatic, as they opened the system to new participants and forced the parties to invent new ways of doing Canadian politics. And, in important ways, each created a new Canada.

The first party-system collapse in Canadian history occurred during and after the First World War as the era of the historic parties of Confederation ended and a new, more democratic, more regionalized, party politics emerged. The Canada of regional brokerage that this second system served lasted until about 1960, when it, in turn, collapsed, and a new party system, driven by parties promoting their own national agendas, arose in a Canada riven by existential and constitutional angst while attempting to marry Keynesian policies with the practices of executive federalism. It is this third, pan-Canadian, system that has now reached the end of its natural life and has given way. Each of these party-system collapses was heralded by an enormous electoral landslide – Robert Borden’s in 1917, John Diefenbaker’s in 1958, and Brian Mulroney’s in 1984 – that signalled the voters’ openness to change and marked the beginning of a fundamental realignment of the electorate that would underpin the politics of the succeeding era. In each case, the Conservative party was the immediate beneficiary of the landslide; in each case, Conservatives paid a heavy price as the Liberals (and others) moved more quickly to absorb the lessons of the collapse, and to build new and different organizations able to create new coalitions and practise new politics. The result has been that the Conservatives have spent much of the twentieth century playing catch-up in the effort to recover from the effects of winning the three largest electoral victories of Canadian history. And this is how they are starting the twenty-first century.

The 1990s demise of the party system constructed in the 1960s is obvious. Its three parties – the Liberals, Conservatives, and New Democrats – between them commanded more than 90 percent of the vote for three decades, but suddenly this easy dominance ended as their combined vote-share fell to just two-thirds of the electorate, and two new parties – the Bloc Québécois and Reform – became major electoral forces and
parliamentary players. Several factors set the stage for the implosion of this third party system, including: increased voter cynicism; declining public confidence in representative institutions, especially the political parties; a concomitant desire for more direct, unmediated public participation; a rejection of consensus politics; a desire for more effective representation of regional interests; and an increasing pluralism in a society being animated by a rights discourse fostered by the new Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Many of these same elements had been among the catalysts for change in earlier periods of party-system transformation, breaking down old patterns as well as setting the terms for new ones.

Seen from the perspective of collapse, the story of Canadian party politics in the 1990s has been that of the failures of the old parties to accommodate to the forces of political, social, and governmental change. From the perspective of rebirth, the story is very much that of two new parties doing politics in new ways and to new ends. Both Reform and the Bloc practise a very different style of politics from the pan-Canadianism of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and both drew their initial support from voters opposed to pan-Canadian politics. Their roots lie in the failure of the Mulroney Conservative government to find common ground between Western Canadian and francophone Quebec interests. Despite early success, the Conservatives’ failures in terms of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown constitutional accords demonstrated the limitations of intraparty brokerage and exposed the growing displeasure in both regions with the traditional institutions of political representation. Pushed to the partisan edge when the Conservatives’ brokerage wheel finally fell off, Quebec nationalists and Western regionalists found a new voice for their concerns in parties devoted primarily to advancing regional, rather than pan-Canadian, interests.

