

The Dalhousie Review

Volume 37

WINTER

Number 4

THE ELECTION OF 1957 AND THE CANADIAN ELECTORAL SYSTEM

J. M. BECK

The results of the federal election of June 10, 1957, appear to demonstrate the utter unreliability of those who seek to forecast the voting behaviour of Canadians. If, for example, the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion had relied upon its release of May 22, its predictions for Ontario would have been substantially correct. But its release of June 1 reversed the trend, and indicated only a four-point gain for the Conservatives instead of the seven-point gain which it had previously reported. The explanation of the co-director of the Institute that June 1 was "a time of yeasty indecision on the part of the voters," and that for greater accuracy the poll should have "caught the restless, changing mood at a point closer to the one existing on June 10," is strongly reminiscent of the American pollsters' apologia after the victory of Harry Truman in 1948.

An examination of the pre-election files of such Conservative newspapers as the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, the *Montreal Gazette*, and the *Ottawa Journal* indicates, too, that their reporters had perceived many of the signs of political upheaval, but had generally interpreted them to mean no more than insubstantial losses for the Liberals. Mesmerized, like almost everyone else, by the feeling that the government was invincible, they were altogether too cautious and arrived at markedly different conclusions from those that their counterparts of 1930 would have reached under the same circumstances.

It was as if the Canadian elector had simply waited, as Professor J. R. Mallory once suggested he might wait, "until some immeasurable mass-instinct told him that it was time for a

change." Then, without any one specific reason and certainly without any comprehension of what his fellows elsewhere were doing, the voter of Stonehurst in Queens-Lunenburg, of Chatsworth in Grey-Bruce, and of Lavinia in Marquette suddenly decided at the same time to defeat a cabinet minister, and a government under which Canadian prosperity had reached an all-time high. The feeling was so prevalent that Mr. St. Laurent found it impossible to re-create the character of Uncle Louis as successfully as he had done in 1949 and 1953. Hence the definitive study of the "father image" in North American politics, which the *Economist* called for in April, 1957, will now have to account for its collapse as well as its creation.

But the basic purpose of this article is not so much to explain the results of June 10, 1957, as to indicate what light they throw generally upon the Canadian electoral system. Most important of all, the bias in the system which, since 1935, had operated persistently in favour of the Liberals was suddenly reversed. As a result, a major party for the first time elected fewer members than one with a smaller popular vote. (The results of 1926 are no exception if the Liberal Progressives are included with the Liberals, as they ought to be.) On election day, 1957, the Conservatives, with the backing of 39 per cent of the electorate, returned 110 members (or 41.5 per cent of the total), while the Liberals won only 105 seats (i.e., 39.6 per cent), even though 42.3 per cent of the voters accorded them support. The phenomenon occurred despite the fact that Quebec, in typical fashion, returned 62 Liberals (i.e., 82.6 per cent of its 75 members), although only 62.3 per cent of the voters supported their candidates. This time, however, the bias in the electoral system in Quebec could not compensate for an even greater bias against the Liberals in six of the other provinces.

Only 52.3 per cent of the Prince Edward Island vote went to the Conservatives, yet for the first time since 1874 they won all the Island's seats. A mere 50.4 per cent of the popular vote in Nova Scotia gave the Conservatives 10 of 12 seats, and, with the exception of 1926, their most decisive majority in that province since Confederation. In Ontario the Conservative party's candidates polled slightly less than half of the popular vote, but won 60, or 71.4 per cent, of the 84 seats which were filled on election night. Three of the Western provinces showed not so much a pro-Conservative as an anti-Liberal bias. The Liberals secured 26.8 per cent of the popular vote in Manitoba, but only one of the 14 seats; 27.9 per cent of the vote in Alberta, but only one of the 17 seats; and 20.5 per cent of the vote in British Columbia, but

only 2 of 22 seats. Cumulatively, in these six provinces the Conservatives polled 385,610 more votes and won 65 more seats than the Liberals, whereas a plurality of 552,000 votes in Quebec gave the Liberals only 54 more seats than the Conservatives. That was the deciding factor in the election of 1957.

