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MY TELNO 706: CANADIAN FEDERAL ELECTION

SUMMARY

1. THE FIRST PHASE OF THE CAMPAIGN A MAJOR SUCCESS FOR THE PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVES, WITH THE LIBERALS IN FREE-FALL IN KEY AREAS AND THE NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY MAKING A STRONG SHOWING. BUT OPINION REMAINS VOLATILE. NEXT WEEK WILL SEE THE START OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING AND ALSO THE TV DEBATES BETWEEN THE PARTY LEADERS. WHILE THEREFORE THE LIBERALS STILL HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO RETRIEVE THEIR BATTERED FORTUNES, THEY LOOK INCREASINGLY DIVIDED AND INCAPABLE OF SEIZING IT.

DETAIL

2. WITH THREE WEEKS OF THE CAMPAIGN NOW OVER, THE PARTIES ARE NEARING THE HALFWAY MARK. THE CONSERVATIVES HAVE EXPOSED AS LITTLE SURFACE AS POSSIBLE AND MULRONEY IN PARTICULAR HAS CONCENTRATED ON THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF HIS GOVERNMENT AND ITS QUALIFICATIONS TO QUOTE MANAGE CHANGE UNQUOTE (AS HE LIKES TO PUT IT) IN THE FUTURE. THE LIBERALS HAVE FOCUSED THEIR ATTACKS ON THE FREE TRADE AGREEMENT, AS SACRIFICING CANADA'S INTERESTS TO THE US AND THREATENING THE LOSS OF HER NATIONAL IDENTITY. THERE HAVE BEEN SIGNS THAT THESE ATTACKS ARE STRIKING A SYMPATHETIC RESPONSE FROM PART OF THE ELECTORATE, WHICH SEEMS FAIRLY EVENLY DIVIDED ON THE ISSUE. BUT THE SECOND PRONG OF THE LIBERAL STRATEGY - TO BRING OUT ATTRACTIVE SOCIAL POLICY PROPOSALS - HAS BENT IN THEIR HANDS: SOME OF THE PROPOSALS HAVE BEEN BADLY PRESENTED, WHILE OTHERS HAVE LITTLE TO DISTINGUISH THEM FROM THE OFFERINGS OF THE OTHER TWO PARTIES. THE NDP, FOR THEIR PART, HAVE MADE THE MOST OF THEIR LEADER'S POPULARITY AND HAVE PRODUCED A SERIES OF STRUCTURED AND NOT IMPLAUSIBLY COSTED PROPOSALS (EG ON TAXATION) DESIGNED TO SECURE GREATER FAIRNESS, RATHER THAN SEPARATE POLICIES AIMED AT SPECIFIC GROUPS.

3. TO JUDGE FROM THE POLLS, THE CONSERVATIVE AND NDP STRATEGIES ARE PAYING OFF HANDSOMELY. OVERALL, THE CONSERVATIVES SEEM TO HAVE ESTABLISHED THE SUPPORT OF OVER 40 PER CENT OF THE DECIDED VOTE, WITH THE NDP AT 29 PER CENT OVERTAKING THE LIBERALS

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(25 PER CENT). THE UNDECIDED VOTE IS DOWN TO 10 PER CENT, A VERY LOW FIGURE BY PAST CANADIAN STANDARDS.

4. THE REGIONAL VARIATIONS REFERRED TO IN TUR HAVE BEEN ACCENTUATED. IN ONTARIO THE THREE PARTIES ARE NECK AND NECK, BUT IN QUEBEC THE LIBERALS ARE IN PRECIPITOUS DECLINE. IN THE PRAIRIES THE CONSERVATIVES REMAIN UNASSAILABLE. IN BRITISH COLUMBIA SUPPORT IS EVENLY DIVIDED BETWEEN THE CONSERVATIVES AND THE NDP, WHO MAY BE EDGING AHEAD. ONLY IN THE ATLANTIC PROVINCES DOES LIBERAL SUPPORT APPEAR TO BE HOLDING REASONABLY FIRM. IF (AND IT IS A LARGE IF) THIS PATTERN WERE TO OBTAIN ON POLLING DAY, THE CONSERVATIVES SHOULD HAVE A COMFORTABLE MAJORITY AND THE NDP A GOOD CHANCE OF BEATING THE LIBERALS INTO THIRD PLACE. BUT THERE WILL BE MANY CLOSE THREE-WAY CONTESTS, IN WHICH THE OUTCOME COULD BE DETERMINED BY QUITE SMALL LOCAL VARIATIONS IN SUPPORT. SO ALL THE PARTIES STILL HAVE MUCH TO PLAY FOR.

