

VIRTUAL POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE DECLINE OF DEMOCRACY

Reg Whitaker

Focused on the surface events of politics, many of us have failed to notice the replacement of traditional political parties by "virtual parties" brought together around would-be party leaders. The winning leader's virtual party then takes over the party "brand." Like the body-snatchers of the Hollywood horror movie, it appropriates the shell of the old party but fills it with something quite different: a direct, unmediated connection between leader and voters that destroys one of the traditional bulwarks of civil society. We are worse off for it.

En restant à la surface des événements, beaucoup d'entre nous n'avons pas remarqué le remplacement des partis politiques traditionnels par des « partis virtuels », réunis autour de soi-disant leaders qui s'arrogent la « marque » d'un parti une fois leur victoire acquise. Comme dans les films d'horreur hollywoodiens où des extra-terrestres déterrèrent les cadavres pour emprunter leur enveloppe charnelle, ces leaders s'approprient l'image des vieux partis mais lui donne corps d'une manière fort différente : ils imposent entre les électeurs et eux-mêmes une relation directe qui, en éliminant l'intermédiaire des formations politiques, vient détruire l'un des remparts de la société civile. Nous ne pouvons qu'en sortir perdants.

A quick quiz on the major events of the political year 2000 might elicit the following list: the emergence out of the old Reform party of the new Canadian Alliance under Stockwell Day; the re-election of Jean Chrétien's Liberals to a third successive majority; the apparent stagnation of the Bloc Québécois; the continued marginalization of the federal Progressive Conservative and New Democratic parties.

Appearances can sometimes be misleading, however. Surface events and personalities mask deeper, structural changes taking place beneath the veneer. Distracted by the rise and fall of party labels and leaders, it has been easy to miss the subterranean transformation of political parties into different sorts of creatures than in the past. In an age of relentless change imposed by markets and technology, political parties have had to adapt to the challenges of globalization, the information revolution and the new media, or fade into irrelevance.

The flavour of these changes can be caught in the language used by party insiders to describe their business. Alister Campbell, one of the leading architects of Ontario premier Mike Harris' Common Sense Revolution, and a for-

mer federal Progressive Conservative official, early in 2000 wrote an open letter to PC supporters urging them to abandon their federal party for the Canadian Alliance. He complained about his own "wasted investment" in this "brand": "it was time to invest elsewhere." He went on: "If the federal PC party in which you have invested so much was a mutual fund you would have dumped it years ago."

Two of Campbell's words are particularly significant: investment and brand. Parties are no longer about commitment, in the sense of principles, loyalty and tradition. Long ago, partisans rallied to Sir John A. Macdonald's Tories under the slogan "the Old Man, the Old Flag, the Old Policy." No more. A party is not a collective project. It is a "mutual fund." Commitment has become investment, and investment demands appropriate returns. If "wasted," it should be pulled out and put "elsewhere." The party's name and symbols are no longer marks of allegiance, but are merely a "brand." Brands are corporate marketing devices for products. Brand identification is intended to promote sales. If sales falter, re-branding may be required. In Campbell's worst-case scenario, the wise investor pulls out altogether and invests in a new product line with a more

marketable brand. Hence, like a good investment analyst, Campbell is advising his clients to sell PC and buy CA.

According to political scientists, political parties are crucial linkages between civil society and the state: a noble calling. But in capitalist democracies, parties are poor cousins to their private sector counterparts, the corporations. Corporations sell goods and services and make profits. Parties sell promises of policy and patronage. At best, they offer insurance that profits in the private sector will not be impeded by policies pursued in the public sector, a kind of respectable protection racket. But in a competitive political market, few parties can bank promises contingent upon victory at the polls. Not surprisingly, it is the corporate sector where research and innovation in the technology of marketing and communications take place. Parties have to catch up with trends in the private sector, and struggle to cope with new techniques and tools of marketing as best they can, with limited resources.

