

A Note on the 1982 Prince Edward Island General Election

Agar Adamson

Due to the small constituencies, a unique style of government and politics has developed on Prince Edward Island. Many members (four in 1982) are elected with majorities of less than one hundred votes. Pleasing the various local interest groups, however small, is crucial to continued success on election day. Public attitudes to politics are a curious mixture of serious campaigning and social events, sometimes referred to as "kitchen campaigning" because of the practice of candidates sitting in farm kitchens, drinking whatever brew is being served.

The electoral system, until recently, encouraged voters to maintain a rather cynical attitude to elections. The province originally had a bicameral Legislature, but in 1893 the two Houses were combined into one so that each of the fifteen constituencies would have double representation of a Councilman and an Assemblyman. If a person owned \$325.00 worth of property in a constituency, he could vote for a Councillor and Assemblyman in that constituency, even though he did not reside there. Therefore, any voter could have up to thirty votes on election day. This system was finally changed in 1963; now persons may only vote in the constituency in which they are resident.

Today, Prince Edward Island is divided into sixteen double constituencies. The increase took place at the last redistribution of 1965. There are five constituencies in both Kings and Prince County, and six in Queen's County, the largest of the counties which is based upon Charlottetown. Since the province is divided fairly evenly on religious lines, the parties have often found it convenient to run one Catholic and one Protestant candidate in each of the constituencies. In some constituencies, such as Fifth Queens, the religious division appears to be not as important as it once was. Since 1975 this constituency has been represented by two Catholics. However, as Jeffrey Simpson pointed out in *Discipline of Power* (pp. 109-110), a political party disregards the religious split in PEI at its peril. Consequently, the general practice of running one Catholic and one Protestant candidate continued in the 1982 election.

Prince Edward Island constituencies are not really dual constituencies. Rather, each party nominates one candidate for

Councillor and one candidate for Assemblyman. The contest is a single one in each constituency between the candidates running for the Councillor's seat and those running for the Assemblyman's seat. In four of the sixteen constituencies the voters elected one Conservative and one Liberal, however, in an equal number of constituencies the coattails of one of the candidates were sufficiently long to help elect the party's other candidate in the same constituency. Consequently, it is difficult to say whether or not PEI electoral system hinders or helps ticket-splitting.

The size of the province, both with respect to population and geography, plus well established family voting patterns, have hindered the development of third parties. Only one independent has ever been elected to the Legislature. In 1970, the New Democratic Party entered what proved to be a temporary period of growth which may have been aided by disorganization within the Progressive Conservative Party. However, the NDP has always had little money because of the small union membership on the Island, and even those trade unionists who do exist do not always support the NDP.¹ After the 1978 election, a serious split developed within the NDP over the question of leadership. During the 1982 campaign David Burke was officially titled "the interim Leader". The NDP ran three candidates, who together received six hundred and twenty-nine votes. In one of these constituencies, Fifth Prince, there were more rejected ballots than there were votes for the NDP. Obviously, we are looking at a two-party system in Prince Edward Island, a fact which will likely remain true for many years to come. The National Farmers Union and the Co-op movement have been strong in PEI, but this form of "protest" has not carried over into the political arena although Jim Mayne, a former president of the NFU was elected Leader of the NDP in 1983.

Prior to the 1982 general election both the Liberals and the Conservatives had undergone a change in leadership. In 1979, the Liberals were led by Bennett Campbell (the present Minister of Veterans' Affairs), who had assumed the premiership following the appointment of Alex Campbell (no relation) to the provincial Bench. Bennett Campbell was elected Leader of the Party at a convention in December of 1978, but he never called the legislature into session. There were sixteen Liberal and fifteen Conservative members, with one vacancy; in effect, a tie, once a Speaker had been elected. Bennett Campbell was apparently of the opinion that he could not afford to call a by-election in Alex Campbell's former

Agar Adamson is a professor of Political Science at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. This is a revised version of a paper presented to the 1983 Political Science Association meetings in Vancouver.

seat and instead called a general election in April of 1979, which returned a Conservative majority government.

Following the death of the federal Minister of Veterans' Affairs Daniel MacDonald, Bennett Campbell resigned from the legislature and successfully contested the by-election for the seat in Ottawa. The Liberal caucus appointed long-time MLA Gilbert Clements as interim Party Leader until a leadership convention could be organized.

