

Canada's 2015 Federal Elections A Retreat from Conservatism?

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INTRODUCTION

The results of Canada's October 2015 federal elections expressed most of the population's weariness with the Conservative government of Stephen Harper, who had governed the country for nine years and nine months. Only 31.9 percent of the electorate voted for the Conservative Party, while 68.1 percent chose a different option, adhering to the ABC (Anything-But-Conservative) maxim. This included Liberal voters (39.5 percent), and those who cast their ballots for the New Democratic Party (19.7 percent), the Bloc Québécois (4.7 percent), the Greens (3.4 percent), and independents (0.8 percent).¹

These figures show a more progressive trend with regard to the Canadian citizenry's political preferences, reflected in

the plural, multicultural nature of its own society, where the center-left seems to be the majority option, as shown in election results for the last three decades. The officially center and left parties (the Liberal, New Democratic, and Green Parties) have concentrated 51.9 percent of the entire national vote in all nine federal elections held between 1988 and 2015.² For its part, since it first participated in federal elections in 1993, the Bloc Québécois has garnered an average of 9.8 percent of the vote.

These figures demonstrate an electoral trend against the recent years' conservative party options (the Reform Party, the Conservative Progressive Party, the Conservative Canadian Alliance, and today's Conservative Party of Canada); all of these together managed to win an average of 36.5 percent of the national vote in the same period (1988-2015).

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This reveals that there is a hard conservative voting base oscillating between 30 and 40 percent of the national electorate, undoubtedly strengthening its position in the face of the rest of the parties that usually divide the vote among them. This electoral practice of tactical—or useful—voting has generally benefitted the Liberal Party, traditionally considered the strongest contender against Canada’s conservatives. This is borne out by the average 33.8 percent of the national ballotting that they have managed to win in the last nine elections.

As I already mentioned, this shows that, in general Canada’s electorate is progressive. However, its political and electoral system shares characteristics that down through the years have cemented a profoundly conservative structure that prevents the implementation of new, innovative mechanisms, like coalition governments. At the same time, it reaffirms rigid electoral systems like awarding the win to the first past the post, which in practical terms turns the votes into parliamentary seats by electoral district, throwing all the votes to the winning candidate. At the same time, this reduces the rest of the candidates to nothing, as well as those who voted for them, even if they actually concentrate the majority of votes in that district, but divided among different candidates.³

In practical terms this means that if we consider that the Conservative Party won the 2006, 2008, and 2011 federal elections with an average of 37.8 percent of the popular vote, 62.2 percent of the population was governed for almost 10 years by a party they did not particularly empathize with—in fact, they were rather hostile to it.

CANADIAN NEOLIBERALISM SINCE THE 1980S

Ronald Reagan’s election to the U.S. presidency in 1981 and the consolidation of his English counterpart, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who governed from 1979 to 1990, imposed an overwhelming economic, political, social, and cultural model in the West; its main objective was to weaken the socialist option brandished by the Soviet Union from Eastern Europe. In the Americas, Canada and Mexico were the first countries that would use institutional measures to implement this free market economic model fostered by U.S. think tanks, which aimed at gradually dismantling the Keynesian paradigm put into practice in the West in the 1940s.

In the Canadian case, the crisis in oil prices in the late 1970s led politicians to debate about the relevance of continuing with a welfare model that was already being harshly

questioned by Washington. That was how positions openly critical of the state playing an active role in the economy began to take shape, suggesting it be replaced by private enterprise. In this context, the leader of the Progressive Conservative Party, Brian Mulroney, took office in Canada precisely in 1984, unfurling a discourse about reducing state intervention in public life and strengthening private enterprise in several areas.