One of the organizational forms pioneered in the new economy is the “virtual corporation,” a form adapted to the flexibility required of a networked world. Old corporations were heavy, stand-alone entities, with high fixed investment in plant and product, centralized and hierarchical in structure, slow to react to changes in their environment, commanding market share by sheer weight and inertia. Exemplars of old corporate culture were the big three North American automakers before the challenge of Japanese and European competition hit home. New corporations are somewhat less hierarchical, more decentralized, more flexible and adaptive, with less fixed investment. New corporations are leaner, which does not mean that they necessarily employ fewer people. Rather, they employ fewer people directly, but many more indirectly, through outsourcing. Here is where the idea of the virtual corporation comes in. For specific purposes or projects, networks are formed that flow around and over the old organizational boundaries. They may involve temporary partnerships or alliances with other corporations, or at least components of other corporations. These networks are functionalist in design, strictly goal-oriented, and evanescent, forming and reforming around particular projects, and disappearing when the goals are achieved. These commando units may be considered, during their transitory lives, as “virtual” corporations

Like “virtual” corporations in the networked information economy, virtual parties form and reform for specific purposes. With more tasks “outsourced” and less done in-house, the virtual party networks across traditional organizational boundaries, drawing in specialists who perform specific functions to meet specific, market-driven needs. Virtual parties form around politicians seeking the leadership of parties, as relatively small entourages or coteries of political strategists, marketing and communications experts, “spin doctors,” PR flacks and policy “wonks.” If successful, the same coterie then in effect colonizes the party and runs its subsequent election campaign. The party, as such, serves as little more than a convenient franchise with brand recognition, marketing “location,” and ready sources of campaign funding. Sometimes, it is more convenient to “re-brand” the old party for better location. The real campaign dynamic derives from the virtual party within the shell of the traditional party. If the electoral campaign is successful, the virtual party then colonizes the strategic heights of government, around the office of the prime minister or premier, setting policy priorities, interfacing with the permanent bureaucracy and managing the government’s image and media presentation. Many of the real high flyers in the team, however, will choose to return to the more lucrative private sector, only coming out again for a brief burst of activity during a re-election campaign. All this is dependent upon the leader, and the policy package he or she represents. These are the products being marketed.

There are some spectacular examples of the virtual party in operation. One of the most remarkable is the transformation of the British Labour party under Tony Blair. Blair’s communications and publicity entourage, led by Peter Mandelson, the former Northern Ireland secretary, remade the party from the top down. They even re-branded it as New Labour, to distinguish it from the electorally unsuccessful and media-unfriendly “Old” Labour. Helped by a decaying Tory *ancien régime*, New Labour swept to office in 1997. Millbank, the permanent party headquarters where its publicity directors and spin doctors reside, has become a kind of rival power centre to Whitehall. In office, Blair and company have been assailed by both critics and supporters as lacking in any clear or distinctive policy direction, yet at the same time as control freaks obsessed with spin doctoring their image at the expense of substance. This is a trap that virtual

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parties can fall into, given that they are constructed in the first instance for the immediate purpose of getting elected, rather than for governing. Yet some Canadian experience suggests that virtual parties may be quite well prepared not only to get elected, but also to govern programmatically with distinctive policy agendas

A remarkable case study of a programmatic, even ideological, “virtual” party is the “Mike Harris party,” as the Progressive Conservative party of Ontario was re-branded in 1995, the year of its return to power from the wilderness. In the years following its traumatic defeat in 1985, after 42 years of uninterrupted rule, the Ontario Tory party was “hollowed out, broke, leaderless,” as journalist and author John Ibbitson put it. The Ontario Tories had been known and feared for the “Big Blue Machine,” the Conservative party organization that raised lavish funds from Bay Street, ran one successful electoral campaign after another, and then discreetly and efficiently managed the patronage that came with seemingly perpetual political power. It had over the years governed resolutely from the centre, mixing policy pragmatism with a kind of Red Tory sense of the importance of the public sector.

The Big Blue Machine was now defunct and the party a shell that could be taken over. This represented an opportunity for ideologically committed young right-wingers to seize the party franchise. A small group of young activists formed up in 1990 to back the leadership candidacy of the Tory MPP from North Bay, Mike Harris, an affable yet ambitious politician with few ties to the crumbling party establishment. With Harris as leader, the moderate policy orientation of the past could be discarded, and replaced with a hard-right neo-liberalism. Although initially unsuccessful in the 1990 provincial election, the Mike Harris virtual Tory party took brilliant advantage of the conjuncture in the early 1990s of an NDP government and a severe economic recession to lay the groundwork for a surprise victory in 1995 on a rigorously right-wing ideological party program, the Common Sense Revolution. Moreover, throughout their first term, the Harrisites were committed to enacting their program with unusual zeal and exactitude. Returning to the electorate in 1999, they could truthfully assert something few Canadian parties in office could claim: They had leveled with the voters about what they intended to do, and then carried out their promises.