On October 24th, 1981, the Liberals met in Charlottetown to select the new Leader. Leadership conventions in Prince Edward Island are not small affairs; indeed, the total number of delegates permitted at both Liberal and Progressive Conservative conventions totals approximately 1,500 plus an equal number of alternates. As one Liberal quipped to the writer: "The province is so small and everyone knows everyone else, we do not wish to see anyone's feelings hurt, consequently, we make sure everyone can come". David MacDonald a former Cabinet Minister and former MP from Egmont has put it, a little bit more positively: "Athenian democracy is alive and well and living in PEI".² Certainly, the number of delegates at these PEI conventions is far greater than that found in any of the other Atlantic provinces and indeed, one would suspect, larger than in any other province save for Ontario and Quebec.

At the October 1981 convention, the two candidates were the acting Leader, Gilbert Clements, and Joseph Ghiz, a Harvard educated, Charlottetown lawyer, who hitherto had been involved in the backrooms of the Liberal Party, but had never sought elective office. Mr. Ghiz, a thirty-seven year old Protestant of Portugese descent, had considered running against Bennett Campbell in 1978 but instead, campaigned actively for Gerard Mitchell, Bennett Campbell's then opponent. Many observers expected Clements to be confirmed as Leader, particularly as his performance in the legislature had been more than adequate; and also because Mr. Ghiz was an unknown quantity. Events were to prove otherwise. Mr. Ghiz won an overwhelming victory. An articulate, intelligent person, Joseph Ghiz perhaps won the convention because of his oratorical skills—certainly they did not hinder him.

In the April 24th, 1978 general election the Conservatives who had been led by Angus MacLean since 1976 won fifteen seats to the Liberals' seventeen and improved their popular vote by eight percentage points. One year later, on April 23rd, 1979, MacLean led the Conservatives to victory with twenty-one of the thirty-two seats and 53.3% of the popular vote. Angus MacLean had stated that he would lead the Conservatives in no more than two elections. True to his word, he announced his retirement in the summer of 1981. On November 7th, 1981, the Progressive Conservatives gathered to select a new leader and a new premier for the province. The four candidates were Pat Binns, Barry Clark, Fred Driscoll and James Lee who had also been a candidate in 1976. All four were members of the MacLean Cabinet. Mr. Lee emerged victorious defeating Barry Clark, a teacher and Protestant clergyman, on the third ballot. (Clark's bad luck was to continue as he was the only member of the Cabinet to lose his seat in 1982, being defeated in Sixth Queens by Joe Ghiz.)

Mr. Lee announced, following the convention, that he would not call an immediate general election in order to obtain his own

mandate. However, by the fall of 1982, he felt secure in office and did indeed call an election.

The campaign which emerged can only be referred to as dull, or as Michael Harris of the *Globe and Mail* reported, "It may be all over but the snoring in a campaign that observers here are calling the dullest in years". (September 25th, 1982) Earlier, a rather prominent Liberal strategist had privately prophesied correctly that Lee would win and "win big because he had managed very quickly to become a second Angus MacLean". In this respect he was referring to the way in which MacLean had been able to identify so very closely with the people of the Island, particularly the rural people, and despite the comments of the *Globe and Mail* ("he has the charm of a potato"), produce his own form of Island charisma. There is no doubt that James Lee had learned the art of political leadership from Angus MacLean. During the campaign, Mr. Lee built on the rural renaissance which Mr. MacLean had started within the Conservative Party prior to the 1978 campaign.



Premier James Lee

Mr. Lee started his bid for re-election with a promise-free campaign. The Progressive Conservatives were of the opinion that the electorate, in the midst of a recession which included low prices for potatoes, did not wish to be bribed with their own money. On the Wednesday before election day Premier Lee did announce that Premiers Levesque and Hatfield had both agreed to begin negotiations with the government of Prince Edward Island which would result in a 20% drop in residential electricity rates. PEI rates are the highest in Canada and, as is the case in Nova Scotia, power rates are a constant political issue. Basically, Premier Lee was promising that PEI would purchase fifty megawatts of excess electricity from Hydro Quebec and obtain "wheeling rights" through New Brunswick. Earlier, New Brunswick had offered to sell electricity from the Point Lepreau nuclear station to Prince Edward Island, but then Premier MacLean had refused to purchase power from the

Point Lepreau station, stating that Prince Edward Island would not purchase electricity made from nuclear fission.

