



## CANADA AT THE CUSP

By David T. Jones

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In February, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Tory Party celebrated having governed Canada as a minority for five years. This date set a record for minority government duration—a somewhat dubious accomplishment, but far better than being in Opposition. Obviously, the Tories would have much preferred to have a majority, but the current run of minority government reflects a circumstance in Canadian politics that while uniquely frustrating to politicians is less so to voting citizens.

Unsurprisingly, on this five-year anniversary, pundits disgorged a raft of commentary and analysis on Harper's accomplishments (or lack thereof, depending on the bent of the commentator). Likewise, they expounded on the circumstances and personalities involved in this ongoing minority.

Harper's record-setting mark also backs into the question of the next election. Officially, the law schedules the next election for October 2012, but with a minority government, it could happen when/if the government is defeated on a confidence vote. Such a circumstance forces all parties to be election-ready at every instance and provides a rich mine for speculation. As the federal budget is due to be presented on March 22, providing a proximate cause for such a defeat, it has prompted even more media frenzy. (The absence of diversion during the cabin-fever Canadian winter can also take credit.)

### FRAGMENTATION OF THE CANADIAN POLITY

The Canadian electorate is essentially left-of-center, devoted to a social welfare/tax heavy framework that more reflects European political-economic thinking than south-of-the-border politics. Conservatives (or what passes for “conservative” in Canada) comprise approximately 30 to 35 percent of the electorate; polling suggests that this figure is rock solid, but you don't get a majority government from a third of the voters (especially as most of them are located west of Ontario). The Tories' task is to move the numbers above their base to the approximately 40 percent range that will accord them a majority.

How do you win with 40 percent? You watch with a polite smile/smirk while the rest of the significantly more liberal portion of the electorate demolition derby each other. This portion of the Canadian spectrum now includes Liberals (25 percent); Socialists (New Democrat Party- 20 percent); Greens (about 10 percent); and Quebec separatists (Bloc Quebecois, about 10 percent, but confined to Quebec).

The frustration on the left is palatable. The Political Science 101 logic is obvious: combine enough of these shards to make a coalition that will jettison the Tories and elect a liberal/left government (looking at the UK Tory-Liberal coalition-of-convenience prompts anticipatory salivating). However, the Canadian impetus to fratricide has been a generation-long imperative. As one might imagine there are “principles” and “personalities” involved. Moreover, the Liberals still believe themselves to be Canada's “natural governing party.” Based on having held power about 70 percent of the 20th century; they continue to believe that a better leader, a Tory error, or an appropriate correlation of sun spots will bring back what is “natural.” The NDP is significantly more ideological than the Liberals—and believes that it is gnawing away at the Liberal constituencies and may take second place in the next election (so why compromise now)? The “Greens” have support that is a continent wide and an inch deep: they have yet to elect a federal Member of Parliament. And the Bloc Quebecois (BQ) has leveraged adroitly its Quebec dominance to get additional benefits for its province, having marginalized the Liberals and benefitted from Tory errors in dealing with Quebecers.

Liberals and NDP (supported by the BQ) machinated to defeat the Tories and replace the just-elected government with a coalition in December 2008. Such a coalition is standard for much of the world but would have been unprecedented for Canada. Harper, employing a variety of parliamentary tactics, managed to avoid a confidence vote, suspended Parliament, and rallied public opinion against any coalition that would depend on separatists to survive. He has continued to employ the

spectre of such a separatist-government coalition to illegitimatize efforts to unite the left.

## SO WILL THERE BE A NEAR TERM ELECTION?

Predicting the future is easy; predicting it correctly is not. "It depends" is usually the safe answer. But the honest answer is closer to the "nobody knows," or "those who know aren't talking and those who are talking don't know." And the driver behind the wheel is the prime minister; Stephen Harper has led his party three times into national elections, and each time he has improved Tory parliamentary standing. He now stands 12 seats short of a majority; his politico-social objectives are only possible with a majority, and he will make every effort to orchestrate such a majority. Yet when (and if) polling statistics will assure a majority is unpredictable. That happy circumstance is not currently the case—or at least not with the assurance that Harper would desire. The possibility of a majority appears—and disappears—like a chimera in the snow.

