

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Reagan steps on Canadian election

In a major political blunder, President Reagan delivered a speech on trade to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Nov. 17, only days before the Canadian parliamentary election, which has turned into a national referendum on the controversial U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement.

Reagan's reference to the trade agreement, coming so soon before the Canadian election, was jumped on by opponents to the Conservative Party in Canada, which negotiated the pact with the United States, as an effort by the U.S. President to meddle in the internal affairs of Canada.

Opponents of the Canadian ruling Conservative Party have correctly attacked the free trade pact as an invitation for U.S.-based cartels to drive Canadians out of business through price wars and other unfair practices. By making the pact the main focus of the election, they turned around a comfortable Conservative Party lead in the polls in the days just before the election.

This reporter was the first to suggest the adverse effect Reagan's speech might have in Canada, just after it was announced at the Nov. 10 White House briefing.

I asked White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater, "If the President speaks on the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement next week, doesn't he run the risk of being accused of interfering in their electoral process, since this is the key issue in their upcoming election?"

Fitzwater groaned, realizing, in effect, the damage had already been done with the announcement. "I was afraid that question might lead to this," he sighed. He was right.

House races reflect one-party system

America has fallen remarkably far down the slippery slope toward a one-party political system at the congressional level, analysis of the 435 House elections Nov. 8 shows.

Due primarily to deals cut at the top of the Democratic and Republican parties, incumbents won 400 races, winning by landslides in 386 of them, running uncontested in 77, and losing only 6.

The statistics show an alarming transformation of the House into what even ABC-TV commentator David Brinkley couldn't help but refer to as "the Supreme Soviet."

The common deception is that the incumbency sweep of the House races was due to the impact of "political action committee" money going to the incumbents. But that is a bogus explanation, principally because incumbents have always, since the founding of the nation, received the lion's share of financial support from special interests seeking to curry favors.

Clever, if not necessarily moral, incumbents have always been able to parlay an election victory into an accumulation of personal wealth, and even the most ethical of them have also been able to count on generous contributions to keep them in office if they have been at all responsive to their constituents.

So, this year's unprecedented sweep cannot be written off with a one-liner about special-interest money: It has always been there, and never before prevented the routine turnover

of scores of seats.

But this time, there was an unprecedented level of collusion between the two major parties at the highest levels, conceding districts to each other. The effect was that, in the overwhelming majority of the House races, the public had no serious choice. In an incredible 77 races, it had no choice at all.

This should set off alarm bells for every freedom-loving American.

The facts are astonishing:

- Of 435 House races, incumbents ran in 406 (93.3%) and won 400 (91.9%). That is, only 6 out of 406 incumbents running (1.37%) lost.

- Of 406 races with incumbents, the incumbents won by a margin of greater than 10%, considered a "comfortable" margin, if not a "landslide," in 386 of them (95.1%).

- Of 406 races with incumbents, the incumbent won by a margin of greater than two-thirds (67%), considered a "blow-out," 287 times (71%).

- A whopping 77 Congressional races (17.7% of the total) were uncontested by one of the two major parties.

- Of the mere 20 out of 406 races involving incumbents nationwide that were decided by a margin of less than 10%, almost one-third were in just two states, North and South Carolina. The deal between the two parties there must not be so solid.

By contrast, in the states where the deal is the most solid, the number of completely uncontested races was staggering. The most were in Texas, where former Democratic National Committee chairman Bob Strauss brags of his long friendship with Republican leader James Baker III. There, 13 of the state's 27 congressional districts went uncontested.

In Louisiana, seven of its eight districts were uncontested, as were 5 of Massachusetts's 11 districts, 8 of Florida's 19 districts and 8 of New York's 34 districts.