After almost 10 years of government, Mulroney made way for his Liberal opponents, Jean Chrétien (1993-2003) and Paul Martin (2003-2006), who did not significantly contrast with him on economic and social issues. This was pointed out at the time by the left-leaning New Democratic Party (NDP), which denounced the similarities in the practices of Liberal and Conservative governments since the 1980s with its traditional slogan “Liberal, Tory, same old story.”⁴

Amidst the global whirlwind pressuring to decrease state attributions and slim down social programs, the Ottawa governments put their own neoliberal and neoconservative stamps on their power dynamics, attempting to arrive at a more balanced administrative design between a right wing that demanded less of a state role in the economy, and a left that demanded higher public spending. However, a gradual decline in investment in social spending and slimming down of public companies, like what happened with Petro-Canada in the 1990s, was clear.

Likewise, the firm efforts of the Paul Martin government in the first decade of the twenty-first century to not increase public spending, despite the need to establish parliamentary alliances with the New Democrats in order to stay in office, ended up costing him the 2004 federal elections. This is only one example that shows the conservative nature of Canadian politics in recent years, whether under Liberal or Conservative governments.

In this regard, Martin himself writes in his memoirs that, by the end of his government, the New Democrats were more interested in coming to parliamentary agreements to increase resources for public health (known as Medicare) than in any-

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thing else. And, as prime minister, he could not guarantee that, since it was an issue that had to be analyzed in detail before coming to any governmental decision.⁵

Precisely this apparent contradiction of the Liberals in office at the moment of favoring a series of proposals designed to further conservative trends on economic, political, and social issues came together with profound internal rifts that cost the Liberal Party the elections in 2006 and 2011. This ended by strengthening a new version of the Conservative Party and a prime minister, Stephen Harper, with a more conservative, reactionary government agenda than those promoted by his Tory and Liberal predecessors.

STEPHEN HARPER AND THE CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN CONSERVATIVE PARADIGM

The three electoral wins of the Conservative Party and its leader, Stephen Harper, in 2006, 2008, and 2011 expressed not only the victory of the more traditionalist compact sectors in the West, but also served to launch a government practice oriented to changing many of the country's traditional domestic and external foundations. This Canadian neo-conservatism fostered from the offices of the federal government in Ottawa included domestically a series of reforms and budget cuts with regard to migration and refugee status, education, retirement, labor, sustainable development, health, and scientific research, among others. This was done to fulfill the campaign promises of not increasing taxes, despite the clear need to increase public funds to cover social requirements.

Abroad, the failed 2010 attempt to obtain a seat on the UN Security Council may have been the paradigm for the international rejection of the Harper Conservative government's foreign policy, which was also followed by other polemical decisions such as Canada's withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol in 2011, its breaking-off of diplomatic relations with Iran in 2012, its unrestricted support for Israel despite interna-

tional criticism of its excesses against the Palestinian civilian population, and its disconcerting activism and confrontational discourse against Russia and in favor of the Ukraine. These are just some of the foreign policy positions that Canadian conservatism chalked up for itself in recent years.

NEW TIMES?

This profoundly conservative trend in Canada seems close to being overcome with the election of Liberal Justin Trudeau. However, we should understand that Trudeau will come up against a profoundly conservative political set-up that does not allow for new, more inclusionary parliamentary arrangements, but does allow for the operation of old, dysfunctional mechanisms like the Senate, which, by the way, in the twenty-first century, continues to be a non-elected body. He will also have to face a rigid Liberal Party structure, whose foundations are not designed to facilitate the arrival of new political actors into office, as was demonstrated when the party elites refused to form a coalition government in 2008 with the New Democrats to oust the Conservatives from office.

It is important to point out that coalition governments are perfectly legal and sanctioned by the Canadian parliamentary system. In fact, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand use them as an expression of openness and innovation. However, Liberal and Conservative leaders alike have insisted that this option is not well-received by the Canadian public, which is a profound contradiction: as we have seen, this society is certainly more progressive and open to change than its political class.

In this sense, we should ask ourselves what it is that Liberals and conservatives would lose if they formed coalition governments in the future. One probable answer is that perhaps they would not be willing to lose the monopoly of power that they have exercised for 150 years of uninterrupted governments of these two parties; a coalition government would emphatically mean the access of new political actors to power, in this case, the New Democratic left. If that happened, then, clearly the main loser would be the conservative movement that is firmly entrenched in Western Canada, and that, time after time, in moments of crisis, expands its presence and flows like a huge wave over the central and Atlantic provinces, even forming majority governments, although they are not representative of the majority, as happened with Stephen Harper from 2006 to 2015.

