



WHY CANADA WENT BACK TO THE FUTURE

By David T. Jones

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SUMMARY

On 19 October, Canadians went “back to the future” by defenestrating a nine-year Conservative Party (Tory) regime and giving the Liberals a strong majority. Led by Justin Trudeau, the Liberal victory was not totally unexpected; however, it was a stronger and more “national” victory than anticipated. Although thoroughly beaten, the Tories were not massacred; they retain a strong enough base to rebuild for 2019. Not so the socialist New Democrats (NDP), which imploded from 103 seats to 44 -- a comprehensive defeat refuting the party’s effort to present an attractive, centrist image to the electorate.

Tory leader Stephen Harper has already resigned as party leader, but remains as prime minister until Trudeau is officially installed as prime minister. NDP leader Thomas Mulcair’s position is more anomalous; there is not an obvious successor.

With a four-year mandate, the Liberals have time to implement their ambitious domestic and foreign policies. Essentially, they will be dismantling the conservative structures erected by the Tories and largely reinstalling previous Liberal verities, e.g., higher taxes, deficit spending, “soft power” peacekeeping-style military commitments, and “balanced” foreign policy toward areas such as the Middle East. Over the past generation, U.S.-Canada bilateral relations under Liberal governments have been fraught. We can expect more disconnects and disagreement under a Liberal government.

ELECTIONS—A TUTORIAL

There are a variety of pithy insights regarding elections in democracies. (Of course “losing” an election in a totalitarian dictatorship usually means that the incumbent is strung from a lamp post or some more gruesome outcome directed by the “voters.”) But in democracies one can note:

- The Opposition doesn’t win an election; the government loses it.
- There is a half-life/fatigue factor in governments. The good ideas and vigorous leadership that generates victory/victories runs out of energy. The best performers decide to take their performance elsewhere, usually for better remuneration as well.
- With every decision the government makes, it angers some individuals or groups. Rarely does it make new friends. And enemies never forget while those you have benefitted tend to say, “What have you

done for me lately?”

Consequently, there are governments that years prior to the next election, any observer can say, “Roadkill, waiting for the street sweeper.”

Such was the case for the Tory government in 1993 when a perfect storm of economic recession hit the country (illustratively, the unpopular Free Trade Agreement had not delivered predicted prosperity). And the Tory government’s double-down effort to resolve the Canada-Quebec national unity conundrum failed twice, leaving all concerned more bitter and/or angry than if no effort had been made at all. Plus a particularly unpopular Goods and Services Tax (national sales tax) either irritated or infuriated a buyer with every purchase. Corruption had also moved beyond the politely accepted one-foot-in-the-trough level. And finally, leadership in the form of Brian Mulroney that grated Canadians who seem to believe leaders should be modest and dress in off-the-rack suits and with their wives affecting limited “middle-class” wardrobes, not designer specials. Eight years of Tories was more than enough.

The Tory victory over the Paul Martin-Liberal government in 2006 and subsequent Liberal challenges in 2008 and 2011 were also relatively easy to predict. In power since 1993, the Liberals “shelf life” had expired. Martin had the charisma of an arm chair; his supporters’ efforts to wrest Liberal Party leadership from Chretien were successful, but left enduring scars. Chretienites believed “Paul” was ungrateful and should have patiently (or impatiently) waited for Chretien to step down from power. And “Adscam” with its demonstrations of Liberal corruption in attempting to manipulate Quebec attitudes fatally damaged the Liberal brand in the province. Subsequent, electoral efforts in 2008 by Stephane Dion (inarticulate and impenetrable in both official languages) and 2011 by Michael Ignatieff (a long-time nonresident that Tories effectively depicted as “just visiting”) were ineffectual.