The Harris party has been successful because it has tightly integrated marketing with policy. It was re-branded the “Harris” party not because Mike Harris is the product, but because it is a useful way of distinguishing its new policy orientation from the soft, centrist conservatism that characterized the old Tory party. The real product is the Common Sense Revolution, an ideological program that reflects the goals and preferences of its architects, the core of the virtual party. But right-wing ideological purity in itself is no guarantee of electoral success. Prior to the 1995 campaign, the Harris people had carefully identified their potential core supporters and what specifically they wanted from government. This is in line with the dramatic shift in recent years in the private sector from mass to niche, or “micro” marketing. New media and new information technologies have combined to provide tools that can profile and target ever more finely honed markets. The Harris Tories have never looked for the illusory grail of the “public.” Instead they have concentrated on very specific “publics”—all those elements in the Ontario population angry and resentful over the results of previous NDP and Liberal governments—and turned to these refined marketing tools to identify specific policies that would sell to these potential buyers. As it turned out, a fortuitous synergy developed between the hard right policy orientation of the Harris team and the policy preference profile of a critical mass of voters in the conjuncture of mid-1990s Ontario. The Common Sense Revolution was a product whose time, and market niche, had come. The virtual Ontario Tory party was the marketing vehicle that delivered the product. Following their re-election, the Tories have seemed directionless. They await a further re-branding, this time as a party of government, no longer a party of angry outsiders, a marketing task that may present difficulties for a virtual party designed to appear as outsiders.

The federal Liberals under Jean Chrétien have been a highly successful political enterprise, winning three successive majority governments. The Liberal party too has become a virtual party, distinct from its roots, although it chooses not to re-brand itself, but rather to link its pitch with a long history of positive brand identification (since 1896, the Liberal Party has been in national office 70 per cent of the time). Yet the party of Chrétien is a different creature than its predecessors. It is neither the elite-run “ministerialist”

party of the King-St. Laurent era, nor the “participatory” party of the Pearson-Trudeau era. It remains a formidable patronage machine, and an engine for organizing Parliament to pass the agendas set by the prime minister. But neither cabinet ministers nor the grass roots matter as much as they once did. National campaigns are poll and media-driven as never before, and the virtual party at the heart of the shell that is called the “Liberal Party” forms the real dynamic.

But there is one oddity about the virtual Liberal Party—its two-headedness—that sets it apart from other virtual parties, and has lent the Chrétien years a distinctive coloration. Virtual parties form up around particular leaders, in the first instance at the time they challenge for control of the party at a leadership contest. Winners then usually take all, and losers typically are isolated, neutralized and quite often blown right out of the party and/or the government. In the case of Ralph Klein when he gained the leadership of the Alberta Progressive Conservative Party, his chief competitor was blown all the way into the leadership of the Alberta Liberal Party, where she opposed him as the official opposition leader in the 2001 election, before resigning after another crushing Klein majority. More often, losers simply drop out to the private sector and are heard of no more, or at least until the leadership reopens.

When Jean Chrétien was himself defeated by John Turner for the Liberal leadership in 1984, he had felt humiliated by the winner. When he in turn won the leadership over Paul Martin, Jr. in 1990, he behaved differently toward his rival. The Chrétien virtual Liberal Party has in office controlled most of the patronage, and the prime minister runs a notoriously centralized and very tight ship. Yet Mr Chrétien came to the top with no policy agenda whatever, other than becoming prime minister. The *Red Book* of policy promises, a crucial element in the 1993 campaign, was constructed by a team led by Martin as co-chair of the platform committee. And early on in the Liberals’ first term, Martin was permitted to set the major agenda of the government: deficit elimination. The success of this priority became the defining mark of the Chrétien government, and Martin has consequently grown in stature, to the point of becoming a putative rival to the prime minister, certainly in the eyes of his own entourage (the nascent Martin virtual Liberal Party) and of the media, always alert to a saleable personality conflict narrative. Thus the Liberal Party has

appeared as a strange, two-headed beast. The Chrétien loyalists argue that while the PM controls the patronage, the finance minister controls the policy agenda, a functional division of labour of sorts. It is an unusual form for the virtual party, but in the Liberals’ case, who can argue with success?