5. TWO KEY FEATURES IN THE REMAINDER OF THE CAMPAIGN WILL BE THE IMPACT OF THE TELEVISED DEBATES BETWEEN THE PARTY LEADERS AND OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING IN TV AND THE PRESS (WHICH IS ONLY PERMITTED DURING THE LAST MONTH OF THE CAMPAIGN). AS REGARDS THE DEBATES, THE AGREEMENT REPORTED IN PARA 3 OF MY TUR BROKE DOWN: THE CABLE COMPANIES REFUSED TO ACCEPT THE REVENUE LOSS ENTAILED BY HOLDING MORE THAN ONE DEBATE IN EACH LANGUAGE. ALL PARTIES EVENTUALLY AGREED THAT THERE WOULD BE ONE 3 HOUR DEBATE IN FRENCH ON 24 OCTOBER AND ONE IN ENGLISH ON 25 OCTOBER, WITH ONE HOUR IN EACH DEBATE BEING RESERVED FOR QUOTE WOMEN'S ISSUES UNQUOTE. IN THE LAST ELECTION IT WAS THE TV DEBATE WHICH PRODUCED THE TURNING-POINT IN THE FORTUNES OF THE LIBERAL PARTY WHEN MULRONEY PROVED ABLE TO DELIVER A KNOCK-OUT PUNCH ON THE ISSUE OF POLITICAL PATRONAGE.

6. A FEATURE OF THE CAMPAIGN SO FAR HAS BEEN THE FAILURE OF THE PARTIES TO ENGAGE IN DIRECT DEBATE ABOUT THEIR PROPOSALS. THEY HAVE SOUNDED THEIR SEPARATE TRUMPETS AND WAITED TO SEE WHO WOULD FOLLOW. EVEN THE STYLISED DEBATES BETWEEN LEADING ADVOCATES AND OPPONENTS OF THE FREE TRADE AGREEMENT, ORGANISED BY CBC TELEVISION THIS WEEK, HAVE HAD THE SAME DREAMLIKE CHARACTER. THE START OF THE PARTIES' ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS AND THE TV DEBATES BETWEEN THE LEADERS NEXT WEEK, TOGETHER WITH THE FEEDBACK FROM DOOR TO DOOR CANVASSING IN THE CONSTITUENCIES, ARE LIKELY TO MOVE THE CAMPAIGN INTO HIGHER GEAR. WHEN THAT HAPPENS, WE MAY HEAR MORE ABOUT DEFENCE AND FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES ON WHICH THE PARTIES (DESPITE DESPAIRING GOADING FROM THE PRESS) HAVE

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REMAINED STEADFASTLY SILENT.

7. IT SHOULD THEN BE POSSIBLE TO SEE HOW SOLID THE PRESENT PATTERN OF OPINION REALLY IS. BUT IT COULD WELL BE THAT, BY SEWING UP THE LIBERALS' TRADITIONAL POWERBASE IN QUEBEC, THE CONSERVATIVES HAVE ALREADY BROKEN THE MOULD OF CANADIAN POLITICS. CERTAINLY MULRONEY'S BILINGUALISM, THE FACT THAT HE IS A CATHOLIC AND HIS POLICY SUCCESSES (NOTABLY THE MEECH LAKE ACCORD) TOGETHER WITH DEEP DIVISIONS AMONG THE QUEBEC LIBERALS HAVE SET THE SCENE FOR SUCH A CHANGE DESPITE THE STRENGTH OF THE (ORGANISATIONALLY DISTINCT) PROVINCIAL LIBERAL PARTY IN THE PROVINCE. MOREOVER THE CONSERVATIVES HAVE, LIKE THE LIBERALS OF OLD, DONE MUCH TO ATTRACT DIFFERENT GROUPS OF PEOPLE ACROSS THE COUNTRY THROUGH SPECIFIC PIECES OF LEGISLATION AND IN DOING SO HAVE STOLEN MANY OF THE LIBERALS' CLOTHES. THE LIBERALS, IN MOVING LEFTWARDS, HAVE FOUND THEMSELVES IN COMPETITION WITH THE NDP WHOSE INEXPERIENCE AND LACK OF NATIONAL COVERAGE ARE COMPENSATED FOR BY THE FRESHNESS AND THE VERY CONSIDERABLE PUBLIC APPEAL OF THEIR LEADER. THE SIGNS ARE THAT IN ONTARIO THE CERTAINTY THAT THE LIBERALS WILL NOT WIN NATIONALLY IS CAUSING TRADITIONAL SUPPORTERS TO DESERT TO ONE OF THE OTHER TWO PARTIES.

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