

Third front

PRESTON MANNING'S REFORM PARTY

A modern David takes on Goliath

By Larry Johnsrude

CALGARY (CP) — The slender, youthful-looking man in the baggy blue pinstripe suit doesn't look like a revolutionary.

Small-faced and bookish-looking behind large wire-framed glasses, Preston Manning seems like someone who should be speaking to a Rotary Club instead of leading a political insurrection.

But he figures Canada is about due for another western-generated political upheaval. First came the Riel rebellion, he says, followed every 20 years or so by some other populist movement bucking the national trend.

This time, says Preston Manning, it's his turn.

It may be an unorthodox historical interpretation, but the 47-year-old leader of the upstart western-rights Reform party is no stranger to unorthodox politics.

A year after he was born, his father, Ernest Manning, became premier of Alberta and leader of the province's Social Credit party. The senior Manning governed the province for 25 years, and growing up in that environment left a lasting impression on his son.

"What drives me?" Preston Manning asks through a toothy, crooked smile, gazing out the window of his eighth-floor Calgary office during a recent interview.

"It's the feeling of unfairness westerners have about the way they have historically been treated by the power brokers in Central Canada."

That feeling is exemplified in the Reform party's forceful slogan, The West Wants In!

In the 30 months since the Reform party was founded to address western alienation, membership has burgeoned, particularly in Alberta where the party is a growing political force.

Deborah Grey became the party's first MP when she won a northern Alberta byelection last spring. And Reform candidate Stan Waters easily won an election last fall to fill Alberta's Senate vacancy, although Prime Minister Brian Mulroney has yet to appoint Waters to the upper chamber.

Many attribute the party's rise in prominence to Manning himself.

"Preston is a visionary," says Dianne Ablonczy, a Calgary lawyer



Reform Party leader Preston Manning is driven by the belief westerners have been short-changed by the power brokers of Central Canada.

and the party's chairman. "He's a very shrewd, strategic and knowledgeable person."

The Reform party's main planks are aimed at making Canada's elected representatives more accountable to the people and the regions. It supports an elected, powerful Senate with equal representation from each province, and it wants to make members of Parliament answer to the electorate at times other than elections.

The party would require MPs to canvass their constituents through public opinion polls or referendums on major issues, and vote accordingly. Constituents could petition to have their member ousted if he or she didn't vote according to their wishes.

"(Only) one in four Canadians agrees with Meech Lake and 70 to 80 per cent of people are against the goods and services tax, and

both are being forced on Canadians," says Manning. "People are showing their frustration."

Reform party members oppose legislated bilingualism and the Meech Lake constitutional accord. They think Quebec should secede if it can't stay in Canada without special status.

Political foes have characterized the Reform party as separatist, intolerant and anti-Quebec. Former Liberal MP Stan Roberts, a party founder defeated by Manning in the first Reform leadership race, criticized the executive as a bunch of anti-French fanatics.

But Manning seems to have avoided being pinned with such labels.

"I think they haven't stuck because of his very considerable political skill," says Roger Gibbins, a political science professor at the University of Calgary.

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PEOPLE WITH ANSWERS



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