

Canada

Post-Election Commentary

It is only a few months ago that the then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney - the man Canadians loved to hate, stepped down as the leader of the incumbent Progressive Conservative government and Kim Campbell took his place. Subsequently on October 25th Canadian voters went to the polls to elect a new government, decimate an old one, and produce a completely new combination of parliamentary forces. Conventionally the election race has been between the Progressive Conservatives, and the Liberals. But this year after a campaign dominated by the massive federal deficit, health care, a helicopter deal, and serious blunders in the Conservative campaign, the political landscape of this country has changed dramatically. In brief the main parties and their policies were and are as follows:

Progressive Conservative (PC)

Eliminate deficit in 5 years, reform social programs. Encourage private sector, removal of trade barriers (via the North American Free Trade Agreement -NAFTA).

Liberals

Job creation, public works programme, maintenance of social programmes, support nationally regulated health care system. Renegotiation of some parts of NAFTA.

New Democratic Party (NDP)

Larger scale job creation, scrap current sales tax, investment in formative businesses. Fund raising by 14% corporate tax. National child care programme. Maintain universal health care. Oppose NAFTA.

Reform Party of Canada

Eliminate federal deficit in 3 years, cut taxes, halve immigration. \$19 billion spending cuts. Declared intention to cut some social programmes. Increase provincial autonomy on health care. No candidates in Quebec.

Bloc Quebecois (BQ)

Main policy, separation of Quebec from Canada. Support more provincial autonomy over health care. New income support programmes, transfer of funds to job creation. Candidates only in Quebec.

The seats held in the House of Commons by each party both before and after the election were as follows (excluding a few independent candidates):

he total collapse in the Conservative vote has been attributed to several factors, including general disillusionment with their performance in office, the introduction of a new sales tax, and continuing constitutional wranglings over the last few years. But there seems to be little doubt that in large part the final magnitude of the damage has been due to a disastrous election campaign.

There were two really memorable screw ups in the PC campaign which are likely to be remembered for a long time, and made a massive impact in the media. Number one was Ms. Campbell's promise to "completely re-think Canada's Social Security", although the 47 day election campaign was "not the time to get involved in very, very serious discussions" on the subject. It was a disastrous statement, leaving many voters both shocked and insulted, and was seized on immediately by the Liberals, the PC fell 12 points in the polls. The other miscalculation came very close to the election as the PC campaign became increasingly desperate. A TV advertising campaign showed very unflattering pictures of Liberal leader Jean Chretien, showing off the paralysis in one side of his face. On the soundtrack people declared how they would be "embarrassed" if he were to become Prime Minister. There was immediate media outrage, the adverts were stopped, but it was close to the election, and it was too late. (Interestingly some media reports have suggested that the strategy was starting to show positive results in the polls). I was intrigued to see that both of these events were ignored in an editorial in the October 27th Financial Times. It pointed instead to Ms. Campbell's warning that unemployment was unlikely to improve before the end of the century as the decisive feature in the campaign. This also allowed it's editorial writer to conclude that the major Conservative error was telling the truth.

The results of the election are especially bewildering because of the geographical distribution of the different groups, with the opposition split almost equally between two largely regional parties. The BQ is based only in Quebec whereas Reform got practically all its support in the two western provinces (British Columbia and Alberta), and ran no candidates in Quebec. Half the Liberal seats came from Ontario, the rest being fairly evenly distributed across the country.

Some observers are predicting that the changes to come will not match the campaign rhetoric, because of the financial restrictions the new government must face. Skepticism has been expressed about Chretien's ability and desire to renegotiate NAFTA, partly because of a strong free trade wing in the Liberal party. As to constitutional fallout from the new picture, outsiders apparently see the Quebec vote as protest rather than a victory for separatism. Some see Reform as the greater threat to Canadian unity, forcing a more rigid development of the federation, and giving the BQ new grievances to exploit.

Certainly now that Chretien has appointed his cabinet and canceled a controversial

helicopter deal begun under the Tories, the pundits have more to work on. Native leaders are disappointed that there is no aboriginal representation in the cabinet and it has also been noted that the main cabinet figures are all white. Chretien's appointments to offices dealing with finance and development are generally seen as on the right of the party, but his other appointments in areas such as Human Resources, are more to the left.

The new parliament will also provide a platform for the two opposition parties to show their mettle, voters will soon start to find out how the behaviour of their elected representatives relates to the campaign rhetoric.

As to the Tories, they may not have much of a voice in Commons now, but they retain their majority in the Senate (a non-elected body), a base which maintains their influence and gives them a foundation from which to rebuild. Despite their poor showing in the house, a lot of Canadians voted for them, and many observers believe they remain the only national, rather than regionally based party that is a credible alternative to the Liberals. Only time will tell.

- Dr. Euan Taylor, Winnipeg, Canada

Sources

Macleans Magazine, September - October 1993.

Globe and Mail (Toronto), October issues 1993.

Financial Times (London), October 27th 1993.

CBC Radio.