



Peter Desbarats
Ottawa editor

Action Canada: Lots of targets but few members

In his keynote speech to his movement's first national convention this weekend, Paul Hellyer made statements which were inimical to the interests of major industrialists and their shareholders, members of every labor union, civil servants and technocrats of every description and the recipients of welfare benefits and unemployment insurance.

Was there anyone he missed? There was, but you could have put each and every one of them into the Crystal Ballroom of the King Edward Hotel this weekend and still have plenty of room to spare. They called themselves Action Canada and they numbered, on the average during the three days of deliberation several hundred.

The small number spoke for itself. It said that Action Canada is at this time a very small voice in national affairs.

According to its own count released last week, four months of intensive organization and publicity have given Action Canada a total membership of 4,738. This figure hardly indicates a populist movement that is sweeping the country.

This doesn't mean that Hellyer and his followers have failed by their own standards. The convention was a serious and useful exercise for all those who attended it.

If they were trying to thoughtfully examine solutions to Canada's economic problems, they succeeded. But if they were trying to start a political party with real clout, strong enough to force a national debate on Hellyer's ideas, they failed.

The obvious conclusion is that Canadians in general, English-speaking Canadians in particular, do not provide fertile ground at the moment for a protest party on the right side of the political spectrum.

It wouldn't be fair to emphasize the right-wing character of the movement. But it was clear from Hellyer's keynote speech that Action Canada, despite its innovative economic theories, is basically conservative.

Hellyer's only direct reference to welfare benefits and unemployment insurance concerned abuses of the system and the problem created when benefits are high enough to reduce the incentive to work.

He appealed to the fears inspired in many people by the bigness, complexity and remoteness of the economic and political system. He attacked the "super-group" of cabinet ministers and technocrats in Ottawa and it was revealing that in an age that prides itself on communication if nothing else, he said that "the old lines of communication have broken down."

Finally, there were graphs and diagrams illustrating his economic theory of selective wage and price controls, the "cornerstone" of a bright new world without poverty or unemployment or inflation.

Hellyer's model economy looked as pretty on paper as the layouts of the National Model Railroad Club which happened to be in convention in the same hotel this weekend. But it will remain only political amusement until Action Canada can mobilize many more people.