Reform party's foes are looking at wrong wrongs

by Paul Notley

I have spent the past three months looking at the futile debate over whether the Reform Party is racist. Speaking as an Albertan who had to read the cheapest right-wing nonsense for a decade I can safely say that they aren't. Someday people are going to have to learn the difference between racism, chauvinism and insularity, but in the meantime it's sufficient to say that Preston Manning is not the equivalent of Jean Marie Le Pen, the French National Front leader.

Of course, like any good conservative party, Reform is quite willing to use cheap chauvinism for its own purposes. I find it hard to believe any reason why people would object to turbans in the RCMP if they did not object more to Sikhs wearing them; tens of thousands of people do not sign petitions because they consider the RCMP uniform sacrosanct. (Nor do I believe that a party of right-wing Christians did it out of their undying support of separation of church and state.)

But more attention should be paid to the Reform Party's "populist" programs. The party supports referenda — particularly on issues that it will win. I have never met a Reformer who supported the abolition of capital punishment, but they all piously proclaim that they will let their constituency do their thinking for them. This gives them the advantage of looking democratic (when they are actually being demagogic) and of not actually having to argue for the indefensible. It goes without saying that if the state does not have the right to murder people that the number of people who believe the opposite is a strictly secondary matter.

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Reform also supports term limits for MPs (not a bad deal for a party that only has one member) and recall legislation (an old Social Credit standby that lasted as long as the first recall). And there is the not-so-unusual rightist contradiction, saying at the same time that government must be more responsive to the people and that Mulroney's major problem is that he shamelessly courts popularity.

It is often said that the Reform Party is "pro-American." Actually, I've never read any conservative writer in this country say anything intelligently appreciative about American culture, and most of them seem to like the United States because it's big and powerful. It is often said that their support for the triple-E (Elected, Equal and Effective) senate reflects pro-American influences. Actually, with no means of settling disputes between the two houses and with the end of party solidarity we will more resemble the Third French Republic.

The party takes the courageous, unpopular stand that taxes are bad and supports a 15 per cent cut in government spending. One Reformer has spoken about the unnerving effects of deficit spending, and how it could lead to the hyperinflation that destroyed the Weimar republic. Actually it was savage *deflation* that destroyed the German economy and German democracy, and it was deflation that helped weaken British and French efforts to resist Hitler.

Naturally the reformers claim there's a lot of waste that can be cut, and one prominent member, Stephen Harper, has argued the old if-we-could-have-the-books-we-could-solve-everything line. He also claims that if we could bring in good company men we could whip government spending — presumably the Canadian versions of the people who gave America $200 billion deficits and the savings and loan crisis.

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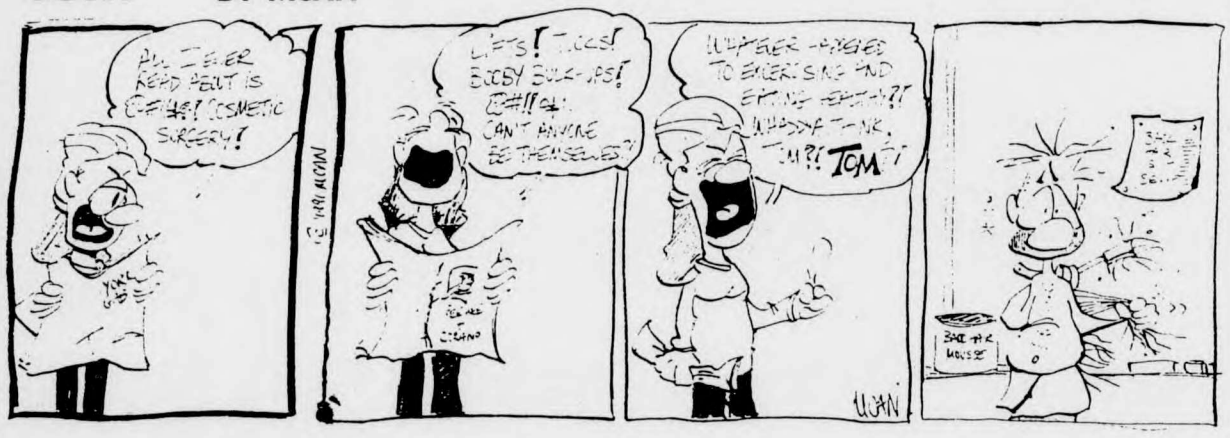

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