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LETTER FROM

The Canadian Election That Changes It All

What Harper's Victory Means for Canada -- and the United States

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It is a credit to Canada that few outsiders pay much attention to what goes on there. Prosperity, stability, and centrist politics make for dull news. But now and then, something truly interesting -- even revolutionary -- takes place. The Tories' sweeping victory in this week's federal election marked just such an occasion.

Canada is a country that has benefited from risk aversion. Unlike their counterparts in the United States, Canada's large banks have long been well regulated; they issued no subprime mortgage loans and resisted the temptation to trade heavily in toxic securitized debt. In response to the global recession that began in 2008, Canada created a moderate stimulus program that led to a moderate deficit. Its soldiers have fought bravely in Afghanistan, and its jets participated in the recent military intervention in Libya -- with little fanfare abroad or violent dissent at home. Its Muslim population is generally moderate, wealthy, and well integrated. Canada is a land that attracts immigrants from all corners of the globe, yet has barely been touched by a clash of civilizations.

Politics, too, is a gentler business in this country than in the United States (even if Canadians endlessly wring their hands over "American-style" political attack ads). South of the border, the two-party system creates a relatively simple left-versus-right dynamic. Canadian politics are more complicated, because the parliamentary system allows smaller parties to gain regional footholds. Although the Liberals and the Tories usually claim most of the vote between them, the pro-union New Democratic Party (NDP) and the avowedly separatist Bloc Québécois (BQ) are also significant players. There is even a small Green party that, in parts of Canada's west coast, has split the vote even further.

The regionalism and ideology that overlay the political party system tend to be nuanced and unstable, which is why this week's federal election, held after the minority government collapsed, was the fourth one in the last seven years.

In recent years, the BQ's domination of Québec -- where it won about 50 seats in each of the 2004, 2006, and 2008 elections -- made it almost impossible for either Liberals or Tories to cobble together an outright 155-plus-seat majority. In U.S. political terms, that is roughly akin to a secessionist party dominating congressional and Senate elections in Southern states for the better part of a decade, denying either major party control of the legislature.

The resulting gridlock in Ottawa has had a souring effect on relations between majority-Francophone Québec and the largely Anglo remainder of the country. For decades, separatism has enjoyed the support of a lively minority of Québécois. In 1995, in fact, a close referendum almost split the country in two. In recent years, a sizeable number of Canadians in the rest of the country have started to grumble that they would be happy to grant the divorce.

Monday's historic federal election changed this dynamic; after two stints as a minority prime minister, Stephen Harper finally won majority control over the government, thanks to a massive surge in support in Ontario and the right-leaning western heartland. He won the campaign by touting economic stability and raising fears about the specter of an unholy coalition of leftists and separatists taking over if his party did not win an outright majority.

The separatist BQ, meanwhile, suffered a complete meltdown, losing all but four of its 49 seats. The party's longtime leader, Gilles Duceppe, didn't even win his own electoral district -- and resigned in his Monday night concession speech. None of this means that Canada's territorial integrity is assured: as in Belgium or Spain's Basque Country, separatism never truly dies. But the election results do show that a significant majority of Québec's voters prefer the economic stability that comes with a united Canada to the BQ's romantic nationalist project.

From a historical point of view, the most amazing result may have been the Liberals' loss. The Canadian Liberal Party ranks as one of the most successful political brands in the Western world. It held power for most of the twentieth century and led three consecutive majority governments, from 1993 to 2004. As the journalist David Frum once noted, the Liberals are "not a party built around certain policies and principles. They are instead what political scientists call a brokerage party, similar to the old Italian Christian Democrats or India's Congress Party: a political entity without fixed principles or policies that exploits the power of the central state to bribe or bully incompatible constituencies" -- French Québécois, Anglo Torontonians, new immigrants -- "to join together to share the spoils of government."

Yet the Liberal brand has been decaying for years. In 2004, the party won 135 seats under Paul Martin, who had been a fine finance minister under the previous prime minister, Jean Chretien, but seemed indecisive once he became prime minister himself. In 2006, Martin won just 103 seats, surrendering power to the Tories. In the 2008 election, the Liberals' bookish, Kyoto-obsessed sociology-professor candidate, Stéphane Dion, won only 77 seats. And now, in 2011, under the direction of another intellectual, Michael Ignatieff, the party lurched to its worst showing in history, 34 seats. That is exactly one third of the 102-seat total that the NDP, a more ideologically conventional left-wing party, won in this election.

Many are comparing the sudden power shift on the Canadian left to the British Labour Party's eclipsing of the Liberals in the early 1920s. Ignatieff (who, like Duceppe, lost his own electoral district) has already stepped down from the Liberal leadership. The party's effective leader, Bob Rae, publicly mused on election night that the time may be right for the Liberals to begin merger talks with the NDP.

Whether the parties merge, over the next four years or so Harper will be able to use his 166-seat majority to impose

an agenda of small government, lower taxes, loosened gun control, and stricter criminal justice. Canada will align more closely with the United States on a broad range of foreign policies, including border protection, the war against terrorism, and support for Israel. In the 1990s, Liberal governments made a great fetish of multilateralism, pacifism, and the moral authority of the United Nations. The events of 9/11, as well as the war in Afghanistan -- Canada's most significant military engagement since the Korean War -- have diminished these more European tendencies. Harper will continue the trend, bringing the country further back to its traditional role as the United States' and Britain's stolid sergent-at-arms.

Canada will also more aggressively develop and market its oil and gas exports, and, as the Middle East lurches from crisis to crisis, will be able to supply a greater percentage of the United States' energy needs. (Currently, the United States gets 12 percent of its energy from Canada.) Unlike the Liberals, who made a pretense of complying with the Kyoto Protocol, Harper does not even give lip service to carbon reduction.

The main worry about the recent election was that it would bring to power a government that would take a turn toward socialism or protectionism or one that was deadlocked by Québécois nationalists. Thanks to the election of a strong Tory majority, that will not happen anytime soon. This will be an exciting time in Canadian politics, as the country watches what the Tories will do with their first Parliamentary majority since the days of Brian Mulroney, the prime minister from 1984 to 1993, and the Liberals and BQ fight to resurrect their party brand. Indeed, the collapse of the Liberals and the BQ may set the stage for the emergence of a conventional two-party system contested by slightly right-of-center conservatives and slightly left-of-center "new liberals." The next time a Canadian election is called, there may well be fewer parties around to fight it.

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