

# Canada's fractured political culture

## MAJORITY GOVERNMENT RULE

For well over a century, Canada was a country with a very stable political tradition. There were two dominant parties—the Conservatives and the Liberals—that between them easily garnered 75–80 percent of the popular vote in federal elections. Both were brokerage parties, without hard and fast political principles.

Minority governments were not unheard of in Canada, but the norm was majority governments. So why have Canadians, through three successive elections—2004, 2006, 2008—elected Parliaments without a majority government? Why does the political party system with five major contenders today appear to be so fragmented when compared with the not so distant past?

## THE ROOTS OF MINORITY GOVERNMENT

The key to the fragmentation of the party system lies in the constitutional debates that dominated the 1980s and 1990s. Pierre Trudeau's patriation of the Canadian Constitution in 1981–82 was carried out against the strong opposition of the Parti Québécois government of Quebec headed by René Lévesque. The Conservative government of Brian Mulroney attempted to remedy this some years later through the Meech Lake Accord, which among other things, recognized Quebec as constituting a distinct society within Canada. That clause provoked considerable opposition in the rest of Canada, ultimately leading to the Accord's failure in 1990.

As a direct consequence of some of these developments, Lucien Bouchard, a leading minister in the Mulroney government, resigned in 1990 and formed a new sovereignty-supporting party, the Bloc Québécois. In the 1993 federal election, this party, which only contested seats in Quebec, won 54 of the 75 seats and 49 percent of the popular vote in that

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province. Moreover, in the five elections that have followed, the Bloc has consistently won a majority of Quebec's House of Commons seats and, with one exception, a plurality though never an absolute majority of Quebec's votes. In other words, since 1993, Canada has had a binational party system. Outside Quebec, the Liberals, the Conservatives, the NDP, and the Greens are the key contenders today. Within Quebec, the Bloc is the dominant party, with the others competing for the remaining seats and votes.

## THE DECLINE OF THE ONCE MIGHTY LIBERAL PARTY

All this did not matter in the short run, since the Liberal Party under Jean Chrétien was able to secure a parliamentary majority between 1993 and 2004 by sweeping almost all of Ontario's seats. Eventually, leading figures on the political right, most notably Stephen Harper, were able to engineer a fusion of the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Con-

servatives in 2003, with Harper as the new Conservative leader. In the 2004 election, the Conservatives were able to offer a more effective challenge to the Liberals, resulting in a minority Parliament. A subsequent scandal involving the funding of federal programs in Quebec did much to undermine confidence in the minority Liberal government, resulting in its defeat in the January 2006 election.

The Conservatives only secured 36 percent of the vote federally in the 2006 election, depriving them of a parliamentary majority. They tried mightily to increase their popularity in the year and a half that followed, helped by the fact that the Liberals had chosen an uncharismatic leader. However, the October 2008 election saw the Conservatives getting 37 percent of the vote and being held once again to minority status. In this instance, the Bloc's domination in Quebec and attack on the Conservatives' cuts to cultural programs had much to do with the electoral outcome. So did an implicit unwillingness of the Canadian electorate outside Quebec to trust them with a parliamentary majority, for fear of what they might do if so empowered.

## UNITY ON THE RIGHT

Stephen Harper's Conservatives were not the Progressive Conservatives of the past. They had a harder edge to them, closer in many ways to American Republicans. They contained within their ranks a hard-line fundamentalist wing, with ultra-conservative views on abortion, homosexuality, and the family. They sought closer alignment with the United States, to the detriment of a more multifaceted Canadian foreign policy. In addition, they showed little concern for the environment, for Aboriginal issues, or for the more progressive facets of Canadian social policy.

Where they could, the government showed its true colours. It attempted to

repeal the *Gun Registry Act*, passed by a previous Liberal government, by putting enormous pressure on rural Liberal and NDP members of Parliament. It withdrew government support for events like gay pride parades, cut funding to feminist and other social activist organizations, eviscerated the long form for the census, and gutted agencies like the International Center for Human Rights and Democratic Development, appointing hard-line neo-conservatives to their boards. In short, the government played to their conservative base, while doing little to broaden its support to the two-thirds of Canadians who did not share those values.

The inability of the Conservatives to achieve a parliamentary majority is one part of the story. The decline of the Liberals to an all-time low of 26 percent of popular support in the 2008 election is another. Why might this have occurred? There was the sponsorship scandal and the Gomery Inquiry of 2004–5, which revealed that key Liberal organizers in Quebec had used funds destined for federal promotion in Quebec to line their own pockets. There was a sense that the party had lost its moorings through a succession of weak leaders—Paul Martin, Stéphane Dion, and most recently Michael Ignatieff. (Martin was seen as indecisive, Dion as wooden, and Ignatieff, who had spent decades abroad, as out of touch with ordinary Canadians.) In addition, there was an incipient feeling that the Liberals had overplayed its hand as Canada's long-time governing party and deserved a spell in opposition.

### **THE FRAGMENTATION OF ELECTORAL POLITICS**

Canada's two historically dominant parties, the Conservatives and the Liberals, together secured a little over 60 percent of the popular vote in 2008; 18 percent of the remainder went to the NDP; 10 percent to the Bloc Québécois; and 9 percent to the Greens. More recent public opinion polls show little change in the situation, with neither the Conservatives nor the Liberals approaching majority government territory.