So it remains somewhat puzzling that the Harper-Tories lost the election. Most statistical indicators were positive. Canada, if not enjoying the very best of times, is doing very nicely thank you. The economy isn’t booming, but far from despair, having weathered the “Great Recession” better than any other G-8 country. Various polls indicate Canada’s population is essentially happy; the country is respected internationally and “punching above its weight” in international politico-military terms while adroitly not engaged in any foreign conflict generating body bags. Corruption is minimal—it’s useful to compare/contrast with African/Middle East kleptocrats to appreciate Canada’s minimal problems.

And Harper is intelligent and honest; his wife saves abandoned kittens; his children are squeaky clean so far as the perils of being teenagers are concerned. He has played the piano at the National Arts Center—and even written a well-regarded book on hockey.

But he is not loveable; much of the media actively despised him (and Harper reciprocated). One commentator observed that the media would rather “French kiss a public toilet” than cover another Harper government. In some ways he reminds a U.S. observer of President Richard Nixon as an introvert essentially unable to master the hail-fellow-well-met political mechanisms that are genetic second nature to most politicians. Harper is not unaware of his shortcomings and was quoted as wryly saying that he became an economist because he didn’t have the charisma to be an accountant.

The various political charges against the Harper/Tories regarding parliamentary manipulation, lack of “transparency,” and failure to respect democracy were technical at worst—and disregarded by the electorate in 2011. Even his most vituperative of his media loathers are not “disappeared.” But the media frenzy directed against him for years has had a tone that might be directed against a pedophile who ate puppies for breakfast.

The Essential Tory Problem

Canada is a left-of-center country; Canadians are “small L” liberals endorsing single-payer medical care, gun control, and multiculturalism. Government is a good thing, not an object of existential suspicion. Canadian politics consist

of three major parties: two of which (the Liberals and the NDP) complemented by the “Greens” comprise 60 percent of the electorate. At base, the Tories can count on approximately 30 percent of the electorate. Unless it can benefit from a circumstance in which the Liberals as Canada’s “natural governing party” have egregiously outstayed popular patience, the Tories must work desperately to divide the left-of-center electorate by focusing on special interests, wedge politics, fund-raising expertise, and more than a scintilla of good fortune.

In 2006, 2008, and 2011, the Tories carefully worked their formulations to generate victory. This time, the “tried and true” approach failed. So why?

--A very long campaign

Whining all the way, Canadians stumbled through a preternaturally extended, 78-day federal election campaign. Indeed, from listening to their laments, one would think that a society of 100-yard sprinters had been condemned to run a marathon. Such wailing and gnashing of teeth amused U.S. observers whose federal elections *are* marathons, beginning the moment the last vote is counted in the previous election. PM Harper deliberately chose a long campaign, apparently hoping it would provide additional time to discredit Trudeau’s competence; provide time for the scandalous trial of a Tory senator to slip from the public mind; put Canadians in a “feel good” mood following a pleasant summer, Canadian Thanksgiving, and the surge by the Toronto Blue Jays, while permitting the Tory’s edge in campaign funds to influence the electorate.

--Very close polls

The persistence until very near the campaign’s conclusion of extremely close polls among the Tories, NDP, and Liberals galvanized the electorate. It was “horse race” polling at its most seductive: every major party led at one juncture or another. And nobody was convinced that the polls, given their repeated failures in recent elections, were definitive. Even in the final week, with the NDP swooning to third place and Liberals buoyant, a last-minute surge in voter participation, youth vote, and/or “black swans” driving changes in voter intentions, suggested a Mulcair/NDP victory (at least with a plurality) was not impossible. The result was the highest voter participation since 1993 with 68.49 percent of the electorate voting. The under-35s came out to vote; old Liberals came back to the fold; NDP voters in 2011 found that they didn’t “respect” the party in the 2015 morning, aboriginals found their way to the ballot box; and there were not enough over-50 conservative voters to stem the tide.

