

CANADA VOTES OCTOBER 25

Job creation, deficit reduction and social programs dominated the first half of the Canadian federal election campaign. More than 18 million Canadians are eligible to vote on October 25.

At the mid-point of the seven-week campaign, on October 3 and 4, the leaders of the five parties represented in the House of Commons met in televised French and English-language debates at Ottawa's National Arts Centre.

The debates were regarded as a critical test for the leaders: Jean Chrétien, whose Liberals broke in front in the pre-debate campaign polls; Prime Minister Kim Campbell, whose Progressive Conservatives have dropped to second place in the polls; Audrey McLaughlin, whose New Democrats began the campaign with support in single digits; Preston Manning, whose Reform Party has grown in strength in western Canada and parts of Ontario; and Lucien Bouchard, whose separatist Bloc Québécois has surged to strong levels of support in Quebec.

Carried in the United States on C-SPAN, the Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network, the 2½-hour English language debate was the best opportunity for Canada-watchers to look in on the Canadian election. It was also an opportunity for some 2 million Canadians living in the U.S. to take the pulse of the campaign at home. Canadians who have been out of the country less than five years are eligible for the first time to vote in the election via absentee mail ballot.

Both the French and English debates featured sharp exchanges among the five leaders. Both also featured, for the first time, a live audience of undecided voters.

In the French-language debate, both Prime Minister Campbell and Liberal Leader Chrétien clashed sharply with the Bloc's Bouchard about Quebec's future in Canada and the Bloc's role in the House of Commons. In the English-



The party leaders take their places at the podium for the leadership debate in Ottawa. From left to right, Liberal leader Jean Chrétien, Prime Minister Kim Campbell, Bloc Québécois leader Lucien Bouchard, NDP leader Audrey McLaughlin, and Reform leader Preston Manning.

language debate, all five leaders took turns on the hot seat. As the apparent front-runner, Chrétien came under fire from all sides for his job creation program. Campbell faced tough questioning on her five-year plan to eliminate the deficit. Manning had to fend off the suggestion that his three-year "zero in three" plan to eliminate the deficit would compromise social programs, including funding for medicare. Bouchard, pressed on his sovereigntist option for Quebec, said, "There are two countries in this land."

The North American Free Trade Agreement was the subject of a heated exchange between Chrétien and the NDP's McLaughlin, whose party flatly opposes NAFTA. While the Liberals want to renegotiate NAFTA on subsidies, dumping and energy, Chrétien made it clear that he favors trade liberalization. NAFTA is supported by the Conservatives, who signed the pact and the subsequent environmental and labor

side agreements with the United States and Mexico. Both the Reform Party and the Bloc Québécois also support NAFTA, with some reservations.

As the campaign moved into the final weeks following the debates, all the polls put the Liberals in the lead over the Conservatives, with the Reform and the Bloc Québécois making significant inroads in the West and Quebec, mostly at the expense of the Conservatives. It seemed clear that all five parties would be represented in the next Parliament. What was less clear was whether the voters would return a majority government, or whether Canadians would be faced with their first minority Parliament since the 1979 election.

The answer will come on the evening of October 25, when polls close at 8 p.m. across Canada. The CBC broadcast of the election returns will be carried live in the United States on C-SPAN once the polls close in British Columbia, at 11 o'clock EDT.