Each region of Canada has its own story to tell about the operation of the electoral system. The most significant feature of the Newfoundland returns was not the election of two Conservatives in the St. John's ridings — that happened in 1949 — but the appearance of the first faint glimmerings of a genuine two-party system in two of the five outport ridings. In the latter only one voter in seven had voted Conservative in 1949, one in five in 1953. But in 1957 the Conservative candidate in Humber-St. George's polled 33.0 per cent of the popular vote as compared with 10.9 per cent in 1949 and 22.4 per cent in 1953, and almost saved his deposit. In Trinity-Conception the Conservative gain was also substantial.

The phenomenon by which a party bringing a province into the Canadian federation has immediate success federally in the new province is by no means new. In each of the six elections between 1872 and 1891 British Columbia returned six Conservatives and no Liberals to the House of Commons. Laurier treated Saskatchewan and Alberta so handsomely in 1905 that the Conservatives have never succeeded in establishing themselves securely in those provinces federally or provincially. The social security and other benefits which accrued to Newfoundlanders as a result of their union with Canada meant nothing less than a transformation in their way of life, particularly in the outports, and, as a corollary, Liberal success. According to the Conservative press on the Island, Newfoundlanders are now discovering for the first time that federal payments are not to be regarded as a special boon of the Liberal party. Indeed, in some respects Uncle John is going to prove more generous than Uncle Louis. Furthermore, the financial plight into which the policies of the provincial Liberal government have brought Newfoundland may well redound to the disadvantage of the federal Liberals if the facts become generally known in the outports. Perhaps, then, a real two-party system will be operating in at least four of the Newfoundland constituencies in the next federal election.

In the three Maritime Provinces the Conservatives fared better than at any time since Confederation, except for 1925 and 1930. On the earlier occasions they took 23 of 29 seats; in 1957 they won 19 of 26. The lesson appears to be that, to achieve its greatest success in this area, the Conservative party must become

the spokesman of a movement which advocates policies designed to foster the development of the Maritimes at a rate commensurate with that of the rest of Canada. But there is an interesting contrast. The "Maritime Rights" movement of the 1920's was born and reached fruition in a time of economic recession; the somewhat analogous ideas of 1957 were put forth successfully at a time when, except for the Nova Scotia coal industry, the Maritimes were unusually prosperous.

Much has been made of the fact that, except for the New Brunswick constituency of Charlotte, the Liberal victories in the Maritimes were all in ridings where a substantial proportion of the population is Acadian. One-third of the people of Shelburne-Yarmouth-Clare and Inverness-Richmond in Nova Scotia claim French as their mother tongue; in the New Brunswick counties of Gloucester, Kent, Westmoreland, and Northumberland the percentages are 86.6, 81.7, 41.6 and 27.1 respectively. Since the Liberals won them all, it is tempting to make the easy generalization that the Acadians voted for a French-speaking Catholic prime minister. Yet the statistics before 1957 seem to indicate that the Acadians accorded no less support to Mr. King than to Mr. St. Laurent, and that the Conservative trend in 1957 may have been as pronounced among them as it was among the rest of the population. In Shelburne-Yarmouth-Clare, for example, the Conservative percentage of the vote increased by only 4 per cent in Anglo-Saxon Shelburne as compared with 13 per cent in Acadian Clare. The Conservatives took 8 per cent more of the popular vote in Anglo-Saxon York-Sunbury than in 1953 and defeated a cabinet minister, whereas a 9 per cent gain in Acadian Kent did no more than reduce an overwhelming Liberal majority. A more definite conclusion with respect to voting trends among the Acadians awaits a detailed study of the official returns when they become available.

Quebec, in 1957 as always, remained the key to complete electoral success in Canada. Only twice in this century — in 1911 and 1930 — have the Conservatives by themselves controlled the House of Commons, and then because they won 27 and 24 seats respectively in Quebec. In 1925 and 1957 the Conservatives were the largest single party, but they fell short of a clear majority because they elected only 4 and 8 members in Quebec. Yet what happened in 1957 probably came up to the highest expectations of the chief Conservative strategist, Gordon Churchill, now the Minister of Trade and Commerce. Colonel Churchill's calculations were based on election statistics which showed that on eight of the last nine occasions when a government suffered

defeat, the Maritimes, Ontario, and the West needed no help from Quebec to bring it about. Only in 1896 had Quebec been the deciding factor in an electoral defeat. So, feeling that the times were unpropitious for the Conservatives in Quebec and following the military maxim — reinforce success not failure — he advised the Conservatives to devote their major energies and resources to the areas outside of Quebec. The latter province would not be abandoned, but it would not be allotted, as was normally the custom, almost 50 per cent of the campaign funds in a rather hopeless cause. If the Conservatives gained 60 seats outside of Quebec, said Colonel Churchill, they could form a minority government; if, by some miracle, they won an additional 20 seats in Quebec, they could form a government with an overall majority. In point of fact, as compared with 1953, they gained 56 seats outside of Quebec, but only 4 seats in Quebec.