But in the "just in case" option, both government and opposition have been campaigning frenetically. The government hit the road during a late-February parliamentary recess to announce (or reannounce) various spending initiatives (cry "pork") in every village and town throughout the land. Simultaneously, they have hit the airwaves with attack ads, focused on the alleged carpetbagger elements of Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, who spent most of his adult life living and working outside Canada. ("Just visiting" and "He didn't come back for you" have been the themes.) The Opposition, with no largess to distribute to the public, has countered with itemized lists of Harper/Tory errors and sins of omission and commission.

Nevertheless, an enduring political aphorism is that Oppositions do not win elections; Governments lose them. Since, sooner or later, there must be an election, what are the Tories pluses and minuses?

## THE POSITIVES

**The Economy.** During this "Great Recession," the Canadian economy has outperformed the rest of the G-8. Harper has managed to provide enough pump priming to help the recovery while projecting reduced spending that could bring the budget into balance by 2015, rather than decades into the never-never. Canadian unemployment, historically 2 points higher than that of the United States, is now significantly lower (7.8 percent to 9.0+ percent). It has recovered all jobs lost during the Recession. GDP growth figures are respectable; interest rates/inflation remains low; the oil sands production has surged the Canadian dollar to rough parity with the U.S. dollar. These are "to die for" results despite the basic problem that ultimately the Canadian economy is locked to the U.S. economy; there are distinct limits for Canadian prosperity if the U.S. recovery continues to stagnate. In response, all the Opposition can do is mutter that they could have done better and/or spent differently with less debt. Nobody is buying that argument.

**Social Tranquility.** Quebec sovereignty remains a national nonissue as long as the provincial separatists are out of power. This "remission" from constitutional wars has endured since the Liberals gained provincial power in June 2003 and, despite current unpopularity, they do not have to face the electorate until late 2012—past the next federal election. And Harper, sometimes maladroitly, has attempted to mollify Quebeckers and keep the sovereigntist canine sleeping.

**Political Financing.** Tory fundraising has built on the small donor paradigm, creating a money-raising machine that gives the party great flexibility in orchestrating between-election publicity. The Tories have no need for big business financing (which earlier was made illegal by the Liberals in a decision that still appears "dumb as a bag of hammers," as one senior Liberal called it at the time). The tactical result is that the Tories have repeatedly unleashed attack ad campaigns putting the Liberals on the defensive and "defining" their leadership invidiously. Once a campaign begins officially, funding is legally limited, but beforehand, it is not.

**Solved the Afghanistan Conundrum.** The decade-long Canadian combat commitment to Afghanistan is ending in July. It was never popular; Afghanistan is far away, and there was no 9/11 imperative to galvanize popular support. The commitment was a good neighbor substitute for not having been one of the "willing" during the Iraq/Saddam Hussein war. Nevertheless, Canadians are leaving with honor; their mission is morphing into a training contingent with much reduced troop levels. This gives Canadians more of what they prefer: "peacekeeping" rather than "peacemaking," with much lower casualty counts. And the government has maneuvered adroitly. Having absorbed disproportionate casualties for its troop commitment and refurbished its depleted "good NATO ally" account, it has also given fair warning for its combat force reduction in a region where the U.S. government has ramped up its efforts, military and civilian, so gains will not be degraded.

**Harper's Leadership.** The general, albeit sometimes grudging, conclusion is that Harper ranks above his political competitors as a national leader. He slowly has blurred his media-created stiff and "scary" image and surprised observers by joining cellist Yo-yo Ma at a National Arts Center gala and playing the piano and singing "With a Little Help from My Friends." As a serious student of hockey, he also connects with average Canadian males. Essentially, Harper is an unlovable introvert, but he is scintillatingly smart; "clean" in the picture-book wife and children, no scandals imagery; immensely focused; operates a highly disciplined, loyal party and parliamentary caucus, and is a master of political tactics.