The Liberals also lay claim, with some justification, to being the only genuinely national party in a system now characterized by opposition parties locked, either willingly in the case of the Bloc Québécois, or unwillingly in the case of the Alliance and the PCs, into regional ghettos. Yet the Liberals are relatively weak in the West. The regional fragmentation of our present party system is a manifestation of an underlying feature of the virtual party system. As mass marketing gives way to niche or micro marketing, the “public” becomes fragmented into many publics, each targeted for votes by parties that tailor and hone their appeals to particular niches. In the most comprehensive examination yet published of the emerging party system (*Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics*, UBC Press, 2000), Professors R. Kenneth Carty, William Cross and Lisa Young argue that the national discussion of politics in an election campaign will “increasingly be replaced by a series of highly focused, private conversations. When coupled with the regional dynamics of campaigns, this trend is contributing to the end of pan-Canadian politics.” They go on to suggest that “despite calls for further democratization of political parties, these new communication patterns ensure that pollsters, advertising and marketing specialists, and those skilled in the management and manipulation of data sets will retain a central role within campaign organizations. Fragmented and private political communication requires the skills and technology of these professionals, reinforcing their place within the party structure.”

The most striking example of how the virtual party is superseding the real party can be found in the transformation of the Reform Party into the Canadian Alliance. Ostensibly designed to break Reform out of its Western ghetto and challenge the Liberals in Canada’s biggest electoral battleground, Ontario, the “United Alternative” project was actually about transforming the structure of the party. When Preston Manning urged the Reform Party faithful to abandon their short-lived party attachment for a new and more efficacious vehicle (which soon showed its disdain for loyalty by ditching

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and so on.

Manning himself), he exhorted them to "Think Big." The subtext of this message was that Reform had been thinking small, not only in terms of its regional base, but also in terms of its conception of itself as a party. For those who would like to see our parties strive to become more democratic vehicles, there is considerable irony in this message.

The rapid rise of the Reform Party from nowhere to Official Opposition was a remarkable example of innovation in the party system. Along with the Bloc Québécois, Reform brought to Ottawa a more programmatic, ideological and principled politics than the cynical old brokerage parties had offered. Above all, Reform brought an insistence upon concrete democratic accountability, and provided elaborate institutional mechanisms to ensure that accountability: referenda, initiatives, recall, free votes in Parliament, fixed terms for governments and so on. To a public jaded by such undemocratic exercises as Meech Lake, free trade, and the GST, Reform's democratization agenda seems a breath of fresh air, and indeed Reform was able to steal ownership of the democracy issue away from the NDP, which had monopolized the concept for decades. To be sure, populism of this kind is always open to a kind of plebiscitarian manipulation by the leadership. But the early Reform Party did demonstrate signs of genuine grass roots participation, in organizing and financing the party, and in asserting real influence over the party's policy directions. A populist network sprang up in western Canada that did something very unusual in this country by successfully launching and sustaining a new party from below. This could only go so far, however. It stalled in Ontario and failed to evict its Conservative rivals from the political map. Hence the Alliance, a re-branding of the Reform product designed to appeal more to the potential Ontario market.

Although the Alliance did hold a founding convention much like traditional party conventions, it made one major decision about process that moved the new party away from Reform's structure. The Alliance's first leadership contest was to be a national primary, not a convention. The rationalization for this was that new members would be brought into the party structure as they were mobilized by competing candidates—most specifically, Ontarians mobilized by the candidacy of Tom Long, one of the architects of the Harris Common Sense

Revolution, and a key catch for the Alliance's Ontario strategy. But voters mobilized by candidates in a primary-type contest are not socialized into the party in the way that those who join local constituencies and attend regional and national meetings are socialized into the solidarity and camaraderie of shared endeavour. They simply pay for a membership and cast a vote for their candidate in much the same isolation that characterizes voting in general elections. They miss the social matrix of the party, and miss learning its norms and practices, its sense of collective memory and shared identity. The Progressive Conservatives had adopted the same procedure for their earlier national leadership contest: It produced the bizarre result of the David Orchard candidacy, and a singular lack of a sense of organized purpose at the centre of the national party. The Joe Clark virtual Tory party was, and is, a large head with a tiny body or, to shift metaphors, a racing driver with a track record but a toy car to drive.