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The political impasse has sparked debate on two fronts. The first has been about changing the electoral system to one more closely resembling proportional representation. However, proposals along these lines, when put to electorates in provinces like British Columbia and Ontario, have gone down to defeat. Having failed at the provincial level, electoral reform at the federal level seems all the more improbable.

### **COALITION GOVERNMENTS: UN-CANADIAN?**

A second idea that has garnered support is that of the Liberals and the NDP forming a coalition government. There was a near turn to a coalition of this kind in December 2008, shortly after the federal election of that year and the introduction of a highly polarizing fiscal update by the Conservatives. In the heated debate that surrounded this event, the Conservatives denounced the proposed coalition as illegitimate, replacing the party that had won a plurality of the votes with one that had been soundly thrashed, in alliance with socialists and with Quebec separatists. In the event, the governor general accorded Stephen Harper a prorogation of Parliament. By the time Parliament reconvened in late January, the Conservatives had substantially modified their budget proposals, and the Liberals had a new leader, Michael Ignatieff, who was less supportive of the coalition idea than his immediate predecessor, Stéphane Dion, had been.

The idea of coalition has not disappeared. Although Ignatieff has ruled out any informal arrangement with the NDP or the Greens prior to a future election, he has left the door open to discussions afterward. There have been many voices,

within both the Liberal Party and the NDP, calling for some coalition arrangement. The near certainty that the Liberals by themselves will be unable to secure a majority of seats in the next election increases the prospects of such a coalition as one possible future scenario.

A lot would depend on the balance of forces at that point. Should the Liberals and the NDP between them garner more seats than the Conservatives, the possibility of coalition would immediately arise. The recent formation of a coalition between Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in Great Britain strengthens the legitimacy of such an option for Canada, whose parliamentary system is modelled on the British. Moreover, Australia has gone down a similar road in recent months, with a minority Labor government supported by a Green and several independent members of Parliament.

### **HOW LONG WILL MINORITY GOVERNMENTS LAST: A LONG TIME?**

The new norm for Canada seems to be a fragmented party system. Something may come along to alter this, a political crisis of one kind or another, firming up support for one or the other of the Conservative or Liberal parties. An eventual redistribution of seats in the House of Commons may increase representation from the fastest-growing provinces—Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia—at the expense of slower-growing provinces like Quebec, weakening the spoiler position of the Bloc Québécois.

The Conservatives may yet make a major breakthrough in the outer suburbs of major cities and even in a number of

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does things in Ottawa. While Ford pretends to want to run Toronto in executive style like long-time conservative mayor Hazel McCallion's Mississauga, his brother Doug fantasizes about the Chicago model of strong mayoral politics.


### HARDBALL POLITICS: PLAYING FOR KEEPS

In true Harperian style, the big and potentially most controversial files, such as the subway extension instead of the light-rail-oriented Transit City plan or the proposal to privatize garbage collection, are handled on a short leash directly by the Ford brothers. In addition, reminiscent of how the Ottawa press corps has dealt with the prime minister, many pundits have played the role of embedded journalists in a war against all things Miller and all things progressive. With Sue-Ann Levy of the Toronto Sun leading the charge, other influential writers like Royson James have all but abdicated their fourth-estate prerogative of critical interrogation of power.

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Harper has played high-stakes poker throughout most of his two terms as minority leader of Canada. He may soon be able to see a payoff when he carries the Conservative standard down Yonge Street. Yet, things may all turn out differently.


The Harper-Hudak-Ford triumvirate may be just a Conservative pipe dream. We could, instead, end up with another and perhaps weaker Harper majority, a failed run to conquer Queen's Park by Hudak, and a lame-duck Mayor Ford who might stumble over a botched transit

proposal, intentional union-busting privatization plans, and make-rich programs for his friends in private business. Harper could lose his gamble for the urban voter and drag his provincial and municipal counterparts down with him. The fate of this scenario is highly dependent on whether the Liberals will (re)articulate an urban vision that moves beyond narrow anti-tax sentiments to address Canada's urban crisis, and whether a fickle electorate will buy into a more progressive urbanity than that symbolized by the politics of Ford and Harper. 

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urban seats, where they have been honing their appeal to ethnic voters. Or the Liberals may eventually begin to regain some of the support they have bled to the NDP or the Greens. However, all this

is for the future. As long as the Bloc Québécois can successfully mobilize Quebec nationalist support, minority Parliaments will remain the norm in our multinational federation. Canadians who

are centre or left-of-centre in their inclinations will, for the time being, have to continue to rely on the Bloc to shield them from the full impact of a potential majority Conservative government. 

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ranked 27th out of 30 OECD countries with respect to gender pay gaps. Similarly, Canada has plunged from 4th to 9th place among 14 comparable OECD countries on the UN Human Development Index. Canada now ranks dead last among 25 OECD countries with respect to early child care and development. This year, moreover, the UN Human Rights Council urged Ottawa to address the growing disparities between

minority groups and their mainstream counterparts in education, employment, income, housing, and political participation.

There is little doubt that the strategists in the Prime Minister's Office had already suspected that the 2011 long-form census would reveal to all Canadians and the world an increasingly frayed and inequitable social fabric. Canadians have a right to know whether social

disparities are growing and among which groups. Like the proverbial three monkeys that can neither see, hear, nor say evil, the cancellation of the long-form census is a cynical partisan ploy that seeks to entrench a climate of indifference to social inequalities and to effective social policies to combat them. This is a manufactured ignorance in the making, which, if met with silence and without solidarity, diminishes us all. 