And it is precisely this political traditionalism determined to maintain the old way of functioning of the Canadian electoral system that puts in the forefront the first-past-the-post system (single-member district elections), benefitting the political parties with the most resources and presence on a national level. This makes it impossible for new actors to come onto the stage, and at the same time limits voters' choices to two or at most three real options at the ballot box. Naturally, this forces the citizenry to accept a system that, in essence, offers limited real possibilities for representation.

SOME FINAL CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE CHALLENGES FACING TRUDEAU

Despite his majority victory in the recent elections, it remains a fact that the majority of the House of Commons may not be enough for Trudeau to be able to fulfill a series of promises made before and during his election campaign. Why? The profound systemic changes he proposed would put in check many of the old foundations of the country's political system, such as, for example, replacing the first-past-the-post system with another, more representative one.⁶ This proposal that Trudeau made in mid-2015 would change the face of Canada's political system. The big question would be, how is he going to do it? Seemingly it would not be enough to have the parliamentary majority and a large part of civil society on his side; fulfilling this promise would effectively mean weakening his own party in future elections, since Canada's current electoral system favors so-called "false majorities." As an example of this, suffice it to point to the fact that today, 39.5 percent of the national vote gave the Liberal Party 54.4 percent of the seats in the lower house, a majority.

The reform of the Senate is another front Justin Trudeau opened up a year before the election campaigns began. As prime minister, he will have to push through a profound reform to make picking senators more efficient by committing them more to their constituencies and the country's policies. However, because of the conservative institutional trend in Canada, the reform Trudeau is proposing does not formally include actually electing them, which further feeds this Canadian propensity toward pragmatic conservatism.

At the end of the day, Trudeau's victory represented a defeat of a conservative—and to great extent, reactionary—movement that former Prime Minister Harper launched. It should also be pointed out, however, that the October 2015

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election results also constricted the parliamentary weight of Canada's most progressive left, the NDP, by returning them to their traditional third place in the House of Commons. This step backward for the left in Parliament dispelled the prospect of a series of ambitious reforms that included the abolition of the Canadian Senate.

To conclude, we can say that Canada is a country with a progressive, open, multicultural society, but a rigid, conservative political system. It is worth asking, then, if Canada can stop being conservative country. Would Justin Trudeau be willing to go down that road? And if he is, can he make it to the end?

Time will tell for Mr. Trudeau. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Parliament of Canada, "Electoral Results by Party," <http://www.parl.gc.ca/parlinfo/compilations/electionsandridings/ResultsParty.aspx>, accessed in November 2015.

² This data does not include the Bloc Québécois since its electoral niche is limited to the province of Quebec; in addition, its ideological positions are not center-left; rather, it opts for nationalist, sovereignty-oriented positions, whose complexity deserves an analysis all its own.

³ Different classic studies have analyzed this particular trend in parliamentary democracy. Outstanding among them are those by Maurice Duverger and Jacques Chastenet, who have dealt with these and other systemic characteristics of parliamentarianism of British origin in their works. For more information, see Maurice Duverger, *Los partidos políticos* (Mexico City: FCE, 2012), and Jacques Chastenet, *El parlamento de Inglaterra* (Buenos Aires: Argos, 1947).

⁴ Tom Flanagan, *Harper's Team. Behind the Scenes in the Conservative Rise to Power* (Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), p. 187.

⁵ Paul Martin, *Hell or High Water: My Life In and Out of Politics* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart-Penguin Random House, 2008), pp. 436-437.

⁶ Rosemary Barton and Trinh Theresa, "Justin Trudeau Vows to End 1st-Past-the-Post Voting in Platform Speech," CBS News, June 16, 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/justin-trudeau-vows-to-end-1st-past-the-post-voting-in-platform-speech-1.3114902>, accessed in November 2015.