

A bad thing may be a good thing

By DAVID OLIE

With the drawn-out inevitability of death itself, it appears the federal Tories will soon be upon us. This, like other man-made disasters, is all the more tragic because it could have been avoided but, nevertheless, may end up improving the human condition after all. The loss of the *Titanic*, for example, led to improved methods of navigation at sea, though that can hardly be seen as compensation for the victims of the sinking itself.

Basically, then, my thesis is this: The election of Byron Baloney and his Terrible Tories will be such a bad thing that it may turn out to be a good thing. In the short term, of course, it may well be a horror story, and those of us who can be classified as "progressive" will be in the

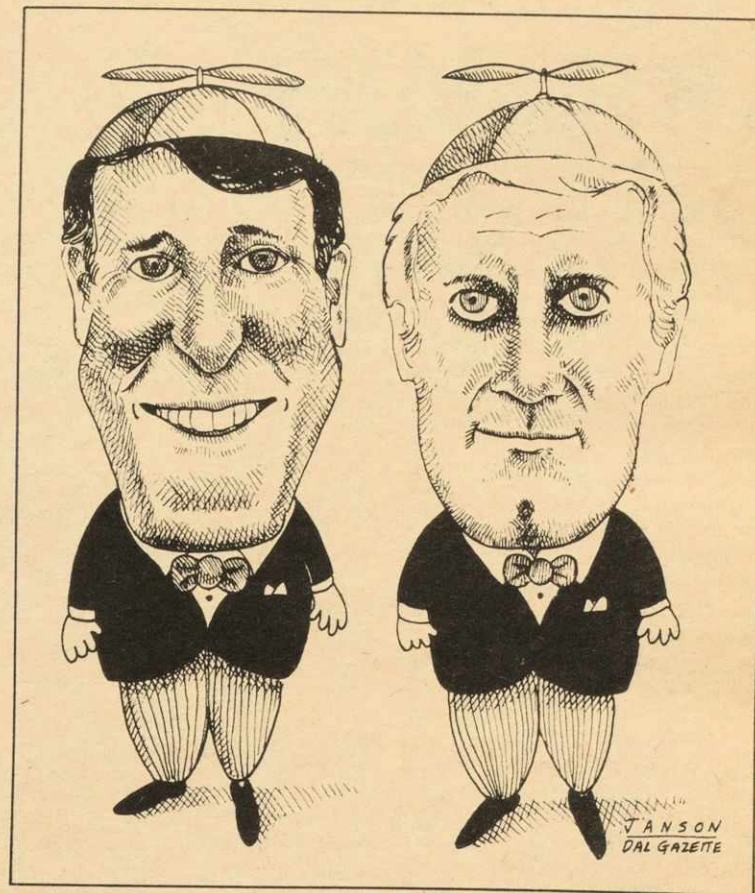
trenches for the next few years, fighting a rear-guard action against the Blue Horde that we will probably lose. Medicare in its present form and dozens of other social programmes are probably goners, and any forward movement on disarmament and other progressive issues will be stalled, if not beaten back. Lord knows what will happen to post-secondary education, but it can be safely assumed to be nasty. All this will be enormously aggravated by the expected downturn of the economy. These will not be pleasant years.

But, out of adversity is born strength. Perhaps the greatest shot in the arm received by the Canadian left in recent years has been the formation of Operation Solidarity in British Columbia. In the face of the Blue Horde, I predict the nationwide expansion of this movement, and the

left may become a cohesive force once more. If the Tories can do that for us, I, for one, will be very grateful.

The problem with the Tories, in a nutshell, is this: They have been out of power too long, and, through long disuse of the muscles of power, they have become mentally atrophied, a condition for which, I believe, there is no cure. Their endless frustration of the last two decades has made them neurotic to the point of being incapable of wielding power, the repeated rebuffs from the electorate has made them feel unloved and unwanted, so they have withdrawn into themselves, where they do have support, and have kept the spark alive by resorting to faith, rather than reason. They have *faith* in free enterprise, *faith* in the military, *faith* in large corporations, and *faith* in the U.S. of A. They have replaced policy with dogma, the dogma of any small and persecuted sect, and now, without thinking about it, they are about to loose this dogma on Canada.

Canadians, being reasonably intelligent beings, would not normally ever let these beasts loose in the halls of power, but this is another effect of the Tories long lapse from power. Canadians have: A) had it up to here with the Grits; B) forgotten what the Tories are all about and; C) decided to take pity on them. To a lesser extent they did the same in 1979 and, soon realizing their ghastly



error, made a hasty correction in 1980, adding immeasurably to the neurosis and frustration of the Blue Horde. (Like some other primitive creatures, a frustrated Tory can be distinguished by the way it tears at its own flesh; thus we have the assassination of Joe Clark.)

I have faith that, after four long, lean and miserable years, the self-preservation instincts of Canadians will re-assert themselves and the

Tories will be put on ice once again. Meanwhile, the trench warfare, though bloody and somewhat disheartening for us lefties, may prove to be the necessary glue to bind us together in the future, a future when Canadians, realizing that the Tories are *not* an alternative may finally turn to us.

