

Canaries in the East

ISLE MADAME, NS –

by Silver Donald Cameron

The Atlantic Provinces are Canada's Puerto Rico: attached to the country but not really part of it, almost without influence on the life of the nation, impinging on the national consciousness mainly as a nagging socio-economic problem and a perennial source of troublesome immigrants.

So it will be interesting to see whether national pundits actually discern that the unprecedented success of Robert Chisholm and the NDP in Tuesday's Nova Scotia election was not a momentary or local aberration. It has major implications for the future of Canadian politics.

Just as if Nova Scotia were part of Canada.

The election results should have been no surprise. The NDP has been steadily gaining strength in Atlantic Canada, especially in Nova Scotia, for two decades. Twenty-five years ago, its sole pocket of support was industrial Cape Breton. It has now elected members, federally or provincially or both, in all four Atlantic provinces. Last June, it took two federal seats in New Brunswick, came within a whisker of taking another in Newfoundland, and carried six of Nova Scotia's 11 federal seats.

For anyone paying attention, that would have been the first hint. Electing members from coast to coast, the NDP had become Canada's second national party. The Conservatives, with no members west of Jean Charest, had become a party of eastern protest. Reform captured no seats east of the wheat, while the Bloc Quebecois was -- well, Quebecois. Only the Liberals and the NDP had seats across the country.

Nobody seemed to notice. But that election also changed Maritime politics permanently. Maritimers hate to "lose their vote" by supporting a party which can't possibly win. After the June election, any fool (except the national political pundits) could see that an NDP government in Nova Scotia was a distinct possibility. And the old politics of fear had fallen apart: Nova Scotians had elected New Democrats, and the sky hadn't fallen.

For nine months, Chisholm and his troops held their collective breath, scarcely daring to believe what their polls were telling them, debating their strategy in an election the government could not avoid. They were not surprised when the floundering Grits dumped their first-term premier and replaced him with an affable if undistinguished federal foot soldier. They expected to be red-baited and tarred as taxers and spenders. They were, but they were ready. They retained their composure and ran a smooth, good-humoured campaign, ending in a dead heat both in seats (19 each) and in popular vote (35.3% for the Grits, 34.7% for the socialist hordes.)

The Maritimes are the canary in the mineshaft of Canadian politics. No region of the country has been so savaged – forgive me – by cutbacks, tax hikes and the politics of primitive greed which have characterized Canadian politics for the last 10 years. Even Jean Chretien knows that; he apologized for it in a post-election swing through the region.

Nor has any region been so frustrated and infuriated by political infidelity. Nova Scotians have made it very clear that they don't want municipal amalgamation, school consolidation, the Blended Sales Tax, health care cuts and casinos. They don't like governments which unilaterally break contracts with their own employees and prostrate themselves before corporate interests. They don't think students should be crippled by debt before they graduate. They think Sable Island gas should mean prosperity for Nova Scotia, just as oil has meant prosperity for Alberta. They don't believe that the wealthiest societies in history must be composed of desperate unemployed masses ruled by a handful of the obscenely wealthy – which is exactly what we are heading for.

Federally and provincially, the old parties have given Nova Scotians exactly what they don't want. So they aren't worried that the sky will fall if they elect someone else. The sky is falling already.

Chisholm and his New Democrats had to climb a steep wall of political tradition, ingrained deference and outright intimidation. Their success is testimony to their own hard work and intelligence, certainly. But it also testifies to the deep fury of the electorate, and to the attractiveness of a less barbarian approach to politics in general.

Other Canadians should pay some attention to what's happening here. They might find the experience illuminating.

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