

# A cast of thousands

## *Eenie, meenie, miney, mandate*

Putting aside any political leanings for a minute, it's difficult for anyone to deny that a federal election is one heck of a show. For several months the national media abounds with spectacle of a sort unavailable in more conventional entertainments: more clowns than at the circus, more unbelievable statements than can be found in the tabloids, and vicious verbal shoot-outs that make the worst TV gunfights look like a Victorian poetry discussion group. If one could afford to remain calmly detached from all this, an understandable response might be to sit back, grab some popcorn, and snicker uncontrollably for awhile. Unfortunately, we can't afford to just sit back and watch. However silly Kim Campbell and company may seem, what they are squabbling about is our future and who will be given a mandate to chart that future, and it is our responsibility to decide who among the candidates is deserving of that mandate. The twist this year, though, lies in the strangely numerous and vastly disparate collection of parties competing for power. The electoral show has a cast of thousands, and it's becoming hard for the voters to tell the players apart without a scorecard, let alone decide which party is worthy of leading Canada.

The frustrating paradox of the current electoral scene is the not wholly incorrect perception that, despite the proliferation of political parties, no party is much, if any, better than its rivals. It's like the old complaint about cable television: a zillion channels but nothing worth watching.

The Conservatives, architects of such economically controversial things as the GST and NAFTA, call for serious belt-tightening in the face of harsh economic realities. Many see them as deficit-obsessed, ruthless economists who shelter the rich and influential; not the most appealing political stance in hard times. As for the other major (and currently front-running) party, the Liberals are promising just about everything but the kitchen sink, including a "return to the good old days" of Canadian prosperity. Many people fear the Liberals' policies because they seem blindly optimistic and/or fiscally irresponsible. The impression one can draw from this is that the two main parties espouse fundamentally different economic policies, but each of these policies seems extreme in its own way, leaving the casual observer to

choose between two kinds of excesses at opposite ends of the political spectrum. Superficially, at least, the major parties don't seem to offer a lot in the way of middle ground for voters who want some kind of balance between indulgent extravagance and uncompromising frugality.

The alternatives are no more appealing, though. The near-invisible NDP has lost almost all credibility as a viable political alternative because of Ontario's new NDP provincial government, which soon degenerated into a scandal-ridden, fiasco-of-the-month political disaster, turning its back on many of the NDP's most cherished socialist principles to deal with unpleasant economic realities; not exactly an encouraging prototype for an NDP federal government. Preston Manning's Reform, the little party that could, is building momentum but is still seen by most Canadians as a right-wing fringe group, a bit too extremist for most tastes. Mel Hurtig's National Party is distinctive but no contender, and most of the other parties are confined to championing certain causes or special interests (i.e. the Christian Heritage Party, the Natural Law Party, and let's not forget the Bloc Quebecois—a political alliance dedicated to dissolving the federation it is seeking to represent; as they say in those Red Rose Tea

commercials, "Only in Canada, Eh?") At a glance, no clearly superior party stands out as the logical choice, and the media has been abuzz with projections of a fragmented, coalition government emerging. It's virtually impossible to pick a party that is unquestionably better than its rivals. Both the media and the public are bitterly divided, or at least thoroughly confused, as to what party we should elect.

What most people seem to overlook is the fact that we are electing people, not parties, or at least we should be. Don't elect Joe Whoever because he's a card-carrying Conservative; elect him on the basis of his platform, his goals for his constituency, and his record, if any. Don't elect Jane Whatserface because she's a tried-and-true Liberal; elect her on her own merits if you do at all. In electing our representatives, we should look beyond the broad and often-shifting parameters of party divisions, and concentrate on electing the best people for the job. Perhaps if our system placed a greater emphasis on the individual, we'd have fewer people campaigning for parties and more people campaigning for Canada.

*Sean McQuaid,  
Editor-in-Chief*

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