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A Quebec view of Ontario's costly election

OTTAWA

Having been an Ontario-ari-aryan for a grand total of eight weeks, I can hardly write an insider's comment on the provincial election campaign leading up to today's vote. But as a recent arrival from one of the nine less developed provinces, Quebec in this case, I have been struck by the differences between politics here and in other parts of Canada. And I've found myself wondering if Election '71 in Ontario is what Election 1984 is going to be like for the rest of us.

In terms of material progress, Ontario already is a living forecast of conditions which other provinces can expect to encounter in years to come. Although its population is only about one third of the Canadian total, Ontario has half of Canada's shopping centres and half of the color television sets in the country. Its total wages and salaries every year now amount to more than the combined wages and salaries of all the Maritime provinces including Newfoundland, all the Prairie Provinces and British Columbia.

The average income of taxpayers in Toronto, Ottawa, Windsor and Hamilton is higher than in any metropolitan centre outside of Ontario. And the average number of persons per family in Toronto (3.5) is the lowest of any Canadian city with the exception of Victoria.

Aim for Ontario's goals

In other provinces, election campaigns are made of promises to achieve the kind of life that Ontario has now. So Election '71 in Ontario should reveal something about the political future that awaits the rest of Canada when all of us arrive at this blessed stage.

The most striking thing, to an outsider, is the amount of money spent on the campaign. Millions of dollars have been lavished in the past few weeks on television, radio and newspaper advertising, films, posters, travel and an astonishing variety of hoopla. It's probably a sterile line of thinking but, as an outsider I couldn't help wondering about the effect of this kind of conspicuous consumption on other parts of the country, particularly where the natives have always suspected that their sacrifices are the foundation of Ontario's prosperity.

And as a Quebecker, I also couldn't resist asking myself whether there really is much difference between giving several hundred thousand dollars to an advertising agency for a slick campaign film and giving the same amount to hundreds of local organizers for more direct forms of vote-buying.

They 'liked' Davis

There might be a difference if the money contributed to a healthy discussion of issues. But the Ontario campaign showed that most of the money is spent on creating superficially attractive images of party leaders. One of the final public opinion polls of the campaign revealed that, among voters who preferred Premier William Davis, the most important single reason was that they 'liked' him. Wow . . . the result of several million dollars of this kind of "investment in democracy" is a Pavlovian mouth watering reflex at the mention of a politician's name. If the process goes any further, they'll have to dispense with the thought-provoking business of writing an "X" on a ballot and simply ask for a grunt of approval.

All the party leaders were given the same treatment. The result is that voters today have a choice of three of the nicest guys you would never want to have a drink with.

Beneath this battle of mini-personalities, there was, if you looked hard enough, a campaign of issues. It was more promising as an omen for the future. While the rest of the country was scrambling for a dollar, any dollar, Ontario was debating the problems of a prosperous society. Economic nationalism was an important issue. In Toronto, the continued growth of the city was taken for granted and there was concern about the effects of development on people.

Unattractive issues

There were a few smaller, more primitive and decidedly unattractive issues scurrying through the underbrush of the campaign; the questions of state support for separate schools and the position of French-speaking Canadians in the school system. Still lethal in Quebec and certain other provinces, in Ontario these issues have turned into exotic if slightly dangerous household pets, like alligators in the bathtub. You didn't feel like stirring them up but the significant thing was that they stayed in the bathtub in Ontario and didn't, as in certain other places, try to take over the whole house.

Finally, as an outsider, I was strongly conscious of the difficulty of defeating a government in a prosperous and highly developed society such as this. When economic discontent is not strong enough to lever a government out of office, when there are no old-fashioned issues of race, language and religion to galvanize voters, when the party in power has huge campaign funds and the best tactical advice in the business, when all the leaders are nice guys and the appeal of all parties is aimed at the political centre, where is the motivation for change? And when a system reaches this degree of self satisfied stability, doesn't this in itself become a problem?

It's a problem that other provincial governments would love to have by 1984. But the Ontario campaign of 1971 shows that money doesn't buy everything. Only an election now and then.