

The Politics of Dream and Denial

by Silver Donald Cameron

ISLE MADAME, NS --

In the West, said the old political maxim, politics is a religion; in Ontario it's a business; in the Maritimes it's a disease. No more. Political fundamentalism now afflicts Ontario; Quebec is a political peep show. (Quick: name Jean Charest's current party. List Lucien Bouchard's previous ones. Who is the separatist *pur laine*?) And on both coasts, politics is delicious entertainment. Maybe it's the salt air.

BC has always been famous for dreamy, surreal politics -- but not the East Coast. Yet for every W.A.C. Bennett we've had a Joey Smallwood, for every Phil Gagliardi a Richard Hatfield, for every Dave Barrett a John Crosbie, for every Bill Bennett a John Buchanan. Nova Scotia recently had a health minister whose notion of preventive medicine was to ban candy cigarettes, prompting one of my neighbors to burst into song:

*Smoke, smoke, smoke that cigarette,
Smoke, smoke, smoke that cigarette,
While the dope lands on the shore,
the cops are at the corner store,
Protecting us from candy cigarettes.*

In BC, a beleaguered NDP government's best hope is -- wait for it -- Bill Vander Zalm. Once the proprietor and vendor of Fantasy Gardens, now leader of the BC Reform Party, Vander Zalm is poised to fragment the right, drawing support from the accident-prone Liberals and allowing the socialist hordes another term in office. In Nova Scotia, John Hamm's Tories propped up Russell MacLellan's minority Liberal government during last spring's session -- but Hamm demanded a solemn promise that the budget would be balanced. This fall the Grits announced a probable deficit of \$50 to \$80 million, leaving Hamm with egg. On his face. (A prominent Tory of the last generation was named Bacon. Who is the casting director at the legislature?)

MacLellan's Liberals also groan under the weight of their Faustian compact with ITT Sheraton, which operates casinos in Sydney and Halifax. Sometime Liberal minister Ralph Fiske, until recently head of the Gaming Commission, recently charged that the government's tumescent urgency to get under the covers with ITT Sheraton cost something north of \$20 million. As the House held hearings on Fiske's charges, ITT Sheraton abruptly ceased construction on its promised waterfront casino in Halifax. The government made concessions, and construction resumed. The government says there was no connection between these events. Sure. And that was the Tooth Fairy you saw flying under the Confederation Bridge, not a military helicopter.

The BC government passes recall legislation, which its opponents promptly invoke against two New Democrats. Those recall campaigns fail, but the next one returns a Liberal to private life. Paul Reitsma has been discovered to be the author of pseudonymous letters to the editor praising Paul Reitsma, MLA. But he clings to office for months, until it becomes apparent that a recall campaign will indeed get the requisite number of signatures.

Nova Scotia has no recall legislation, so Reitsma's Maritime counterpart hangs on like an over-ripe apple in an October gale. Reeves Matheson, a Glace Bay lawyer, having admitted he forged cheques and misappropriated more than \$55,000 from clients -- for which he was disbarred and may face criminal charges -- resigned from the NDP caucus in May, but not from the House. He says he will step down --

not just now, but sometime ... in the future ... after some consultations ... when the moment is right. He sounds like John Buchanan, asked when he would call an election. "In the fulness of time," said Buchanan. What did that mean? "Well, you know, time..." explained Buchanan vaguely. "When it's full..."

When the House opened October 15, Matheson said that "no one has told me that they want me to resign." The next day, the Halifax Chronicle-Herald did a street poll of 40 people in his riding. Twenty favoured his resignation; thirteen opposed it. But he can only be forced out by a criminal conviction – or, more likely, another election.

Shades of Billy Joe MacLean, the genial Mayor of Port Hawkesbury who became a minister in the Buchanan government, padded his expense accounts, pleaded guilty to fraud, and refused to resign his seat. In a specially-called session, the House declared the seat vacant. The irrepressible MacLean ran as an independent in the resulting by-election and won handily, but lost in the next general election. He thereupon ran successfully for Mayor of Port Hawkesbury. He remains in that post to this day.

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