Some weeks after the Prince Edward Island election the chairman of the New Brunswick Power Commission reported privately that no discussions had taken place with New Brunswick and, indeed, he was quite flabbergasted by the whole concept of power from Quebec going through New Brunswick to Prince Edward Island. It now appears that the issue may have been laid to rest, perhaps until the next PEI election.

Liberal Leader Joseph Ghiz offered a wide ranging programme which included mortgage assistance, free drugs for Senior Citizens, low interest loans to fisherman, farmers and small businessmen, and selective energy subsidies. He informed the voters that his promises would cost only eight million dollars, while Mr. Lee argued that it would cost more like thirty million to implement the entire Liberal programme. The governing party was able to turn the issue away from its own performance in office and on to the promises of the Opposition; indeed, the Opposition's platform



Opposition Leader Joe Ghiz

became the major issue. As is usually the case when such events transpire, the governing party was successful not only in defusing the attack on its own programme, but also in pointing out the alleged fallacies of the Opposition's proposal. The style of the two party leaders also differed markedly. Lee ran a quiet, personal campaign while Ghiz ran what, at least for Prince Edward Island, was a flamboyant, aggressive campaign based upon his oratorical skills.

The final results saw the Progressive Conservatives win twenty-two seats, a net gain of one, with the Liberals being reduced to ten seats. The Conservatives obtained 53.9% of the popular vote, compared to 45% for the Liberals and 1% for the New Demo-

crats. It was the Tories' best showing since 1912, when they captured 60% of the popular vote.

The percentage of the electorate voting included a high of 93.9% in Second Kings, and a low of 68.4% in Fifth Prince. In total, 78.2% of the electorate voted as compared to 83.8% in 1979 and 86.2% in 1978. The usual election day shenanigans, including "treating", (which central Canadian academics and journalists find somewhat repulsive), continued to take place. It must be remembered that the use of rum on election day is considered to be a way of life in certain sections of the Maritimes. This particular practice is not seen, by the receivers at least, as a criminal offence, or even bribery, but rather as a part of their democratic right. To them, what has been tradition remains permissible. It would appear that the only way these rather questionable practices will ever be stopped is when the rum becomes too expensive. In the meantime one may ask if it is any greater crime for politicians to bribe electors with rum than it is to bribe them with bridges, roads, stop and go expressways, super-port developments, oil sand developments, school cafeterias, etc.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of elections in PEI is that in nearly every election since Confederation Islanders have elected the party which is in power in Ottawa. This is certainly a prudent practice, particularly when one considers the percentage of the provincial budget which is passed in one form or another from the revenues of the federal government to the provincial one; and how greatly the province is dependent upon federal fiscal transfers. In three PEI elections, those of 1890, 1919, and 1979, the government turned over in Charlottetown prior to similar events taking place in Ottawa.

The question which arises from the 1982 result is simply this: Are the events of those three general elections to be repeated some time in the near future? Or, has a new pattern of voting developed with respect to Prince Edward Island? These questions may only be answered by subsequent political events.

Perhaps there is a third possibility, one which may in the long run prove to be far more important than the other two. Did the electors of Prince Edward Island follow those of Nova Scotia and other provinces in showing their dislike for the federal Liberal Party by defeating their provincial counterparts? In other words, are provincial elections being fought not on the issues and performances of the provincial governments and opposition parties, but rather upon the performance and personalities of the federal party leaders? If this is indeed the case, and events in the recent past in Canada tend to indicate that they are, then we are in danger in this country of producing a federal political system similar to that of the Federal Republic of Germany, where elections at the state (Lander) level are mere plebiscites on the performance of the parties and their leaders at the national level. The tendency of Canadians to place the opposition in the provincial capitals and not in the House of Commons is not a completely new phenomena but it does not auger well for the future of interdependent federalism.

Notes

¹A. Brendan Curley, "An Analysis of the 1976 Progressive Conservative and 1978 Liberal Leadership Conventions in Prince Edward Island", unpublished B.A. Honours thesis, Acadia University, April 1979.

²In an interview with the writer.