
The Rise and Fall of the New Brunswick CoR Party, 1988-1995

by Geoffrey R. Martin

This article traces the rise and fall of one of Canada's recently-formed populist, "New right" parties, the Confederation of Regions Party of New Brunswick. It shows how and why the party was formed and why it collapsed in the last provincial election. COR-NB was a programmatic party based on political protest, which advocated a libertarian ideology. The article argues that partisan realignment is possible in "traditional" areas like New Brunswick, but that the anger that led to the formation of the party eventually turned inward and destroyed the party's coherence.

On September 11, 1995, the saga of the Confederation of Regions Party of New Brunswick (COR-NB) ended, when the party received 7% of the votes and no seats in the provincial election. This represented a major collapse of a party, which in the 1991 provincial election polled 87,256 votes (21% of the total), took 8 seats, and the position of Official Opposition in the Legislative Assembly. As it turned out, COR-NB's success in 1991 took place in a "populist moment" in New Brunswick politics, in which a number of factors came together to enable a new party, which rejected "Official Bilingualism" and many of the basic principles of the political system, to achieve significant success in a province with almost no tradition of third-party activity. COR's collapse in the recent election shows that this populist moment has passed, along with the other factors that made for COR-NB's success. For the foreseeable future New Brunswick politics has returned to its historic pattern of two-party competition among small-c conservative elites.

Geoffrey R. Martin is an academic and journalist who teaches part-time at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick.

The COR Party of New Brunswick

COR-NB was formed in 1989, less than two years after the "McKenna sweep" of 1987, in which the Liberal Party under Frank McKenna won every single seat in the legislature. In the 1991 election, COR-NB won its seats in the South and Central parts of the province, and its support was also disproportionately in rural, sparsely populated areas. COR took advantage of the voters' underlying concern about bilingualism. It did this chiefly in the former heartland of the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party.

There are five central points that describe the party's platform and principles.

- The party was, first of all, a *programmatic* party, not a brokerage party. It had a fixed programme which its activists were unwilling to compromise.
- Second, it was a *protest* party with roots in a single issue, that of "Official Bilingualism." The party was essentially an "ethnic party" representing a segment of English New Brunswick which was extremely dissatisfied, to the point of anger, over the direction of public policy in the province and the country.¹
- Third, like Social Credit in Alberta, COR-NB was a *populist* party and it placed high priority

on changing the system in addition to changing specific public policies. This populism was represented most significantly in the inversion of the political hierarchy: For COR activists, elected members were responsible to the Electorate first, then the Party, and only finally the Leader.

- Fourth, ideologically the party is "classical liberal" in the nineteenth century sense, which today is best referred to as *libertarian*.
- Fifth and finally, like Social Credit in the past, in class terms the COR Party is *petty bourgeois* and lower-middle class in its orientation.

This final point is important and too often neglected, and is also relevant to other Canadian political experiments, especially the Reform Party of Canada. In its heyday the COR Party was dominated by middle-income and small-business people, professionals, and the self-employed. The middle class is the backbone of advanced industrial societies and pays more than its share of taxes and is most likely to feel put upon and unable to "get ahead." The party went beyond appealing only to "middle-income groups." It was also a reflection of those individuals who have an intermediate amount of control over their work, including professionals, small business people, and independent commodity producers, like farmers, woodlot owners, fishers and the self-employed in general. These characteristics are important because this class sometimes allies with the working class, sometimes with the middle class, and sometimes is alienated from both.

Political parties based purely on the middle class and petty bourgeoisie are notoriously hard to hold together. As C. B. MacPherson notes, "the petite-bourgeoisie cannot be cohesive" in politics because the individualism of members of this class divides it and splinters it apart.²

In electoral terms the COR Party was not a party of big business or the affluent, even if its programme, especially the provisions that weaken government, would seem to provide disproportionate benefits to large corporate interests. Yet high income groups and wealth holders appear to have stuck with the Liberals and PCs. This is symbolized by the close association of the powerful McCain family with the Liberal Party, and the fact that one of the McCain spouses, Margaret Norrie McCain, was appointed to a five-year term as the province's Lieutenant-Governor in 1994. The Irving interests, both individual and corporate, are harder to identify with certainty. The descendants of the founder of the Irving empire take little public role in partisan politics, seeming to prefer to influence the provincial government of the day regardless of its political stripe. Judging from the 1993 federal election and the 1995 provincial election, the

Irving preference runs towards the "old line" parties and not populist alternatives further to the right or the left. In the 1993 federal campaign, the Irving interests made financial contributions to both the PC and Liberal campaign funds, and not to Reform, the National Party or the NDP.³