In the case of the Canadian Alliance, the Long candidacy failed to ignite an influx of new recruits from the Ontario Tory party. This failure was foreshadowed by the curious "poison pill" adherence of Ernie Eaves, provincial treasurer and No. 2 man in the Harris government (since retired), and long the most prominent supporter of the federal Tories within the Harris cabinet. Eaves declared that he would support the Alliance, but only if it adopted the Ontario candidate as its leader. When Long finished last, Eaves was as good as his word, brusquely taking his leave of the Alliance. Although the Alliance under Day did do better with Ontario voters than Reform under Manning, clearly outdistancing the PCs in the popular vote, they were able to elect only two MPs. There was certainly no sense of gaining a durable new mass federal base to match that of the Harris Tories. The 905 suburban belt around Toronto, the very heartland of the Common Sense Revolution where Long had symbolically chosen to launch his leadership campaign, actually threw its support so monolithically to the Liberals as to run ahead of the 51 per cent the Chrétien party garnered province-wide.

The failure to mobilize lasting grassroots support in Ontario partially masked one very important contribution to the new party by Tom Long, although this only strengthened the party's virtual status. Long was able to open up financial support from Bay Street that was unprecedented in the previous short history of the Reform Party. Although Manning had the

financial support of certain Western regional economic interests, especially oil money, and had gained a few supporters here and there on Bay Street, Reform had never been able to match the corporate fundraising prowess of the Mulroney Tories or the Chrétien Liberals, and had had to rely to a degree on grassroots donations. Manning and his Western supporters had appeared a bit too rough-edged and *outré* for Bay Street's liking. Long was one of their own, and, urged on by the *National Post*, they opened up their coffers for him. Unlike Long's vanishing voting support, Bay Street money stuck to the Day-led Alliance. In the 2000 election, the Alliance was able to rival the Liberals in corporate campaign funding. However important in establishing a financial base for the Alliance's future stability, this shift in funding from small, grassroots donations to big corporate giving completes a cycle within the Reform/Alliance from a grassroots populist movement to a political marketing tool for Bay Street. The Alliance as a virtual Ontario party had the money, and a vociferous mouthpiece of Bay Street in the form of the *National Post* to push it forward. All that was missing were the voters.

Stockwell Day's campaign in 2000 was of course ambushed by a far more sophisticated and ruthless marketing machine centred on the prime minister's office, and the Chrétien virtual party's pollsters and spin doctors. But the scale of the disaster should not obscure the effects of campaign exigencies on the Alliance as a party in its first, formative national campaign. Distinctive policies that set the Alliance apart from its competitors, including the Progressive Conservatives, were quickly dropped on the advice of Alliance advertising advisers. Delegates to the party's founding convention had enthusiastically adopted a flat tax. Moreover, as Alberta Treasurer, Day had already begun implementation of a flat (or at least flatter) provincial income tax, so the idea was clearly in the realm of the possible and practical. No matter: Focus groups showed there were perception problems with a flat tax, and it was unceremoniously dumped from the party platform.

Another distinctive feature of Day's ascent to the leadership had been the adhesion of pro-lifers and the Christian Right, who had flocked into the Alliance to elect a candidate who forthrightly defended their moral positions on sensitive public issues like abortion and homosexuality. Once the national campaign was launched, however, all mention of anti-abortion and anti-gay rights



CP Picture Archive: Frank Gunn

The Mike Harris Party:
Mike Harris hugs the media mascot at the end of the 1999 Ontario election campaign

positions was dropped. When the Liberals cleverly ambushed Day by raising the spectre of an Alliance government encouraging referenda on abortion and gay rights, there was furtive backpedaling even on the Alliance's commitment to direct democracy. Finally, one might cite the Alliance's frantic efforts to deny any distinctive conservative position on health care, despite the Klein government's trail-blazing efforts to open up private clinics as a component of health care delivery. Their flight from principle was embodied in the rather forlorn spectacle of Day holding up his hand-lettered sign, "No two-tier health care," during the leaders' TV debate.

