



Sucesión y balance de poder en Canadá entre gobiernos liberales y conservadores. Administraciones y procesos partidistas internos (1980-2011).

(Succession and Balance of Power between Liberal and Conservative Governments in Canada.

Administrations and Internal Party Processes)

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This book offers a very broad, detailed panorama of the Canadian political system since its formation, as well as of the behavior of its two main political parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, until our time. This is why it begins with a broad explanation about Canadian federalism, fundamental for understanding the pillars that support this political system and the actions of these two main political forces.

In the first place, the author identifies the characteristics of the Canadian political system in order to understand how the political platforms and actions of Canada's two most important parties are determined. Secondly, he describes and analyzes in detail their evolution, above all concentrating on a series of worldwide transformations in the 1980s, a period characterized by the preeminence of neoliberal economic policies that impacted both of them. This allows us to understand their relatively consensual political behavior until 2006, when the Conservative Party broke a series of unwritten rules that ensured a certain degree of harmony between them.

One of this book's hypotheses is that both Liberal and Conservative groups in the oligarchy have managed to amalgamate their values around relatively undifferentiated government practices; that is, they have shared power oriented toward a policy of the center, allowing them to replace each

other with fewer complications. This shows that, at bottom, Conservatives and Liberals often coincide in their practices, even if they have different styles, which has led to governmental actors, but not values and principles, being renovated. The intention of this, which generally speaking provides widespread social benefits, has been to maintain the unity of a very large, multicultural country, but above all, to forge a common front to deal better with the United States. The author posits that this way of working continued without major changes until Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper took office and consolidated his position.

To understand the current situation and the changes in Canadian policy after his taking office in 2006, the book studies the origins of Canada's federalism. Understanding the federal system not only makes it possible to understand how political life operates, but also how the two first political parties, the Conservatives and the Liberals, were founded, the dynamics of their functioning, and the political play between the two. This allows for a better understanding of how the power elites are formed, their actions since Canada gained independence from the British Crown, the way they maintain their broad power in the federation, and how through these mechanisms they have managed to keep the country united.

The detailed analysis of both parties' most outstanding successes and mistakes and the way they act once in office shows that their values, identities, and platforms are based on very old government achievements, at the same time that their styles of government tend to be moderate and identified with centrist, not radical, values. This helps us understand how, despite the fact that they have different ideologies, both parties seem highly conservative. The author explains that in the Canadian federalist political system, power is paradoxically enormously centralized, although this is seen more as an advantage than not.

Santín Peña puts forward the idea that when Stephen Harper took office, he made it clear that the rules established by the two parties had begun to change. The prime minister has implemented policies different from those of the parameters set up before by these two political forces, ideologically linked to the extreme right, and that contravene central values of Canadian society. Among them are his environmental policy, the prolonged Canadian military presence in Afghanistan, and a migratory policy that is in some ways exclusionary. It is important to note that these three issues used to be one of the things Canada was most proud of and to a certain extent represented a point of unity among the provinces. However, they were not only that: they were also a trait that distinguished it from the United States.

Originally from Ontario and a former Alberta oil worker, Stephen Harper has decisively supported the development of the oil industry in that province, which extracts oil from tar sands using a highly polluting extraction process. This has meant that Canada has had to make large compensation payments to international bodies for contravening the Tokyo Protocol with its greenhouse gas emissions. Finally, in 2012, it withdrew from the protocol to avoid making the high payments due. Despite this, Canadian society assured Harper an uninterrupted term of office from 2006 to 2015, which is surprising given his extreme rightwing affiliation and polemical personality, something unique in Conservative Party history.

Former Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's term was one of the longest of any Liberal Party government. But Harper's case can be explained in part because of his tax cuts, which, of course, have been well-received by the public. In addition, we should remember that during the 2008 economic crisis that shook the United States and the world, despite being the United States' first trade partner, Canada was not so very hard hit, above all due to its traditional caution in financial markets.

Despite this not being something that could be traced specifically to Harper, the citizenry did not feel that its prime minister had acted badly in the face of the crisis and continued to give him a vote of confidence.

He is recognized as the restorer and the great patriarch and defender of the old, traditional, and most conservative values that have expanded across all of Canada, the effect of what the author calls "a profound conservative revolution," which consistently fends off progressive policies.

One of the book's conclusions is that, once the Harper era comes to a close, the Canadian political system might go back to its well-worn road of cooperation between Liberals and Conservatives, and therefore gradually restore the balance of power achieved by the two groups over more than a century and a half of Canada's political existence.

This end could be marked by several issues. The first is the discontent around environmental matters linked mainly to extracting oil from Alberta's tar sands: the production of an equivalent of one barrel of oil emits three to five times more greenhouse gas than extracting conventional oil. In addition, these operations will have flattened about 800 square kilometers of boreal forest or taiga; the Athabasca River will have been contaminated; and several kinds of fatal illnesses linked to this contamination of the aquifer will have been visited on nearby towns. This is all linked to the construction of the TransCanada oil pipeline, the most important in North America, which allegedly can transport 400 million barrels of oil a year. The second issue is public health; this is not new on Canada's agenda, but it has recently become more important and a matter for more concern among the public.

Finally, the Liberal Party seems to be paving the way to regaining office after its terrible defeats, marked among other things by internal division and corruption scandals during its most recent administrations. However, we will have to await the decision of the citizenry, since 2015 is a federal election year.

In conclusion, I should add that few works in Spanish analyze Canadian politics, and fewer still its political system in the detailed way this book does. Reading it gives us a broad and accurate vision of political life in Canada through two of its main pillars, the Liberal and Conservative Parties. ■■

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