The Formation of the COR Party

The McKenna Liberals completely dominated New Brunswick politics from 1987 to 1989, and New Brunswick was effectively a one-party province during that time. Yet the COR Party rose much faster, less than two years after the 1987 election, than is usually the case with third parties. First of all, this rapid rise is explained by the seriousness and longevity of New Brunswick's high unemployment and economic hardship over the last 25 years. The Progressive Conservative Party was wiped out in 1987 as a repudiation of Richard Hatfield, whose longevity in power and personal legal troubles turned the electorate against him. Further, the Progressive Conservative Party was slow to rebuild, and the leader it finally elected, Barbara Baird Filliter, was generally regarded as ineffective. The rapidity of the rise of COR-NB was also a response to the McKenna government's desire to increase bilingualism in the civil service, an effort which the government has since admitted it has not succeeded in achieving. Finally, for many activists and voters, federal and provincial politics are not separate, and one reason for the rise of the COR-NB was the activists' distaste for the Mulroney government, another handicap for the provincial PC Party.

A neglected aspect of the rise of COR-NB was its genesis as a social movement called the New Brunswick Association of English-Speaking Canadians, usually shortened to the English Speaking Association (ESA). The ESA was formed in the early 1980s to oppose the extension of bilingualism in the provincial government, something that it was effective in preventing. The ESA was like a party-in-waiting with a membership and an agenda, so that activists were easy to mobilize once the decision to form a new party was taken in the late 1980s. By that time individuals involved in the organization began to question their effectiveness as a lobby group. "We brought our concerns to government but it just became frustrating because month after month we were bringing the same concerns, getting the same answers, and really not getting anywhere," said Arch Pafford, COR-NB's first president, first leader, and an ESA activist.⁴

The ESA was a single-issue social movement and the COR Party inherited ESA activists and this issue. Perhaps

because of its ties to the (now-defunct) federal COR Party, COR-NB quickly developed similar New Right policies, including opposition to the Meech Lake Accord and support for parliamentary reform, tax reform, privatization, and deregulation. While party activists claim the COR Party is not a one-issue party, the party, like the ESA before it, would never have been formed without Anglophone discontent over the perceived lack of jobs for Anglophones, and Official Bilingualism, two phenomena that COR-NB activists always linked together. As Sue Calhoun has written, "If someone is pushed about why they joined COR, the answer is, inevitably, because of language."⁵ Just as the ESA was a protest vehicle, the COR Party was a protest party because of its desire to overturn the status quo and because of its dependence on a single issue, that of language policy.

The COR Party in Decline

By the fall of 1993, two years after the party's breakthrough in the 1991 election, the COR Party was clearly in decline, manifested in the party's slide in public opinion polls as well as internal bickering. By 1994 the party consistently polled between 3-7% of decided voters in various polls (down from 21% in the 1991 election) and its membership had plunged from around 20,000 in 1991 to approximately 2500 by the end of 1994. To some extent the conditions for the decline of the party mirror the conditions under which it arose.

In this section some of the reasons for the party's decline will be outlined, but we will concentrate on one of the root reasons for the party's problems, that of the incompatibility between the party's: a) populism; b) free market ideology, and; c) its role as a political party and Official Opposition in the existing system. In contrast to many members of the party, the argument presented here is that COR's problem was not just a matter of finding a new or better leader.

The party ultimately collapsed because of the membership's approach to politics and because a section of the party was unwilling to conform to the existing party system.

There are straight-forward reasons for the party's decline that should be delineated briefly. First, the departure of Brian Mulroney from national politics, and the collapse of the federal PCs in the 1993 federal election, made it possible for small-c conservatives to return to the provincial PC Party. Second, the COR Party suffered a

double blow from the Charlottetown Constitutional Accord referendum in 1992. Since the accord was defeated nationally, constitutional and language issues disappeared for a time from the political agenda, which hurt the COR Party's ability to grab public attention. Even the province's constitutionalization of Bill 88, which declared the equality of the Francophone and Anglophone communities in the province, and the 1994 Québec election, did not excite widespread public attention. The second blow was that COR-NB led the anti-accord side in New Brunswick in 1992 and yet the pro-accord side won convincingly in the province, all of which undermined COR-NB's claim that it represented some kind of "silent majority."