The pronounced Conservative weakness in Quebec does not date, as is commonly supposed, from 1896 when Laurier swept the province, for in none of his four victories did the Conservatives poll less than 40 per cent of the popular vote. The real cause of their downfall was the conscription issue of 1917. As a result, the Conservatives won no seats in Quebec in 1921, and polled only 18.5 per cent of the popular vote. This was increased to 33.7 per cent in 1925, to 34.3 per cent in 1926, and, in a time of economic recession, to 44.7 per cent in 1930.

Again, in 1940, the Quebec voter's distrust of the Conservatives and their attitude to the manpower question was reflected in the election returns. Only 19.8 per cent of the voters supported them, and they won no seats. The subsequent demands of the Conservative press and members of Parliament for full conscription and their criticism of the French-Canadian war effort led to the further deterioration of their party's strength in Quebec, and it reached an all-time low in the election of 1945. The results then indicated the complete disintegration of the party system. The official Liberal candidates polled only 48.8 per cent of the vote; the Bloc Populaire 11.8; the Conservatives 8.8; the Social Credit 4.6; the C.C.F. 2.1; the L.P.P. 1.0; and a host of independents 22.9 per cent. Since 1945, just as after 1921, the fortunes of the Conservatives have steadily improved — 24.1 per cent of the vote in 1949, 29.3 in 1953, and 31.5 in 1957. At the same time the voting strength of the Liberals has remained remarkably constant at between 60 and 62 per cent. This means that more than 90 per cent of the Quebec electorate has voted either Liberal or Conservative in the last two elections. Thus Quebec has firmly rejected any idea of an ethnic party, and at least statistically

has returned, more than any province west of it, to a two-party system. But it is an abnormal two-party system, for at best the second party has shown barely half the strength of the other.

This becomes more understandable when it is realized that Conservative constituency organization in Quebec, except in a few largely English-speaking ridings on the island of Montreal, simply does not exist. To a large extent, therefore, the intensity of the electoral battle in any riding will depend upon the support accorded the Conservative candidate by the local Union Nationale organizers and organization. This is, of course, a natural alignment, since most of the Conservatives of Quebec switched to the UN when it was formed in 1935. Nor is the alignment inherently evil if its policies correspond with those advocated by the Conservatives in the nine other provinces. But it contains obvious weaknesses and dangers for the Conservatives. For one thing, it is easy for their opponents to conjure up the spectre of a Drew-Duplessis or a Diefenbaker-Duplessis alliance, and to use it, sometimes with telling effect, outside of Quebec. Worse still, the vigour with which the Conservatives fight any contest in Quebec is determined not by themselves but by another political organization.

The UN's attitude is in turn determined by the degree of "collaboration" which has been reached between itself and the federal Liberals in any constituency. In times past it was common practice for a Liberal member of Parliament to remain inactive in his riding against the provincial UN candidate, in return for which he received no more than token resistance from the UN organization in his own contests. The agonized denunciation of this practice by Georges Lapalme, the provincial Liberal leader, during the provincial election of 1956 led to its abandonment in many constituencies. However, in two constituencies, Beauharnois-Salaberry and St. Jean-Iberville-Napierville, where collaboration still prevailed (and where, incidentally, the Conservatives had no chance of election), the UN organization supported the Liberal candidates in 1957. This produced the remarkable situation in the latter riding of the official Liberal candidate, a "notorious" collaborator backed by the UN, barely defeating an independent Liberal who had the support of the "true" Liberals. In at least thirty other ridings the UN had its scores to settle with the Liberals, and it campaigned strongly for either Conservatives or Independents. Against Hugues Lapointe and Jean Lesage, the two cabinet ministers who had vigorously supported Mr. Lapalme in 1956, it fought tooth-and-nail, and Mr. Lapointe failed of election in Lotbinière.

