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Report on the 1988 Canadian General Election (or Divided Government - Canadian style)

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In reporting on the November 21 Canadian election I would like to mention two areas, one of which dominated the campaign, the other was ignored, unwisely in my opinion. The first of course was a debate over the Canada-US free trade agreement which I suspect is not of overwhelming importance to this group.

The other is the future of several proposed constitutional amendments known as the Meech Lake Accord which, in the long run are, I think of greater significance to Canadian politics and may be of some interest to you.

There is an old Quebec proverb useful when it is unclear who to blame for some foul up. You reply C'est la faute de Jacques Cartier (It is all the fault of Jacques Cartier for discovering this place in 1527 because if he had not made the discovery obviously the problem would not have occurred.) I am not going to go all the way back to Jacques Cartier but I do not think Canadian politics and this election can be understood without a bit of background:

I would go back to 1980 when there was a referendum in Quebec on the question of independence. The NO forces were victorious and during the course of the campaign promised that if Quebecers rejected independence there would be changes to make participation in the federation more attractive.

In 1982 Prime Minister Trudeau succeeded in finally patriating the constitution, including an amending formula and a Charter of Rights and Freedom. The government of Quebec, which was still led by a pro independence government, was opposed to these changes on the grounds that the new amending formula (7/10) did away with Quebec's traditional right to veto constitutional amendments.

For this reason they refused to participate in any federal provincial conferences excepts as observers and systematically prefaced all legislation with a clause stating that it operated notwithstanding the new charter of rights.

In 1984 Pierre Trudeau retired and a few months later the Liberals were defeated by Brian Mulroney and the Conservative party which had promised to bring Quebec back into the constitutional fold. This was greatly facilitated by the defeat the following year of the Parti quebecois in Quebec and over the next few months negotiations were undertaken which culminated in the Meech Lake Accord.

Among other things the accord recognizes that Quebec constitutes within Canada a distinct society

and requires that the constitution be interpreted in the light of that fact. The Accord also provides that the appointment of Senators shall no longer be the sole prerogative of the federal government but instead the provinces shall submit names from which the federal government must choose new Senators.

There are a number of other changes which, according to critics, all will result in a weakening of the central authority in Canada and an increase in the already considerable power of the provinces. The two opposition parties supported the Accord and it passed the House and Senate with only a few individuals voting against. However to come into force the Accord also has to be approved by all of the provincial legislative assemblies within three years.

The Premiers who signed all took the view that they would entertain no changes which would force them to go back and renegotiate. Eight of the provincial legislatures have so far approved the Accord. But in the other two there have been elections and changes in government since the accord was signed. Manitoba and New Brunswick are threatening to withhold signature unless certain changes are made. In both provinces the Liberal party is in a strong position. It holds all the seats in NB and is the opposition in a minority parliament in Manitoba. Neither of these parties is particularly keen on free trade.

The Meech Lake Agreement provides for a constitutional conference to be held on the subject of Senate reform including the role and function of the Senate, its powers, method of selecting Senators and representation in the Upper Chamber.

While all this was going on the Mulroney was also negotiating a free trade agreement with the United States which was signed last year. Legislation implementing the agreement has since been passed by Congress and by the House of Commons. The Canadian Senate, which is an appointed House and still controlled by the opposition Liberal Party, announced it would not pass the legislation until the Canadian electorate had a chance to pronounce on the issue. This was an unusual, indeed unprecedented, exercise of the Senate's power but it did force the Government to call an election.

In 1984 the Conservatives won 210 out of 282 seats, and 50% of the vote. This time, after a topsy turvy campaign which saw them go from the top of the opinion polls to the bottom and back to the top they won 170 out of 295 seats and 43% of the vote.

In a three party system this is quite a strong mandate and there is no doubt the House of Commons is going to once more pass the free trade legislation. The Senate, on the other hand is still controlled by the Liberals and although the Liberals are on record as saying they will respect the wishes of the people, think there will be some attempt to slow down the process to embarrass the Prime Minister and, more importantly, to give notice of an activist Senate for the duration of this Parliament.

One other noteworthy aspect of the election result is that Quebec voted overwhelmingly in favour of the Conservatives 63 of 75 seats going to Mr. Mulroney. Without the Quebec seats the Conservatives would not have had a majority and there would probably be no approval of the free trade agreement.

Let me now turn to the issue that did not receive any attention during the election campaign, the Meech Lake Constitutional Agreement. Unlike free trade all three federal party leaders voted in favour of the agreement. Some have been so unkind as to suggest that Provincial leader Robert Bourassa promised each of the three parties that they could count on his support if they voted in favour of Meech Lake. A more generous interpretation is that both of the opposition parties felt they had to support it in order to win some support in Quebec. If so this proved to be a miscalculation as the only ones to gain in Quebec were the Conservatives.

So despite the Conservative victory in the recent election what we have , in the short term at least, is a country divided very fundamentally.

First in Parliament between the Senate and the House of Commons

Second constitutionally between the 8 provinces in favour of Meech Lake amendments and two calling for further changes.

And finally between a Quebec overwhelmingly in favour of the free trade agreement and anxious to get on with business and an English Canada ready to try it out but just waiting for an excuse to say "I told you so it was all a mistake."