Third, the provincial PC Party gained new credibility in the last two years because of the effectiveness of its leader, Dennis Cochrane, who was elected to that position and to the Legislative Assembly in 1991. Even the sudden resignation of Mr. Cochrane in the spring of 1995, and his replacement by former Mulroney cabinet minister Bernard Valcourt, did not revive COR's fortune's. Fourth, Frank McKenna's Liberal government was rightward leaning during its second mandate (1991-95), given its attitudes toward individual and provincial self-reliance, cuts to social and health services, and its emphasis on job creation in the private sector. This also hurt the COR Party because like a competent brokerage politician, McKenna's rightward move undercut COR-NB support, and this left most opponents of the government in the centre (supporting the PCs) or to the left (supporting the NDP, led by Elizabeth Weir).

All of these are important reasons for the decline of the party, but we should concentrate on another reason, the incompatibility of the party's self-identity and its role in the system. The party tried to combine populism and free market economics, two ideologies that are often in conflict because the interest of the "common man" is often in conflict with the interests of even small business, let alone the larger firms that dominate the New Brunswick political economy. Like the supporters of the United Farmers and Social Credit in Alberta, COR-NB members believed in the value of the individual and of free enterprise, even though the concentration of capital and high levels of unemployment are the result of the particular form of resource-based capitalism that exists in New Brunswick. The COR Party started as a "revolt against the system," though by 1993 the party increasingly internalized the system and so the revolt turned inward, with all of the venom once reserved only for the New Brunswick Society of Acadians and the established parties.

As the economy and job situation in New Brunswick improved somewhat after the recession of the early

1990s, COR-NB lost momentum. (Instead of scapegoating Acadians as they did in the late 1980s, in 1995 New Brunswick Anglophones were more likely to feel aggrieved at the Liberal federal government for tightening the Unemployment Insurance rules in the 1994 budget, or for its gun control initiative of 1995.)

There is a serious structural problem underlying these internal conflicts, in the form of an ideological conflict between Board control and caucus control of the party. As has been stated above, the party policy is that an elected member is responsible to the electorate first, the party second, and the leader last. Yet under its constitution the COR Party—and not the elected caucus—selected the leader and the Board of Directors could call a leadership convention, which inevitably gave the party control over the elected members.

Greg Hargrove (MLA-York North) said in 1993 that the Board overstepped its authority in trying to dump then-leader Danny Cameron because the Board is answerable to the membership while the caucus is responsible to the electorate. By this line of reasoning, the membership can elect a leader but cannot remove a leader, which ultimately sounds like the “old-line parties” that the COR Party criticized. This suggests an inherent contradiction in the party’s inversion of the “Leader-Party-Electorate” hierarchy, because elected members cannot be responsible to the electorate first given the party’s power to remove the party leader by calling a leadership convention.

Conclusion

COR-NB was a right-of-centre protest party that picked up on the tendency of many New Brunswick Anglophones to blame their economic woes on Official Bilingualism, big government, and “special interest groups.” The COR Party went into the vacuum left by the collapse of the provincial PCs, aided by the general weakness of political opposition in McKenna’s first term and the unpopularity of the Mulroney government in the Atlantic region. The political culture of New Brunswick was, for a brief period, not as traditional as many observers claim, because a significant segment of the electorate proved that they were willing to try a political

alternative to the two dominant parties. By making the COR Party the Official Opposition, the voters showed that they were prepared to forgo, both as individuals and as constituencies, the benefits of having a member on the government side of the house.

The COR Party ultimately declined because of the contradiction between its anti-party populism and the realities of operating a political party in the existing party system. This essay also shows the risks of building a new party based on participatory and populist principles when it must function in a “democratic” political system that remains hierarchical and discourages active, meaningful, mass participation in the process of governing between elections. With the election of 1995, the voters have again accepted the elitist political system, in which a government is judged based on its results—the “bottom line”—and not on its style.

The COR Party was formed by a delicate coalition of populists, anti-francophone activists, and traditional conservatives. This coalition has shattered, and it is unlikely that it will come back together in the near future. It may take a generation to rebuild it. There is some possibility that populism will make itself felt in the coming years, if people increasingly feel alienated from New Brunswick’s McKenna government and from the Chrétien government in Ottawa. The key question is whether any political party can take advantage of this populist discontent without itself being consumed by its fires.

Notes

1. More attention is paid to the issue of bilingualism as well as the ethnic basis of the party in another article by the same author, entitled “The New Brunswick COR Party as an ‘Ethnic Party’”, *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, forthcoming, 1996, Vol. 23.
2. See C.B. MacPherson, *Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System*, Second Edition, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), pp. 224-226.
3. *New Brunswick Telegraph Journal*, October 4, 1994, p. 1.
4. Interview with Arch Pafford, Nordin, NB, August 20, 1993.
5. Sue Calhoun, “Getting to the Core of COR,” *New Maritimes*, 1992, vol. 11, No. (2) November/December, p. 15.