Undoubtedly all the French-Canadian Conservatives elected in Quebec on June 10 owed their success to the UN. Since the election, the national director of the Conservative party has announced his intention of setting up constituency organizations in Quebec to fight the party's battles in the next election. Whether these will be anything more than paper organizations remains to be seen. Past history indicates that they will have to deliver something more than 40 per cent of the vote if the Conservatives are to win a substantial number of Quebec's 75 seats.

On June 10, Ontario behaved as Ontario usually does when the national trend is Conservative. It had contributed strongly to Laurier's defeat in 1911 by returning 73 Conservatives out of 86; it had brought Meighen close to victory in 1925 by electing 68 Conservatives out of 82; it had ensured Bennett's success in 1930 by giving him 59 supporters to the other parties' 23; it gave Diefenbaker 61 of its 85 seats in 1957 and enabled him to form a minority government. All but 3 of the Conservative losses were in the peripheral areas where the party's strength has been weakest in recent years — 11 in northern, 5 in eastern, 2 in south-eastern, and 3 in south-western Ontario. In the rest of the province the Conservatives showed more impressive strength than ever before, losing only Kingston, Waterloo North, and Toronto-Trinity. Toronto and York County, as in 1930, elected Conservatives in every riding but one, and only by an eyelash missed returning to the situation which prevailed from 1900 to 1925, when the city elected nothing but Conservatives and was deservedly dubbed "Tory Toronto." But this is not the old Tory Toronto. Among the new members are the Irish Catholics Arthur Maloney of Toronto-Parkdale and Frank McGee of York-Scarborough, and the Ukrainian Catholic Dr. John Kuchepa of Toronto-High Park. In the old Toronto they would not have been nominated by their party at all; their nomination and election offers evidence that the Conservatives are adapting themselves to new circumstances.

Even in the peripheral ridings, Port Arthur and Cochrane excepted, the Conservative candidates ran more strongly, and often much more so, than in 1953. In south-western Ontario they won Essex South, in eastern Ontario Renfrew South and Glengarry-Prescott — the latter, however, with the assistance of an independent Liberal. But in northern Ontario their augmented vote brought no gain in seats. Here their last success was in 1930 when they took 5 seats to the Liberals' 3. In the five general elections between 1935 and 1953, the Liberals won every seat in the North, often by overwhelming majorities. But in

1957 the C.C.F. managed to win 3 of the 11 northern ridings — Timmins, Timiskaming, and Port Arthur — for their only victories east of Manitoba. Of the 21 seats which the Conservatives lost on the periphery, 11 contain at least substantial French-Canadian elements. While even these evinced a Conservative trend, their swing seems to have been much less than that of the Acadians and pronouncedly less than that of the rest of Ontario.

The real political miracle of 1957 was wrought in the four western provinces. There the Conservative share of the popular vote, after ranging from 20 to 23 per cent between 1935 and 1949, had plummeted downward to 15.5 per cent in 1953, and in many constituencies the Conservative seemed to have shared the fate of the dodo. Seven of the party's nine victories four years ago appeared, in fact, to be more personal than party triumphs. Then, on June 10, 1957, in a spectacular rejuvenation, Conservative candidates in these provinces attracted 526,541 voters — 30 per cent of the total and 75,000 more than any other party — and re-established Conservatism as a force in western Canada. A substantial portion of this new-found strength, it is true, was centred in urban Vancouver, Calgary, and South Winnipeg. But many of those rural areas which had a history of voting Conservative up to a decade or two ago returned to the old fold. This tendency was particularly marked in rural Manitoba and in the Saskatchewan riding of Qu'Appelle. In other rural constituencies, such as Bow River in Alberta and Comox-Alberni in British Columbia, where they had shown little strength since the First World War but where they put up first-class candidates, the Conservatives ran incredibly strongly in 1957.

Superficially, the results in western Canada constituted a complete debacle for the Liberal party. Of the 70 seats, the Conservatives took 21, the C.C.F. 22, the Social Credit 19, and the Liberals only 8. But if the seats had been apportioned according to the popular vote, the results would have been 21, 15, 16, and 18 respectively. In some instances at least it almost seemed as if the western voter was determined to get rid of his Liberal representative at any cost, and calculated nicely which of his opponents was most likely to do the trick. Perhaps this was a suitable fate for those guilty of supporting a measure as politically unrealistic as that which required the prairie farmer to make himself indebted to his old *bête noire*, the chartered banks, for loans on his stored grain.