--Trudeau learned by doing

The Liberals surged back-from-the-dead (scoring their worst modern era election totals in 2011). Liberal leader Justin Trudeau proved “just in time” for a party, which for several elections had more history than presence. Trudeau’s substantive résumé is slim, essentially based on having been born as the oldest son of Canadian political icon Pierre Elliot Trudeau, having “great hair,” and a photogenic wife/children. But his charisma is undeniable; he is the most exciting Canadian politician since his father a generation ago. And he learned enough to deflect the intensity of the “He’s not ready” Tory advertisements, which were head-shaking accurate six months ago when, as the old sobriquet goes, he opened his mouth only to change feet. Trudeau may not be the brightest bulb in the chandelier, but he is not an empty socket.

--The NDP implodes

In 2011 the election shock was an “orange wave” that swept through Quebec, giving the NDP 59 seats and propelling them into Official Opposition status. But Thomas Mulcair was not Jack Layton, and Mulcair was not able to rise above his previous history of being an angry, bearded socialist. Instead, attempting outreach to voters skittish about a socialist by adopting centrist policies (balanced budget, no tax increases), he puzzled traditional NDPers and opened a gap on his left that Liberals exploited. Moreover, he alienated his Quebec base by taking the principled but unpopular position that a woman could wear the face-concealing niqab when swearing allegiance to Canada in citizenship ceremonies—a position massively opposed by Quebecers.

Quebeckers proved again that their votes are rented not owned, and annihilated the NDP Quebec caucus, reducing it to 16 MPs.

The NDP collapse, however, equally damaged the Tory's careful calculations. The Tories made their political living by exploiting NDP-Liberal splits; they needed a strong NDP particularly in Ontario ridings to divide the left-progressive vote, permitting them to "come up the middle." Instead, the NDP was virtually wiped out in Ontario ridings they had long held (including former leader Jack Layton's constituency in which his widow was running).

Election Results—The Statistics

The only poll that counts is the one on election day. Results were not unprecedented, but certainly striking for the Liberals:

338 seats in the House of Commons of Canada 170 seats needed for a majority					
Turnout	68.5%				
	First party	Second party	Third party	Fourth party	Fifth party
Leader	Justin Trudeau	Stephen Harper	Tom Mulcair	Gilles Duceppe	Elizabeth May
Party	Liberal	Conservative	New Democratic	Bloc Québécois	Green
Last election	34 seats, 18.91%	166 seats, 39.62%	103 seats, 30.63%	4 seats, 6.04%	1 seat, 3.91%
Seats before	36	159	95	2	2
Seats won	184	99	44	10	1
Seat change	▲148	▼60	▼51	▲8	▼1
Popular vote	6,930,136	5,600,496	3,461,262	818,652	605,864
Percentage	39.47%	31.89%	19.71%	4.66%	3.45%
Swing	▲20.56pp	▼7.73pp	▼10.92pp	▼1.38pp	▼0.46pp

SOME OBSERVATIONS

Liberals. For the first time in a generation, the Liberals have representation in every province. Even "fortress Alberta" proved vulnerable and now has four Liberal MPs. They won every seat in the Maritime Provinces. This circumstance provides the Liberals with a wide array of potential talent on which to draw in constructing a Cabinet—far beyond their previous caucus.

Trudeau has the traditional challenge of any victor: promises to keep. Domestic commitments range from tax cuts (and increases); infrastructure funding; environmental action; pipeline management; placating disrespected public federal civil servants; mollifying the sensitivities of Muslim-Canadians; expanding support for “First Nation” aboriginals; addressing marijuana legalization; etc. He will be seeking to reverse nine years of Tory societal restructuring. And he will have to decide how to manage a Senate with over 20 unfilled vacancies when he jettisoned all Liberal senators from the official Liberal caucus.

Tories. Conservatives are down but not “out.” With 99 seats they have a strong base. Nor was the Liberal sweep all defining: 71 ridings were won by 5 percent or less and 23 ridings won by 1,000 votes or fewer. The Tories lost votes from their 2011 totals, but more importantly they failed to gain votes from an expanded 2015 electorate. They are closer to being a party of old, white males in the West than they were in 2011.

