

Canada's Election, North America, and Mexico Breaking the Circle?

Imtiaz Hussain*
Jorge A. Schiavon**

In the name of conservatism, Canada's May 2, 2011 election could revolutionize domestic and foreign policy, dragging Mexico into a different ball-game: cozy NAFTA-driven Mexico relations are unlikely to be abandoned by Canada, but will probably not receive the priority of previous years as Canada seeks a more assertive global role. An assessment of the broad electoral theme, unresolved issues, and perceived foreign policy impacts suggests Canada's emerging identity diminishes the space for Mexico and any role Mexico might play in a reconfigured North America.

THEME OF THE ELECTIONS

Conservatism, rather than party ideology, values, and interests evidently became the dominant electoral theme: the Conservative Party (CP) flirted with the 40-percent vote barrier for the first time this century;¹ Steve Harper became the third Canadian prime minister (after Sir John A. Macdonald, and John Diefenbaker) to rack up three consecutive election victories;² and he attracted the second highest number of CP votes (5.8 million) after Brian Mulroney in 1984 (6.3 million). Conversely, the Liberal Party (LP), by achieving its lowest parliamentary representation (34 seats) and proportion of voters (20 per cent),³ is no longer even the Official Opposition.

Party ideology, values, and interests became unimportant for several reasons. First, since this was the third election in five years, voters were not just "tired" of fulfilling a duty, but also leery that all their input could produce was a minority government, twice over, downgrading major policy decisions



A polling station in Vancouver.

from both deliberations and legislation. To avoid another deadlock, they punished the Bloc Québécois (BQ) and the LP for disconnecting with their constituencies.⁴ In short, they voted against ideologies—for example, French nationalism did not play a part—, interests—no single policy issue drove the election—, and values—the "Liberal" flock was not only divided, but this division also mattered: in 20 Ontario ridings, the LP and New Democratic Party had enough votes to collectively defeat the newly dominant CP.⁵

Second, driven to champion "sovereignty" when the 1987 Meech Lake Accord was not ratified in 1990, the BQ simply did not graduate out of its "sovereignty" rationale by the 2011 election.⁶ This is not to say French separation has become a dead issue,⁷ but since the BQ first participated in elections in 1993 and won 54 seats (becoming a balancing legislative force), it seems to have done better "when it didn't talk too much about sovereignty."⁸ With merely 4 seats after Canada's forty-first election, the BQ is no longer an officially recognized party; but that it lost 45 others, mostly to the NDP, reflects less a lost cause than what Peggy Curran attributes to the "school of fish syndrome": sudden changes of direction typical of swimming fish.⁹ Quebec's political atmosphere was

* Researcher at the Iberoamerican University International Studies Department.

** Researcher at the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE) International Studies Division.

already reeling with complaints of “Bloc bourgeois,” and its defeated leader, Gilles Duceppe, paid the price of a Québécois “suspicion”: “holding political power in Ottawa.”¹⁰ Wanting to warn Duceppe and the BQ by choosing Jack Layton and his New Democratic Party (NDP),¹¹ Quebec voters, however, did not fully anticipate how the tyranny of small decisions would leave Quebec out in the Ottawa cold.

Third, the continued LP leadership crisis meant the election was lost even before it began. It was not just Michael Ignatieff’s esoteric Harvard profile and inability to connect,¹² but inherent divisions—Finance Minister Paul Martin backstabbing Prime Minister Jean Chrétien—¹³ exposed the LP as a collection of either sticky-footed veterans and political acrobats, or fame-seeking rookies operating against a backdrop of entrenched corruption, in either case completely oblivious of mainstream voters. Many mainstream supporters substituted center-left values, ideologies, and interests for pure centrist preferences (much like Bill Clinton and Barack Obama did with the Democratic Party after the first mid-term election they faced), moving in a conservative direction, dictated no less by a relatively healthy economy. At least three LP pillars crumbled: its solid and critical grip of Quebec seats (lost in the constitutional battles of the 1960s and 1980s);¹⁴ advocating strong nationalism (undercut by LP unpopularity in the west and a secular sentimental public shift against big government); and flexibility from being a centrist brokerage party (Chrétien’s shift to the right began breaking this).