In 1993, and again in 1997, voters in three of the country’s five regions\(^3\) abandoned the traditional parties in large numbers, and in so doing propelled these new parties to centre stage as first the Bloc, then Reform, took a turn as the Official Opposition. Yet both of these parties represent a distinctive region of the country in the House of Commons, and is largely seen as championing the interests of that region. In the two general elections of the 1990s, the Bloc won in 98 constituencies without ever fielding a candidate outside of Quebec, while Reform was victorious in 112 constituencies, only one of which is east of the Ontario-Manitoba border. This success makes it unlikely that the three traditional parties will dominate party competition in the new system.
This growth in the sheer number of parties has coincided with a pronounced regionalization in party support. After the 1997 election, the governing Liberals managed to hold a majority of the seats in only Ontario, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland. For their part, the Conservatives have been virtually obliterated in Western Canada, their stronghold over the previous three decades; have barely held on in Ontario and Quebec; and have staged a modest recovery in Atlantic Canada, where they managed to claim thirteen of the region’s thirty-two seats in 1997. The New Democrats have also been shut out of central Canada; furthermore, with the loss of most of its support in British Columbia, the party has largely been reduced to its historic Saskatchewan and Manitoba base. It is too early to know whether NDP 1997 electoral successes in Atlantic Canada are sustainable, though it would be consistent with the direction of the new party system if voters in those provinces were looking for a party to voice regional interests in the House of Commons. In short, as the country’s politics became increasingly regionalized, the parties developed distinctive regional bases. Reform represents the West, in particular, British Columbia and Alberta; the Liberals are a party of Ontario, with small pockets of support tacked on across the country; the Bloc speaks for francophone Quebec; the New Democrats represent parts of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and perhaps Atlantic Canada. The Conservatives may be something of an exception to this new imperative, for they have yet to find a regional stronghold that will translate their modest strength in terms of the popular vote into a comparable number of seats in Parliament.

However, a growth in the number of parties and the realignment of the partisan face of the country is not all there is to the transformation of the party system. As on previous occasions, more profound and far-reaching changes are altering the character of the parties and the manner in which they conduct national politics. Just as Macdonald’s and Laurier’s patronage-driven parties gave way to the Mackenzie King’s ministerial-brokerage party, and it, in turn, to the Trudeau and Mulroney-style pan-Canadian party, so now the parties are experimenting with new forms as they wrestle with the increased fragmentation of the electorate, insistent calls for increased democratization of the parties themselves, and a greater diversity among parties, in their ideologies, their representational impulses, and their internal practices. In previous party-system transformations, the big old parties survived such challenges by reinventing themselves, possible because there was never much more to them than
their electoral vocation. Whether they can perform this almost magical reincarnation a third time is still an open question. In considerable part, it will depend upon their responses to the new parties’ challenges in winning over a volatile electorate demanding more participatory, clearly defined political organizations.

Increased regionalization in party-support patterns has been accompanied by a greater fragmentation of the electorate. Unlike the pan-Canadian election campaigns of the previous decades, federal elections in the 1990s have been characterized by parties targeting relatively small groups of voters with specially tailored messages. In the new electoral playing field, with five major parties, the vote-share needed for success is considerably smaller. After all, the Liberals have discovered that they could win two majority governments with an average of just over 39 percent of the popular vote, compared with an average of 45 percent needed by the winning party in the five previous elections that produced a majority government. The other four parties have even more modest electoral objectives, and so each is targeting a small fraction of the electorate in the hope of maximizing its yield of seats in the House of Commons. The working of Canada’s first-past-the-post, single-member electoral system means that (up to a certain point) parties benefit from a regional concentration of their vote. The result is a focusing of campaign efforts and the delivery of targeted messages to those electors in specific areas of the country where the party believes it can muster enough support to win in individual constituencies. The parties are increasingly able to rely on sophisticated new communication strategies to, first, identify and, then, target those voters crucial to its electoral success. With little national political dialogue, and an effective absence of some parties from the campaign in each region, elections have lost their capacity to engender a national political debate. Since in no region of the country do all five of the major parties vigorously compete against one another for electoral support, there is no longer any genuinely national party system.

The appeal of the Reform Party is not based solely on its attentiveness to the parochial concerns of Western Canada, but also on its ability to give voice to the increased support for the democratic populism long found in much of the country. As voters have become increasingly disenchanted with elite-dominated, consensus-driven politics, Reform has successfully positioned itself as a genuine grass-roots, democratic organization. Playing on sentiments that directly echo those responded to by the farmers’ parties in the 1920s, Reform has championed a greater, more
direct role for ordinary Canadians in both public decision making and internal party affairs. When the three old-line parties were allied in support of the elite-sponsored Charlottetown Accord, the door was effectively opened for Reform to differentiate itself as being more responsive and in touch with the concerns of average Canadians. The traditional parties have responded both to the steps taken by Reform and to public sentiment on this issue. The most noticeable change has been in the area of leadership selection. Elite-dominated conventions are portrayed as relics of an old, unacceptable political era, and direct election of party leaders by the membership is increasingly becoming the norm. It is not accidental that, in each of the two earlier transition periods, the parties had responded to similar demands for more meaningful grass-roots participation in their internal affairs with an overhaul of the leadership-selection processes. The special pre-eminence that leaders have always held in Canadian parties ensures that any serious party reform involves rebalancing the relationship between the leader and ordinary party members.

