

The First Six Months of the Harper Administration

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally the tone and rhythm of Canadian federal elections are very different from electoral processes in Mexico and the U.S. Unlike either of these, the sitting prime minister of Canada can call for elections at any time, bringing his mandate to an end, regardless of the length of

time he has been in office.¹ Each call for elections reflects a specific set of political circumstances, and the prime minister and his party are frequently re-elected. Prime ministers like Pierre Trudeau, Brian Mulroney and Jean Chrétien governed the country for long periods because each was re-elected several times; the last two, in fact, won consecutive mandates with majority governments. In both cases the prime minister needs to have the political skill necessary to discern the extent to which his administration

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can seek a further extension of its initial mandate, without over-reaching in such a way that their party and the country are plunged into a crisis of incalculable proportions.

In either of these cases the legal and political paradigm that is invoked to justify the decision to call for new elections is that of a “loss of confidence” in the current administration, since without that framework of legitimacy the cohabitation of parties and of the prime minister in parliament becomes difficult and prevents the government from successfully carrying out its program.

Given the political idiosyncrasy of Canadians, who typically place a high priority on moderation and balance and on consensus-building in preference to more polarizing solutions, clearly a call for new elections is always the most appropriate, and perhaps most elegant and peaceful way to bring a poor administration to a close or simply to redirect the nation toward specific shifts in policy that could not be undertaken successfully without a specific electoral mandate.

One example of this is that of conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (1984-1993), who won 211 seats in his first election, an overwhelming majority in parliament. Although Mulroney had noted during his campaign, in reference to U.S.-Canadian relations, that it was difficult to “sleep with an elephant,” in fact he trusted in his majority support in parliament and initiated negotiations which laid the groundwork for a free trade pact with the U.S.

But the CUFTA brought enormous political problems for Mulroney, since Canadians generally felt that such a pact had not been specifically included in their initial mandate for his government. This discontent was further

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complicated by an economic crisis that afflicted the country during this period, blamed by many on the CUFTA. Under these circumstances Mulroney opted to call for new elections, once he realized that his popularity ratings had dropped considerably and that he needed to reinforce his initial mandate if he wanted to carry out the economic and constitutional reforms he had come to consider necessary.² Mulroney took advantage of this campaign to divide his opponents who had initially converged in an anti-NAFTA bloc. This coalition had temporarily brought together key members of the Liberal (LP) and New Democratic (NDP) Parties as well as the main union and NGO leaders. Nonetheless this opposition coalition eventually became divided as the country became engulfed in the historic constitutional debate which resulted from the Meech Lake Accords.

It is because of this landscape in which national concerns were divided between free trade and the appropriate distribution of power between the federal government and the provinces, and Quebec specifically, that Mulroney surprisingly obtained a second mandate despite the sharp decline in his popularity, and won 170 seats in parliament. It made him the only prime minister to win two consecutive elections with a significant majority since 1957. This conservative government used its vic-

tory to press forward with its free trade initiatives, including the negotiations which culminated in NAFTA. This case demonstrates that a second and even a third skillfully planned call for elections can revive a failing mandate and enable it to implement significant changes in policy that it would otherwise be impossible to pursue.

The elections held in early 2006 were a very different matter since they evidently included an ineffective prime minister and a governing party that was widely questioned on both moral and political grounds, and which sought to seize the opportunity to reform and in the final instance redefine itself, in the crucible of heated opposition. In this sense, the way former Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin was forced to resign and call for new elections exemplifies a unique case where the convening of elections was intended to eliminate further risk of the country facing a deeper political crisis.

THE MOTION THAT MADE HISTORY

On very rare occasions a no confidence motion³ has obtained the votes necessary in the Canadian system to compel the dissolution of a government and a call for new elections. Nonetheless by the end of 2005 the loss of confidence by members of parliament in Paul Mar-

tin unleashed a political crisis of such magnitude that a censure motion of this kind drew 171 votes.⁴ Canadian voters as a whole responded in kind by withdrawing their initial support for Martin and inflicting a punishing defeat on the Liberals. Stephen Harper's victory as leader for the New Conservative Party (NCP) reflected the overwhelming tide among Canadians and their representatives in parliament against a prime minister and a party that in the past had enjoyed enormous popularity; the Liberal Party had governed Canada without interruption since 1993.

THE CONSEQUENCES

The way in which all of this played itself out is illustrative. Although the voters opted for the new Conservative Party, it is equally true that only 64.9 percent of them went to the polls to deliver a strategically conditioned mandate for Stephen Harper.⁵ As a result the new prime minister was not able to form a government backed by a majority consisting solely of his own party, unlike some of his more fortunate predecessors.⁶

Much has been written about the causes which contributed to the Liberal debacle. Nonetheless the most important lesson to be learned from this case is that despite a very favorable econom-

ic picture in Canada and that the Martin government had remained independent regarding the Iraq war—supported by Canadian public opinion—these factors were not enough to mitigate the discontent that had been provoked by the scandals and abuses of this party over the last 12 years.