Fourth, crisis, another secular development, is not only not new in Canadian electoral politics, but it typically followed and produced stability: Lester Pearson’s weak prime ministership was sandwiched between the solid tenures of Diefenbaker before him and Trudeau after, Kim Campbell’s in the early 1990s between Brian Mulroney’s and Jean Chrétien’s, and the five years of downwardly spiraling minority governments after Chrétien produced the 2011 electoral outcome. Like Trudeau’s Third Option, multiculturalism, Foreign Investment Review Agency, and National Energy Policy, among other policy shifts, as well as Mulroney’s U.S. free-trade, Harper

gets the chance to both restructure Canada and reverse once and for all Canada’s Liberalist symbol.

Finally, circumstances also chipped in. Canada weathered the 2007-2009 recession better than any other industrialized country, especially since it relied less on bail-outs, recorded more trade surpluses than deficits, and enjoyed profits from escalating oil prices. These gains had to be preserved—better yet, institutionalized—regardless of political proprietorship. Yet, with the country’s dwindling international profile, caused no less by fickle minority governments, more Canadians sought a game-changing solution in 2011 (61.4 per cent of voters turned out) than in 2008 (58.8 per cent).¹⁵ Partisanship could not have been the driving reason behind this, but it became one of the biggest winners.

Past patterns predict stability: Harper has time on his side, understands the political winds better than other political leaders (including how and when to use character assassination as a political tool), and does not have to fear either the LP or BQ.

UNRESOLVED ISSUES

Now that the historical rivals/threats have been sidelined, does a majority Canadian government imply stand-still politics? Hardly, since at least five vectors constantly challenge the status quo. First, Canada’s multiculturalism cannot coexist forever with an ascendant national conservative mood. Harper’s argument that the typical Canadian is a conservative (rather than a liberal) belies the country’s heterogeneous gene. Richard J. F. Day observed at the turn of the last century, without even bringing parties into his analysis, that the schism between what he called “Selves” and “Others” “always produced *resistance*” [italics in the original], beginning half a millennium ago with the French, then the “Savages,” and more recently with “Immigrants.”¹⁶

It is hardly likely in a polemical post-9/11 era complicated further by incorrigible developments. On the one hand, Canada’s shift to deploying combat troops in Afghanistan from its familiar post-World War II peacekeeping role coincides with increasingly stifling conditions for Muslims in Canada, challenging Canada’s multicultural claim. On the other hand, creeping resentment across the Muslim world climaxed in the October 2010 U.S. Security Council vote for non-permanent members when Canada’s almost automatic entry was denied, in part, by Muslim countries unhappy with Harper’s unqualified support for Israel. While the CP may have pen-

Canada’s forays abroad illustrate why widening North America to include Mexico is no longer a Canadian priority: for Harper, Mexico is dispensable.

U.S. interests have become so diffused globally that Canada alone cannot demand the revival of a historical special relationship, especially since the United States is not always on the same page as European countries or Canada.

etrated the LP's "Fortress Toronto" through *chai* parties with immigrant communities in the election, that is small comfort for Toronto's legendary foreign doctoral and engineering students who make their livings as taxi-drivers.¹⁷

Second, business cycles rarely, if ever, remain static for too long, and since Canada has had it relatively good economically,¹⁸ some market-driven correction is overdue. By raising social costs and negatively impacting some social groups, the CP's hands-off, balanced-budget, and deficit-free economic goals could complicate matters.

Third, the LP gets a long time to cultivate new leaders, just as the BQ finds the space to either reinvent itself or await voter reconsideration. Reducing the CP to a minority government would be one step in the right direction for the LP/BQ, but both parties have risen from the ashes before, suggesting they cannot be written off just yet.

Politics-as-usual is a fourth factor. Harper also has a plateful of contentious domestic issues to resolve on the basis of his—or his party's—preferences (gun-control, Senate reform, judicial appointments, eliminating voting subsidy, and so forth), but alienating too many groups sets the condition for the next election to unravel as the perfect political storm. Sidelining Quebec might become a Pyrrhic victory, as could the rapprochement with First Nations,¹⁹ but with the Green Party's first parliamentarian (Elizabeth May) and 75 other women parliamentarians (of whom only 29 belong to the CP),²⁰ the House of Commons might reflect less commonality than one might expect.

