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His party may change, but not Real Caouette

ROUYN

Real Caouette has been through a bewildering variety of political labels: Union des Electeurs in the old Rosary-swinging days of Social Credit in Quebec, then Quebec Liberal in the Fifties against the power politics of Maurice "Le Chef" Duplessis, then Social Credit in the early Sixties, Ralliement des Creditistes when the party split in 1963 and now just plain Social Credit again.

But for the ever-faithful members of his ladies' auxiliary in his home town of Rouyn in northwestern Quebec, the menu is always the same. Last week they were putting the bite on local merchants with special diligence. On Sunday, in the parish hall of Immaculate Conception, they presented their "slush fund" to Caouette—enough pork and beans, ham and "tourtiere" pork pies to make 1,000 servings.

There were 600 people at Caouette's nominating convention (several hundred more incidentally, than attended the Action Canada convention in Toronto the same day) and they finished every scrap. Afterward they danced until midnight to the music of the Savard family orchestra.

A real family life

Caouette himself arrived at the hall at two in the afternoon and stayed until two in the morning.

"It was really enthusiastic," he said later. "It's a real family life among these Social Crediters."

This weekend Caouette will face a more important convention when about 1,000 delegates from across Canada meet in the arena at Hull, across the river from Ottawa. It's called a leadership convention mainly because that title forces television networks to give it a certain amount of national coverage. In fact the prospect of Caouette being overthrown is about as likely as the Pope handing the keys of the kingdom to Golda Meir.

More than ever, the Social Credit party in Canada today is a projection of the philosophy and personality of this 54-year-old car dealer from Rouyn. During his career the base of the national Social Credit party has made a complete shift from Alberta to Quebec. Although its credentials as a truly national party remains suspect, as always, there is no doubt about its importance in the next federal election.

Quebec is the key to a Liberal majority in the next election and Social Credit, at the moment, is the only party that stands in the way of a Liberal sweep in Quebec.

It's pumping adrenalin

This situation already seems to be pumping adrenalin into Caouette's wiry frame. The convention here last weekend was really a triple celebration—his 54th birthday, his 30th wedding anniversary and the 25th anniversary of his first election to the House of Commons—but no one suggested that the end was in sight.

"I'm all right for a few more years," said Caouette. "I'm 54 years of age but I had some people 40 years of age following me on the Prairies a few weeks ago and they were nearly dead when we came back from there. The next morning I was speaking in Quebec."

Caouette has often been regarded as an unpredictable showman by many English-speaking Canadians, but in fact his record shows durability and persistence. He was defeated twice in federal elections in 1944 and 1945, losing his deposit the second time, before winning a 1946 by-election.

For three years he sat in Ottawa with 13 Social Credit MPs from Alberta under Solon Low, exactly the number of the current Socred delegation from Quebec in the House of Commons. Defeated in 1949, he ran unsuccessfully as a provincial Liberal in 1956 and as a federal Socred in 1957 and 1958. Then he went on television in Rouyn in 1959, and in 1962 he "won the same damn riding by 14,000 votes." His mastery of the political telecast was an important factor in electing 25 other Social Credit candidates in Quebec in that election.

Never able to match it.

The party has never been able to match that achievement in subsequent elections. In 1963, Caouette split with western Socreds and formed his own Quebec-based Ralliement des Creditistes. Membership in Parliament dropped as low as nine after the 1965 election.

The Westerners were wiped out in the 1968 federal election and last May, the Ralliement re-adopted the Social Credit title and Caouette started a renewed effort to re-establish himself and his party outside Quebec. At the party's national council meeting last spring, Quebec supplied 47 of the 118 delegates. Ontario provided 33, British Columbia 17 and the rest came from other provinces.

Caouette predicts that about half of the expected 1,000 delegates to the convention this weekend will come from Quebec.

Nine years ago, when he swept Quebec, Caouette was compared with Hitler and Mussolini. He was often called a potential separatist.

"Now everyone says—boy. He is a Canadian," he laughed. "Why have they changed? I'm the same guy as I was in 1962, but they didn't understand me in 1962 while they do understand a little better today. I'm a one Canada man and I've always been a one Canada man. I say the same thing from coast to coast. When I put my foot on the dog's tail in Halifax, it barks right in Vancouver."