But unquestionably, they are in “rebuilding mode.” Harper had led the Tories since 2004 and reunited the splintered conservatives in the process. He has resigned as party leader, but remains as prime minister until Trudeau is officially sworn. He will continue to sit as an MP from Calgary—but for how long is unknown. There is no obvious replacement. Many of the most prominent MPs from earlier mandates departed over the past several years; several up-and-comers drowned in the Liberal tide. An interim leader will be chosen, but a permanent Tory leader may not emerge for a year.

NDP. The election conclusion can only be “not ready for prime time.” Mulcair’s leadership in parliamentary action and his ability to whip a “newbie” caucus into respectability generated media plaudits, but not popular acclaim. There is no immediate judgment regarding his future as party leader; he was not the “insider” choice originally, and his back has a collection of knives. More importantly, the NDP may have lost its way politically. Its swing to the center didn’t work. The Liberals appear to have seized the social welfare mantle at least for the next several years.

Bloc Quebecois. Ten seats—up from four in 2011, but still two short of official party status in Parliament. Long-time leader Gilles Duceppe, who came back to guide the Bloc in this election, again lost his prospective riding and resigned as BQ leader, leaving the Bloc’s status undetermined. And the prospects of Quebec sovereignty recede steadily into the never-never.

Greens. The Green leader Elizabeth May held her own seat, but that was all. Green vote percentage declined. But Ms May is a nice lady.

A LIBERAL GOVERNMENT AND THE UNITED STATES

Historically, the Liberals prefer the worst possible bilateral relationship with the USG that will not prompt direct retaliation. Reportedly, Trudeau never visited Washington until October 2013, a curious omission for any politically engaged Canadian. Although the sobriquet declares that “We are best friends, like it or not” under the Liberals ranging from Trudeau, to Chretien, to Martin, the “not” has frequently been ascendant. We will remain the world’s largest trading relationship with intimate connectivity across virtually every 21st century political, economic, social, cultural, and military activity. Nevertheless,...

Liberals have been skeptical of USG border security concerns. They believe we are paranoid when we should merely be neurotic about potential terrorist incursions.

Although they have endorsed the Transpacific Partnership accord, their concerns are more for union members and domestic industry than for private enterprise writ large. It is impossible at this juncture to determine the TPP’s future let alone the painfully negotiated trade agreement with Europe, but these do not appear to be topics that deeply engage Trudeau or to which he is definitively committed.

Defense/security policy will virtually reverse 180 degrees. Former Chief of Defense Staff General Rick Hillier labeled the years of previous Liberal government, “a decade of darkness.” A good bet would be for another black-as-night decade. The likelihood of an F-35 purchase is fleeting—perhaps not definitively canceled, but Trudeau has spoken of using funds saved on aircraft purchases to improve the navy. “Peacekeeping” is the Liberal mantra; we will never see a Liberal government making a major military commitment equivalent to that of the Tories in Afghanistan. Nor would we see a Liberal government military officer leading a NATO expedition against Libya.

And Trudeau has already announced that he will withdraw Canadian F-16s making anti-ISIS strikes in Iraq. Continued Canadian Armed Forces deployments and exercises in Ukraine, the Baltics, and “show the flag” naval exercises on Russia’s periphery is problematic.

Trudeau’s support for the Keystone pipeline (not necessarily a positive in Obama administration eyes) appears more tactical than committed. It appears to be a pawn available for sacrifice.

An early announcement suggests commitment to creating a bilateral environmental agreement. There is a plethora of proposals to address “global warming,” “climate change,” whatever; however, negotiating such along realistic lines is a challenge that has proved impossible to resolve. At least it has not appeared possible under the parameters conceived by environmentalists without inflicting severe damage on domestic economies. Trudeau may end by putting it in the “too hard” box after ritualized public relations pronouncements.

Washington will face a Liberal government in Ottawa for at least the next four years. We have endured such previously along with its commensurate steep learning curve. And in little more than a year, the Canadians will have a new U.S. administration with which to ponder our mutual challenges.

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