Finally, since all stable governments in the past were anchored in a significant foreign policy pursuit (Trudeau's Third Option and anti-nuclear proliferation; Mulroney with the Canadian-U.S. Free Trade Agreement; and Chrétien with NAFTA), Harper's overloaded foreign policy plate offers him both chances and constraints: having combat troops in Afghanistan displaces Canada's peace-keeping tradition; Mexican refugees and the resultant visa elimination fed into Canada's shrinking North American view from the trilateral NAFTA-based configuration into the familiar Canada-U.S.

bilateralism; Harper's bilateral U.S. trade preference and perimeter defense with the United States further sidelines Mexico; full-fledged Harper support for Israel launches an uncharted foreign policy era of "division" over "unison"; and Harper's environmental policy choices, among others, generate more grumbles than contentment.²¹

EXPECTED SPILLOVERS: FOREIGN POLICY DOMAIN

Angelo Persichilli notes how Harper "has the credibility" to "strengthen Canada's position in the world" on the basis of "good relations" with not just the United States (commented by Barack Obama's "laid-back approach"), but also South American and Asian countries; and "respect" in Europe.²² Yet, there are not only problems on each of these fronts, but the problems are also becoming more entrenched than the opportunities.

U.S. interests have become so diffused globally that Canada alone cannot demand the revival of a historical special relationship, especially since the United States is not always on the same page as European countries or Canada ("Arab spring" responses, Arctic claims, Middle East peace positions are examples). Similarly, though Harper's institution-building "Americas strategy" against drug trafficking and promoting Canadian trade and mining was resuscitated by his August 2011 visits to Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Honduras, it neglected Mexico, reaffirming his bilateral over trilateral North American preference.²³ On another front, Chinese mining companies seem poised to challenge their Canadian counterparts across Asia, possibly in Latin America.

Canada's forays abroad illustrate why widening North America to include Mexico is no longer a Canadian priority: in the absence of vigorous global U.S. foreign policy commitments under President Barack Obama, Canada wants to step up to the leadership plate drawing upon its "kinder, gentler" past reputation. But the way recent domestic divisions find foreign policy expressions explains Harper's dispensability fix: the United States is indispensable; Mexico is dispensable.

MEXICO'S FIX

Canada's evolving policy-making preferences eventually become a Mexican fix. First and most egregious is the 2009

refugee-no visa disjuncture: Mexico was made a lesser partner, and portraying Mexicans in the Canadian media as low-wage-job-seeking illegal infiltrators disconnected with mainstream interactions cultivated over the 15 NAFTA years. Second, the unhindered growth of Canadian businesses under a conservative agenda, with, for example, over 2 000 mining companies in Mexico alone, revives the *dependencia* mentality which one would have thought was buried with the free trade agreements. Third, the environmental subjugation this entails reaffirms a *have-have not* Canada-Mexico relationship: Canada's more acute environmental instincts invite remedial efforts against abuse, for example, against tar-sand oil exploitation—not that this will be stopped under a conservative agenda—but Mexico's relaxed environmental instincts invite only more business exploitation. Fourth, Canada playing the very game with the rest of the world that it hopes the United States will not play with Canada (prioritizing security interests over trade and economic expansion) only widens the gap with Mexico,

Mexican refugees and the resultant visa elimination fed into Canada's shrinking North American view, moving from the trilateral NAFTA-based configuration toward the familiar Canada-U.S. bilateralism.

where economic betterment is not only the top priority but also the dominant relational vehicle with Canada. There is the final and deepest underlying gap: whereas Canada is explicitly making Mexico a reversible economic partner (by seeking markets and raw materials not just in Mexico but worldwide), Mexico has not even explored alternatives to Canada.

By the time of its own elections in 2012, Mexico might do itself a favor by following U.S. and Canadian steps: finding global partners to strengthen regionalism. **NM**

NOTES

¹ Patrick Brethour, "Conservative majority: With gains across Ontario, Tories find stability," *Globe and Mail*, May 3, 2011, p. A1. All newspapers listed are Canadian.
² Oddly, the CP got 39.6 per cent of all votes, but 54 percent of all seats. See Kathryn Blaze Carlson, Natalie Alcoba, Charles Lewis, and Adam McDowell, "Elections 2011: 10 lessons to learn from Canada's elections," *National Post*, May 4, 2011, pp. A2-A3.