David Olie is a member of King's-Dal Young New Democrats

Election to cost \$95-million

Democracy has a price. By the time this election is over Elections Canada will have run up a tab of \$95 million—or \$5.60 per eligible voter. The money will be dispersed by as many as 500,000 cheques to enumerators, returning officers, deputy returning officers, poll clerks, and other staff. \$2 million will be spent on advertising designed to reach voters who were missed by door to door enumerators. About \$15 to \$18 million will be spent helping candidates and political parties with election expenses. Hundreds of tonnes of materials have been shipped to 282 ridings, which will in turn distribute materials to 68,000 polling stations across the country. 110,000 enumerators are responsible for registering 16.5 million eligible voters.

Cluster at political centre just marketing

By WILLIAM G. WATSON

The current election campaign was barely days old before the perennial complaint was heard that the differences between the major parties are mainly ones of style rather than substance.

There is a lot of truth to this. While Opposition Leader Brian Mulroney is upset at the Liberals for stealing his natural gas policy, Prime Minister John Turner argues that the Tories haven't got any other policies (which suggests, though he naturally doesn't say so, that they are copying the Liberals' own favorite electoral strategy).

And New Democratic Party Leader Edward Broadbent tells anyone who will listen that he offers the only real alternative to Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Though possibly true, this has not yet attracted large numbers of voters to his own brand of policies: different obviously need not mean better.

What people don't seem to realize is that the fact that there are no glaring policy differences between the two major parties is a sign, not that our political system is intellectually corrupt, but that it is working exactly as you would expect it to. To understand why, however, it's best to think of political parties—as economists do—as if they were gas stations.

The most efficient way to distrib-

ute gas stations across the land would be to put them all the same distance apart (allowing for some variation, perhaps, according to population density). But, in fact, gas stations tend to cluster together—particularly at intersections, because that's where the bulk of the traffic is. Anyone who moves down the road a little risks being outflanked by his competitors.

But, in the same way that gas stations can be outflanked by setting up too far from where others congregate, political parties can be outflanked by adopting too extreme a position on the political spectrum. Set up too far left, for instance, and the other party will nudge in beside you and steal the centre-left, the centre, and all the right-wing voters, as well, since they have nowhere else to go.

The obvious outcome of a game of this sort is that in an essentially two-party system parties end up bidding for the support of those voters who inhabit the middle of the political spectrum—the "median voters," as they're called in the literature. With all the in-depth polling that currently goes on, it's not hard for parties to get a good fix on just where median voters' preferences lie, and it's not surprising that they offer similar policy packages to try to attract them. What is interesting in the current campaign is that polling has persuaded both major parties that the middle of the political spectrum has

shifted right.

Of course, another reason politicians don't like to emphasize policy differences is that policy is so hard to run on. For at least a generation, Canadian politicians will remain spooked by Robert Stanfield's disastrous endorsement of wage and price controls in the 1974 election. The one sure way to be put on the defensive in a campaign is to put forward specific policy recommendations.

On top of that, there's the difficulty of getting complicated policy messages across. Here blame must be shared between a press that is either too partisan or too lazy to explain at length and a public that is simply unwilling to listen.

About a month ago, a Toronto-based newspaper ran a banner headline on its front page declaring that the Department of Finance was giving consideration to a flat-rate income tax which, the headline said, would benefit the rich. Never mind that of the two Finance officials whose views were solicited one said "No comment" and the other could not be reached. Never mind that a responsible department should be assessing a wide range of policy alternatives at all times.

And never mind that because of the large number of exemptions that area of greatest advantage to higher-income taxpayers the current tax system leaves most people, rich and poor alike, paying roughly the same percentage of their income in tax,

anyway. (Try getting *that* message across on a 30-second TV clip.)

Little wonder then, that the Conservatives have backtracked frantically on any talk about doing away with universality in social programmes, even though the effect of reducing universal access would be to make the programmes in question more, rather than less, progressive in incidence.

So, faced with two major parties running on what seems to be the same platform, what's a voter to do? First, it's best to realize that there *are* policy differences between the parties, even if these remain largely unspoken. Between the two leaders there may not be much one way or the other: Mulroney seems to be a fairly Red Tory and Turner is obviously a Blue Grit.

But despite their own strikingly similar political coloration, the leaders are surrounded by people who have readily identifiable ideological interests. Whenever there is room for manoeuvre, Mulroney is likely to be pulled rightward by his party and Turner leftward by his.

But it's also best to remember that a Prime Minister often has very few degrees of freedom. Thus, while Mulroney might well shave a few more billions of dollars off the deficit than Turner would, neither man could eliminate it in short order. Similarly, neither is likely to undertake dramatic reversals in, say, Canadian trade policy. The exigencies of

interest-group politics are simply too compelling.

Thus it seems that—as usual—the choice between candidates must be based mainly on style. A political system like ours is going to generate much the same kind of policies whoever is in power.

Moreover, for many people the main attraction of modern politics is as an entertainment medium. Voters should therefore ask themselves which is more likely to grate first: Turner's boardroom prose, mesmeric stare, and reverberant throat-clearing? Or Mulroney's gilded hyperbole, husky baritone, and jaunty chuminess? And how will each principal control his supporting cast? Can Turner prove that it really is possible to clean house without first removing those responsible for the mess? And how long will Mulroney, if he acquires the lease, be able to keep his caucus-mates from bloodying the carpets?

These and similar questions are more the stuff of melodrama than of seminars. On the other hand, if we did get an issues-oriented campaign, we would probably soon complain about how unbearably dull it all was. Best to relax and enjoy the glitter and the fun.

William Watson teaches economics at McGill University, Montreal.