Voters in the new system are being offered more than just more electoral choice. Not only do they have more parties to choose from, but the parties are also increasingly staking out distinctive policy positions. Gone are the days when all the major parties agreed on the essence of all the major issues. Consistent with their desire for more direct, effective participation, voters are demanding that parties offer them concrete policy positions during election campaigns. And as the parties’ policy positions are increasingly influenced by their membership, and tailored to specific segments of the electorate, we are seeing more divergence in their views than was evident in the previous elite-dominated, consensus-oriented system.

Supported by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Canadians have also been advancing new representational claims, in particular, those related to gender and ethnicity, that transcend the traditional divisions of region and language. The parties have struggled to find ways to accommodate these new interests. Their success has been modest. One result of the advancement of these new representational claims, and the inability of the parties to incorporate these interests effectively, has been a significant rise in interest-group activity and the invasion of the electoral process by these groups. Many of these groups devote themselves to single issues and attempt to force the parties to take concrete positions. This type of activity works to the advantage of parties such as Reform that take pride in having a clear and decisive stance on all issues. By
contrast, it lays bare the traditional practices of the old-line parties, which too often try to accommodate competing interests on the same issue.

For all the changes that these forces are working on the nature and practices of Canadian parties, the parties’ traditional electoral tasks of nominating candidates as well as managing and financing electoral campaigns remain. Canadian elections are fought in geographically defined, single-member districts, and the local constituency associations remain the fundamental organizational unit of Canadian political parties. It is in these associations, spread across hundreds of local communities, that most Canadians come into contact with party activity and much of the hard party work of electoral politics takes place. But it is also clear that, in the absence of any significant reform of the electoral system, this process has changed little over time; thus, its forms and practices provide an important element of continuity, anchoring the nation’s political parties against the shifting tides of the successive party systems.

In the chapters that follow, we use a variety of materials and approaches to explore these issues and to provide an account of why Canadian party politics collapsed in the early 1990s and how it is being reconstructed. An analysis of past party-system transformations structures not only the story of the shifting electoral fortunes of the parties, but also our interpretations of past organizational and representational styles that made each period so distinctive. To understand the contemporary parties and their responses to the situations they find themselves in, we have attended many local and national party meetings; leadership, policy, and reform conventions; campaign kick-off rallies; candidate schools; and nomination meetings. We have also consulted party documents and public records; interviewed party elites, activists, and members; and surveyed local organizations. During the 1997 general election, we visited local campaign offices to observe the parties’ grass-roots operations, and the links between local and national organizations. In the aftermath of the campaign, we conducted formal interviews with senior party officials, such as the parties’ national presidents, national directors, national and provincial campaign officials, and also with the political professionals, such as public-opinion pollsters, media and advertising specialists, and leader-tour directors, who now play such an important role in the parties’ electoral activity.

This book is not an encyclopedia of Canadian political parties. Instead, it provides an examination of the changes that are reshaping the parties engaged in national politics, and the system of competition that governs their relationships. We identify the tensions that resulted in the demise of
the recognizably distinctive period of Canadian party politics that stretched from the early 1960s into the 1990s, discuss how the parties are adapting, and look ahead to what the defining characteristics of the new party system will be. We start by exploring the cyclical pattern of party-system transformation in Canada, and the rise of two new parties at the expense of the Conservatives and New Democrats. That leads us to a consideration of the ways the new and old parties are going about representing interests, organizing political life, and paying for politics. We then explore the patterns of both continuity and change in local and national party electoral campaigning. The final chapter returns to our larger themes, and the building of the fourth Canadian party system.