³ The lowest proportion of the popular vote won by the Liberals was 22.67 per cent, in 1867. Margaret Wente, "Political implosion: Is this Ignatieff's Kim Campbell moment? A failure to connect: The wrong man, in the wrong party, at the wrong time," *Globe and Mail*, April 30, 2011, p. F9.
⁴ Future "leaderitis" predicted in "Liberal Party: Restored masonry for the Grits," *Globe and Mail*, editorial, May 25, 2011, p. A18.
⁵ Adam Radwanski, "Conservative strategy: Vote splitting aside, Tories dominant in Ontario," *Globe and Mail*, May 4, 2011, p. A4.
⁶ "Profound change comes to the electoral scene," *The Gazette* (Montreal), editorial, May 4, 2011, p. A18.
⁷ On this point, see Jane Jacobs, *The Question of Separatism: Quebec and the Struggle over Sovereignty* (Montreal: Baraka Books, 1980).
⁸ Philip Authier, "Sovereignty remains, but will Bloc? Bravado is gone, but Barbot says party will be back," *The Gazette* (Montreal), May 4, 2011, p. A3.
⁹ Peggy Curran, "Experts struggle to explain size of shift: A sea change: Electorate turned like 'school of fish'," *The Gazette* (Montreal), May 4, 2011, p. A6.
¹⁰ Graeme Hamilton, "'Dirty' to be in power in Ottawa: That's why Quebecers voted for teens and absent anglos" [sic], *National Post*, May 4, 2011, p. A8. Reg Whittaker takes the BQ to task for killing "all the reflexes that help sustain a federation: the will to exchange, negotiate and compromise, the capacity to understand other people's viewpoints, the capacity to give and take." See his "Liberal dominance: Is the government party over?" *Globe and Mail*, May 16, 2011, p. A11.
¹¹ Barrie McKenna, Ingrid Peritz, and Julian Sher elaborate: "After the election: Change: Quebec's flirtation with NDP just a test," *Globe and Mail*, May 4, 2011, p. A9.
¹² James Mennie, "Liberals down, but history says they're not out: With leader gone, rebuilding can start," *The Gazette* (Montreal), May 4, 2011, p. A6.
¹³ Patrick Gossage, "Liberal election debacle was years in the making: Party still plagued by infighting and outward methods," *Toronto Star*, May 25, 2011, p. A21.
¹⁴ Whittaker, op. cit.
¹⁵ Aaron Derfel, "Little evidence that hordes of young voters flocked to polls," *The Gazette* (Montreal), May 4, 2011, p. A7.
¹⁶ Richard J.F. Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 5.
¹⁷ Gloria Galloway, "Tories storm Liberals' last Ontario redoubt: Liberals' once-impregnable Fortress Toronto battered down as Tory tide washes across province," *Globe and Mail*, May 13, 2011, p. A9; and Joe Friesen and Julian Sher, "How the Tories changed immigrant 'askers' into party supporters," *Globe and Mail*, May 4, 2011, p. A13.
¹⁸ See Doug Palmer, "Recovery rolling as U.S., Canada trade takes off," *National Post*, May 12, 2011, p. FP3.
¹⁹ Two aborigines joined Harper's 39-strong cabinet: Peter Penashue (Intergovernmental Affairs) and Leona Aglukkaq (Health). See "Cabinet: Aboriginal Canadians: From symbol to hope," *Globe and Mail*, editorial, May 19, 2011, p. A20.
²⁰ Anna Mehler Paperny, "House of Commons: 76 women in Parliament is 'a good start': For first time in Canadian history, 25 per cent of seats in House of Commons filled by women," *Globe and Mail*, May 4, 2011, p. A7.
²¹ Richard Blackwell, "Environment: Green energy sector not cheering Harper majority: Industry executives say they don't expect government to show leadership on renewable power—but hope for indirect support," *Globe and Mail*, May 4, 2011, p. B7.
²² Angelo Persichilli, "Foreign focus for next four years," *Toronto Star*, May 29, 2011, p. A15.
²³ Campbell Clark, "Our Time to Lead: Foreign Policy Series" "Solid Americas strategy promises big rewards: Ottawa must commit resources and efforts, starting with a push to secure stability and growth in Mexico," *Globe and Mail*, May 24, 2001, p. A13; and Jennifer Ditchburn, "Harper's Americas strategy falling short: internal review," *The Canadian Press*, March 16, 2011, <http://ca.news.yahoo.com/harpers-americas-strategy-mucho-talk-poco-action-20110316-1>.