

Federal election '88



Word of caution
Liberal leader John Turner unfolds a flag given to him by the Quebec wing of the group fighting acid rain, during campaign visit to Beauceville, Que., this week. Turner said Canada would be in need of a new national emblem if another Tory government continues to carry on as it has for the past four years.

PM again No. 1 in Quebec

An analysis by PETER MASER
Southam News

MONTREAL — The start of the federal election raises only one question in Quebec — what size the Conservative victory?

That the Tories will capture a majority of Quebec's 75 seats Nov. 21 is a subject of little dispute, even for many Liberal and New Democrat organizers.

What is uncertain is how high the Tories will go. Depending on the campaign, that figure could go quite high indeed, possibly in the range of 60 to 65 seats.

In the 1984 election, the Tories captured 58 ridings by capitalizing on Brian Mulroney's popularity and a widespread disenchantment with the Liberals and John Turner.

If they do as well or better in this campaign — an almost unthinkable prospect only two years ago — it will be for largely the same reasons.

Mid-way through their term, Mulroney and the Tories were reeling from a series of controversies from which it seemed they might never recover.

Today, however, Mulroney is once again the most popular of the three federal leaders in Quebec and his party, already in first place, appears to be gaining strength.

The turnaround can be traced to several factors, the most important being policy, notably free trade and the Meech Lake accord, the cleansing of the party's tarnished image and the forging of links to provincial Liberals and moderate elements in the Parti Quebecois.

It was this coalition that put Mulroney in power in 1984 and it now seems good for at least one more election.

Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa has certainly made it clear he would like to see the Tories returned for another term. Bourassa will not campaign for the Tories, but has already sent strong signals to his organization that he prefers his old friend Brian.

In contrast, Turner is on the wrong side of Bourassa, the wrong side of free trade and at least parts of his party are on the wrong side of Meech Lake, a fact that has not gone unnoticed in Quebec.

Once the absolute rulers of the province, the federal Liberals were reduced to 17 seats in 1984 and could drop even further this time.

The only area in which they are certain to elect MPs is Montreal, and even there, their best chances are in predominantly anglophone and ethnic ridings.

Put another way, the Liberals could be shut out of francophone Quebec, an indication of how badly they have fallen out of favor with the province's majority.

Meanwhile, the New Democrats will be conducting their first real campaign in the province in the hope of electing their first Quebec MP.

Because it is their first campaign, however, they are years, if not decades, behind the other two parties in establishing credibility with voters and developing a campaign organization worthy of the name.

The official line from NDP headquarters is that the party will do well in several ridings. That may prove correct, but whether they actually win any appears far less certain.

At best, most observers feel they could win one or two, although few would be surprised if they won none.

FORTUNES REVERSE

Maritimes looking Tory

Southam News
HALIFAX — What a difference a few months can make.

It wasn't that long ago that the front pages of Atlantic Canada's newspapers were carrying grim news for Brian Mulroney's Conservatives.

Consider:

■ On a visit to Moncton, N.B., an angry mob moves in on the prime minister and his wife in an unruly demonstration over the closure of the Canadian National maintenance shops. Mila Mulroney is struck in the stomach and two protesters are slightly injured.

■ Nearly 300 laid-off railcar workers confront the prime minister in Halifax in an ugly protest about the closing of the Hawker Siddeley plant in Trenton, N.S.

It seemed the Tories had fallen irreversibly since 1984, when only rural Newfoundland put up even a show of resisting the Tory blue tide that washed away 12 Liberal seats on the way to winning 25 of 32 Atlantic ridings.

By June 1988, the Tories were eight points behind the Liberals in Atlantic Canada — the Conservatives had been 19 points ahead in

the 1984 election — and appeared to be in free fall.

Analysts were saying that except for a handful of relatively safe seats, the Conservatives appeared headed for major electoral losses in the region.

Said Agar Adamson, a political scientist at Acadia University: "It's downhill all the way."

But that's all different today.

An Angus Reid poll released last week put the Tories at 48 per cent of decided voter support in the region. The Liberals had tumbled 18 points to 24 per cent, three points behind the New Democratic Party, which has never been a major player in Atlantic Canada.

A combination of factors are probably behind the rise in Tory fortunes and the Liberal slide.

The re-election of John Buchanan's Conservative government in Nova Scotia on Sept. 6 likely had some spinoff value for the federal party.

And, says pollster Reid, Mulroney's strong standing in other parts of the country — notably Quebec and Ontario — has probably led to a sort of bandwagon effect in Atlantic Canada, where voters don't want to be out of step

with the rest of the nation.

Further, says Reid, it is likely the release of a book detailing John Turner's troubled leadership of the Liberal Party turned some voters away from the Grits.

History also suggests the incumbency factor may help the Tories in several ridings held by MPs who command an "awful lot of loyalty" from voters, explains Adamson.

Still, Adamson believes the Liberals can increase their representation from Atlantic Canada in the Nov. 21 election. He says New Brunswick — especially the francophone north — is likely to play the most prominent role in any Liberal resurgence.

In 1984, Mulroney made an historic breakthrough in the area by claiming three of four seats. But that was before he had to face a Liberal New Brunswick still honeymooning under the spell of bilingual Premier Frank McKenna.

Adamson cautions, however, that a lack of funds could derail a Liberal comeback in Atlantic Canada. Few candidates have been nominated in the region, a sign that the party has been unable to convince high-profile members that Turner can lead them to Ottawa.

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