

Canada's new political landscape

MAUREEN MCTEER, social and political activist, spoke to the Canadian Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong on October 28. Her topic was the Canadian federal election and its stunning results (which saw the Liberal party form a majority government, the Bloc Quebecois form the official opposition and the Progressive Conservative Party capture only two seats.)

McTeer is currently a Visiting Scholar at the University of California at Berkeley along with her husband, former Canadian Prime Minister Joe Clark. A lawyer by profession, McTeer was also a candidate for the Progressive Conservative party in the 1988 election.

Here are some of her remarks.

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On regionalization

"...Throughout the campaign the conventional wisdom was that mainline Parties were a species on the verge of extinction...The PQ leader Jacques Parizeau even went so far as to wish publicly for an Italian-style parliament, peppered with several political groupings, all with a local or ideological brief, but none with a sense or understanding of the national purpose, that has made Canada possible over the past century.

"The result of this kind of talk was tremendous concern among our trading partners and investors everywhere that Canada was heading down a road to uncertainty and political and economic instability.

"What the election of a new majority Liberal government does for Canada, then, is reassure those both at home and abroad, that our political system is working, and that the majority of Canadians want a government that is national in approach and make-up...Canadians also made it clear they wanted experienced leadership.

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On the Bloc Quebecois

"...The Bloc represents only Quebecers and has no commitment to the larger Canadian community. To the extent that a national legislative agenda also serves the interests of Quebec, as these will be defined by the Bloc members in Parliament, the Bloc will support them. They bear no real ill will towards English Canada, but are convinced that Canada's existing constitutional, political and economic structures and relationships no longer serve their interests.

"...Time will tell whether Lucien Bouchard is able to mold his group of political neophytes, who share a common and narrow focus on one province and one main issue only, into an effective political force in the national Parliament. What they will not be is an effective Opposition in the Canadian parliamentary tradition. But after what happened on Monday, the Canadian parliamentary tradition has been totally altered anyway.

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On Jean Chretien

"...I have known Jean Chretien since 1973, and while I have disagreed fundamentally with him over the years on specific public policy issues, I know him to be a good and generous person, whose years of public service, and dedication to Parliamentary democracy and Canadian politics, make him a worthy and welcome leader of our country.

On the defeat

"...The most startling result of Monday's vote for me was the defeat of the Campbell government and the virtual removal of the Progressive Conservative Party from the current political and parliamentary landscapes.

"...At the personal level, it is hard to describe how I felt to see close friends and colleagues defeated. Having lived through a similar experience in 1988, I can imagine the personal toll of individual defeats....It was heart-wrenching to watch a Party, to which I have been devoted and in which I have spent all of my adult life, reduced to rubble.

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On how the Reform Party will help the Bloc

"...The presence of the Reform Party as a strong force (in Parliament) will help the Bloc Quebecois in two ways.

"First they will be a constant, if not accurate, symbol of intolerance within a small part of the larger Canadian community, to Quebec's aspirations to be a true and equal partner in the Canadian federation.

Second, they will serve as a voice in parts of English Canada for the Bloc's firmly held view that Quebec's interests would be better served outside of the Canadian federation. For different reasons, and in different languages, Reform and the Bloc will preach the same message - Canada would be better if Quebec were to separate and Quebec would be stronger if it were a separate country.