In Manitoba particularly the electoral system seemed, as in 1926, to exaggerate out of all proportion the voter's dissatisfaction. On the former occasion the Conservatives polled more votes

than any other party, yet won none of the province's 17 seats; in 1957 the Liberal popular vote was 93,252 compared with the C.C.F.'s 82,400, but the latter took five seats to the Liberals' one. Both the C.C.F. and Social Credit parties added slightly to their Commons strength in the West, but they appear merely to have been minor beneficiaries of Liberal losses.

These sectional results, taken together, have meant the greatest infusion of new blood into the House of Commons since 1935. Of the 238 sitting members who sought re-election, one-third were rejected by their constituents. This will be all to the good if it rescues the House from the state of lethargy which has often characterized it during the last two decades. Too many persons have been elected too often who regard the Commons as a pleasant club, membership in which will bring a retiring allowance if they can somehow survive more than two Parliaments. Perhaps the House of Commons is one area into which the modern craving for security in the form of pensions should not have been permitted to intrude. Above all, Parliament needs novelty, fresh ideas, and even changed styles of oratory to counterbalance the boredom which is an inevitable concomitant of its routine procedures.

In the distribution of the 94 new members by party, there is a striking disproportion. Only the two smaller parties have managed to strike anything like a healthy balance between old and new. Of the 25 C.C.F. members, 7 were not in the last House; of the 19 Social Crediters, 5 are new. In contrast, 68 of the 112 Conservative members of this Parliament did not sit in the last. The difficulties of cabinet-making are heightened if a party accedes to office just after it has more than doubled its representation at one fell swoop. Thus Mr. Diefenbaker discovered that over half the material which was available to him was untested and unknown. Exercising caution, he chose 14 of his ministers with portfolio from the 44 Conservatives who were members of the last Commons, and only 2 from his newly-elected supporters. Promotion of the latter will depend, therefore, upon how well they meet the test in Parliament.

The predicament of the Conservative party, according to some critics, is its inability to escape from its inherent Anglo-Saxon personality. "This inhibition," said one writer in the *Canadian Forum* of January, 1957, "is slowly fossilizing it in a country which is working out its own national character compounded of not just Anglo-Saxons but one-third French Canadians and a steady stream of new Canadians to whom Macdonald's battle cry 'A British subject I was born, a British subject I will die' means nothing." The same writer also commented on the

Conservative leadership convention of December, 1956: "The sight of so many enthusiastic young persons and women... was proof that the party has tried hard to broaden its approach, but it was sad that nearly all the delegates appeared to be from one community — English, Scotch or Irish descent, Protestant well-heeled, upper middle class or farmers." The Conservatives must therefore derive great satisfaction from the fact that they are now more representative of Canadians generally — except for French Canada — than are the Liberals. Their members include a Jung, a Jorgenson, a Mandziuk, a Kucherepa, and a Martini; a larger number of non-French Catholics than for many years past; and even more French-Canadians than in any election since 1930.

The Liberal problem with respect to new members is exactly the reverse of the Conservative. Ninety-five Liberals who sat in the last House, but by no means all the best, are back. Only 10 members are new, and they clearly do not provide an adequate infusion of new talent. Also, the Liberal representation in Parliament is decidedly unrepresentative of the Canadian population. Of the 105 official Liberal candidates who won election, 66 call French their mother tongue, and at least a dozen others represent constituencies in which the French vote is substantial. But this is nothing new; nor may it be of long duration. Of 82 Laurier Liberals in 1917, 54 were French, as were 56 of Mr. King's 101 supporters in 1925, yet in both cases the party succeeded in correcting the imbalance at the very next elections. Certainly the Liberal party has not become a French party, as some observers have stated, since its popular vote was better balanced than the Conservative throughout all ten provinces.

Equally superficial are the observers who attribute the Liberal failure in 1957 to a run-down organization. They have really accepted the professional politician's myth that electoral defeat is out of the question when the party organization is sound. Internal decay is often the fate of a political organization which has enjoyed a long period of success, but that certainly was not evident in 1957. Sometimes, when an obvious trend sets in against a party before the date of the election, the members of the party organization tend to become delinquent or lukewarm, but the trend was not obvious in 1957. Only on election day itself did the massive poll organizations of the Liberal party realize the apathy of the public to their blandishments. It is certainly a sign of health in the Canadian democracy that the average voter had made up his own mind that a change was necessary and that the strongest political organization in the country could not alter his decision.