## THE NEGATIVES

**Harper's Leadership.** His strengths are his weaknesses. The tightly disciplined caucus generates charges of dictatorial over-control, a "my way or the highway" image. He listens to few, suffers fools badly, and (politely) considers much of the world to be fools. The scintillating intelligence is too often demonstrated in cutting rhetoric during parliamentary Question Period, making him appear "mean" rather than adroit. The mastery of political tactics can become "too clever by half." Since Harper is close to being a one-man show for the Tories, all errors by ministers and MPs end on his doorstep.

**Conservative Principles.** While hardly a "conservative" in U.S. terms, Harper has compromised his preferred positions first to be elected and now to govern. Nevertheless, his efforts to eliminate a "long gun" registry, support for tough-on-crime legislation, (relative) indifference to green/environmentalist importuning, emphasis on sales tax and business income tax cuts, and defense expenditures for pricey hardware—such as F-35 fighters—are easy targets. Internationally, he emphasized concern for human rights abuses in China (and didn't attend the Beijing Olympics) and strongly supports Israel—a move that was probably instrumental in losing a rotating seat on the UNSC for Canada.

And because he doesn't throw horse manure in the U.S. direction every time he picks up a pitchfork, he is unforgiven by those that remain convinced the North American Free Trade Agreement is a USG plot to beggar our neighbor while sucking their natural resources (oil/water) into our insatiable maw.

**The Foul Up Factor.** In each of the last three elections, there were instances when it appeared as if a Tory majority was possible; in each it has slipped away. Between elections, Tory support rises—and then drops with the latest political mishap (abetted to be sure by vigorous media criticism. Still the Tories and Harper serve into their own net all too frequently, ranging from a foreign minister who had a biker babe girlfriend (and left classified documents in her apartment) to other ministers who have had public hissy fits and/or found themselves on the wrong side of accurate parliamentary testimony.

Consequently, there is the sense of snatch-defeat-from-the-jaws-of-victory that hangs over the Tories. Plus, there is a further sense that the Canadian public remains suspicious of anything with a conservative label and is willing to bolt away from the party given the least excuse. They are willing if not happy to have Harper as leader—but not give him a majority.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE UNITED STATES?

Throughout the George W. Bush years and the first 18 months of the Obama administration, we have had a "no problems" relationship with Canada. Or, to be more precise, the problems have been of the technical economic and security nature that remain sourced to attitudinal differences, for example, protecting privacy vs. enhancing security or polite exchanges over trade differences (Canadian softwood lumber policy). With our foreign policy cup overflowing, it has been pleasant to have a northern neighbor that is looking after its interests but not convinced that it must tell us how Ottawa could better run U.S. foreign affairs.

Historically, Canadian Tories have been easier partners than Liberals. That "fit" has been best between Tories and Republicans, but works pragmatically with Democrats as well—particularly when the U.S. government is avoiding rather than seeking problems, as in continental missile defense or Arctic sovereignty questions juxtaposing Canadian claims that the Northwest Passage is Canadian territorial water vs. U.S. unequivocal commitment to maintaining it as an international waterway.

A Liberal government would be... different. Currently, the Liberals are campaigning against everything the Tories are doing. While it is the duty of the Opposition to oppose, Liberals express a traditional attitude against the United States. While Tories want the best relationship with the United States that will not cost them the next election, Liberals have always sought the worst bilateral relationship that would not prompt U.S. retaliation. Currently, they are arguing the proposed perimeter agreement to enhance North American security would threaten Canadian sovereignty. They plan to reopen the agreement to purchase F-35s. They are again skeptical about the free trade agreement. They demonize (Tory) political advertisements as "American style" politics. While some of the rhetoric doubtless is just rhetoric, one can never fully discount words.

Over 30 years ago, the Iranian revolutionaries seized U.S. diplomats and our Tehran embassy. Then Canadian ambassador Ken Taylor sheltered six U.S. diplomats in his residence, arranged for their escape using Canadian passports, and acted as de facto CIA station chief by providing Washington with detailed intelligence for months. The action was fully supported by a short-lived Tory government; then Liberal opposition leader, Pierre Trudeau, was unhelpful (even when the situation was explained to him). One can wonder whether a "prime minister" Trudeau would have directed Taylor to say "no room at the inn" and wonder equally just what a Liberal government would do in a comparable situation today.

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