The 2000 election results produced very small gains for the Alliance outside the West, along with further deepening of support in the West. Whether the party can ever break out of Reform's Western ghetto, or even force a merger with the PCs, remains to be seen. But even if it does succeed, the Alliance, as a structure that has moved further along the continuum away from "party" toward "virtual party," will represent one more step in the decline of deliberative, negotiated democracy and its replacement by unmediated telemarketing.

Referring to the emergence of the modern social welfare state in Canada in the 1960s, former Ontario premier Bob Rae writes (in *The Three Questions: Prosperity and the Public Good*) that "these achievements were brought about

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because political parties, the little platoons of loyalty bound together by common affection and common conviction, advocated, persuaded, compromised, and negotiated their way to achieving tangible, real, practical progress. That's what politics is."

Rae draws the phrase "little platoons" from Burke, who meant all the institutions of civil society that mediate between the individual and the state. Parties were, for the political system, the pre-eminent mediating institutions. Whether they ever quite fulfilled the role Rae has lovingly ascribed to them is open to question. Ambition, patronage and venality were often enough in as much evidence as "loyalty ... common affection and common conviction" as motives for partisanship. Yet Rae's emphasis on how parties "advocated, persuaded, compromised, and negotiated" surely gets the hang of what these peculiar institutions were supposed to do. States must arrive at authoritative resolutions of conflicts in the society. Parties were there to articulate demands, focus debates, negotiate workable solutions and then build broad support for the compromises thus arrived at. This was referred to as the "brokerage model" of parties, usually in recent years with disdain. Brokerage politics, it has been said repeatedly, were mundane, uninspiring, conservative, often corrupt and ineffective.

At one time or another, no doubt, they were all of these things. Like all other established institutions they have suffered over recent decades a decline in the trust and deference accorded them by the democratic citizenry, most spectacularly in the case of the state itself, but followed by corporations, unions, churches and so on. The reasons for this decline are many and complex, and still perhaps obscure to contemporary observers too close in time and place to fully decipher the clues. But take away the capacity of parties to link and mediate between society and the state, take away their capacity to fulfill the functions accorded them in theory, and we have a serious problem with our politics. Parties have been largely denuded of their old legitimacy, incapacitated in filling their traditional roles, and held up to public ridicule and scorn. But no new and better institutions have been invented to replace them. Interest groups act directly upon the legislative and administrative processes, without the mediation of parties, and with the result that the more powerful get their way, while leaving the losers bitter, angry and paranoid about what is done behind closed doors

and in the dark corridors of power. Social movements and public interest groups try to influence governments directly from the outside by raising their voices and making threatening gestures, but they are largely ignored, leaving their supporters further alienated. Everywhere the "democratic deficit" is identified and decried, yet the traditional instruments for making government accountable to the people—political parties—tend to be seen as part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Neither corporatism nor populism, neither technocracy from above nor electronic direct democracy from below, have actually succeeded so far in replacing parties. In the 21st century, parties remain as crucial to the workings of liberal democratic politics as they have always been. A democratic political system without parties is like an automobile without a transmission: it might look good, but it won't take you anywhere. But this does not mean that under their old labels, "parties" are in continuity with their past. Here is where virtual parties step in. Like the body snatchers of the Hollywood horror-movie, they take over the old shells, but fill them with something quite different. Virtual parties in opposition are not so much participants in ongoing debate and deliberation as marketing tools for selling their product—themselves. Virtual parties in power do not preside over and organize the parliamentary process, as such; rather they are devices for establishing unmediated producer-consumer relations between the leader and the population, while bypassing or end-running Parliament and press and any other institutions that get in the way. Not much room is left for the "little platoons of loyalty bound together by common affection and common conviction."

Structural reforms of the electoral process and enhancing the role of Parliament are worthy objectives in themselves, but unlikely to get far under the present circumstances of Liberal self-satisfaction. Yet even such reforms might do little to dislodge the virtual party, which has sunk roots in economic and technological changes that lie deeper than political institutions. Perhaps more radical changes in forms of representation are required to address a growing democratic deficit.

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