Fiscal irresponsibility, proven cases of corruption, and lack of transparency in the exercise of power by the Liberals carried greater weight with the voters than the independent stance Martin had pioneered for Canada regarding the U.S. government's anti-terrorist policy. Not even the Martin government's official discourse about a "new multilateralism" was enough, nor did its cooperation with the U.S.' anti-missile shield succeed in reversing the negative swing in public opinion about his remaining in office.

THE CAMPAIGN FROM A DISTANCE

During the last few months of the campaign the Liberals, aware of their scant possibilities of victory, focused their attacks on the New Conservatives, alluding to the ideological links Harper had forged with hard-core right wing sectors in the U.S.

The Liberals sought to win based on a campaign grounded in Canadian

nationalist sentiments, including their traditional mistrust of the U.S. government, and the fear that Harper would promote a deeper process of integration with the U.S. Their TV campaign ads reflected this "anti-Americanism," and their slogans constantly reiterated that Harper was very popular among the extreme right in the U.S. and was Bush's "best friend." In a desperate effort to revive his popularity, Martin emphatically protested statements by the U.S. ambassador who requested that all candidates abstain from criticizing the U.S., to which Martin responded that no one would dictate to him which themes he should or should not address.

Harper, meanwhile, promoted his proposed government program, which included elements that helped swing the campaign in his favor. Among the most interesting proposals was his pledge to shape a role for the country's provinces in international forums; to increase the defense budget until 2015 and increase troop strength to 75,000; to support the U.S. anti-missile shield initiative; not to veto the recently approved law legalizing gay marriages; to create a national information agency; to arm customs guards; to increase the number of police on street patrol; to grant revenue-collecting authority to tribal governments in order to reduce their dependency on federal funding; and to free all parliamentary votes from party discipline except those regarding budgetary matters.

Many of these campaign promises sought to respond to specific interest groups which had been neglected during 12 years of Liberal government. Evidently the provinces—Quebec, in particular—were receptive to these, as well as the armed forces, who had borne serious budget cuts during the preced-

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ing years. The same thing applied to Canada's indigenous peoples, who have historically been confined to reservations, manipulated by subsidies, and by privileges traditionally conceded by the federal government in exchange for their restriction to these territories.

Obviously some of Harper's promises were above all motivated by his maneuvering for political support and did not reflect a genuine personal commitment. The legalization of gay marriages was not a cause close to his heart, but Harper did not want to face the risk of the negative campaign that would result from his opposition to the recognition of these unions. On the other hand, all matters related to national security issues laid the basis for a spectacular reconciliation with the Bush administration and foreshadowed Harper's supportive approach to the Canadian role in the U.S. global "anti-terrorist" war, the collaborative management of shared borders and Canada's participation in the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America.

THE WINNER: WHO IS HARPER?

Stephen Harper has a first rate political biography highlighted by his ability to carve out new spaces for the right wing in Canada. He was originally a member of the Progressive Conservative Party and left its ranks precisely when it was being led by Brian Mulroney. He then initiated a longtime sojourn in Calgary where he joined a group of conservatives who in 1987 formulated the platform of what soon became Canada's Reform Party. In 1989 he began to work in the parliamentary arena as an aide to Deborah Grey, the first Reform Party member of that body; then in 1993

he was elected in his own right as a member of the House of Commons for the district of Calgary-West.

His political history bears the mark of two decisive influences. The first is that left by Preston Manning, one of the most powerful men of the Canadian West, who founded the Reform Party in 1987, which he continued to be a member of until 1997 when he decided to seek out other options along Canada's rightwing spectrum. The second key influence was that of Stockwell Day, the first leader of the Canadian Alliance (CA, whose full name was the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance), and who came to play a role of equal weight in his political development to that of Manning. Harper had a meteoric career within this party that led him in 2002 to succeed Day as its leader. This catapulted him in turn to leadership in the process of negotiations which sought to bring together all of the parties, groups, and individuals of the Canadian right into a single convergent bloc.

A few months later he was elected to parliament as a member of the CA from the Calgary-Southwest district and became head of the official opposition in the House of Commons on May 21, 2002. From that moment forward, and from his base in the CA, Harper promoted his overall political strategy, which envisioned the formation of a unified rightwing party as a

national force, and its ideological positioning as the vanguard of all center-right forces in Canada. This process culminated successfully in 2003, after overcoming the resistance of the old guard in the Progressive Conservative Party and recalcitrant sectors of the right in the Canadian West.

Finally, with the support of Peter Mackay, a Conservative Party member of parliament, the New Conservative Party was created. It was the product of a merger of the historic Progressive Conservative Party, primarily based in Eastern Canada, with its origins extending all the way back to the period of the establishment of Canada's Confederation in 1867, and the Canadian Alliance, whose greatest base of popularity is in the western regions of the country, and which in turn had its origins in the merger of Preston Manning's Reform Party and Stockwell Day's own Canadian Alliance.

In March 2004 Harper was elected to the leadership of the New Conservative Party and was re-elected as head of the opposition in parliament as a result of the federal elections held in June 2004. During his campaign he distanced himself tactically from the most hard-core rightwing sectors in the province of Alberta, as well as from the Republican Party in the U.S., but this was a purely circumstantial maneuver.

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Harper has never hidden his own religious inclinations nor his links to groups that promote a literal interpretation of the Bible. He is a profound believer in free trade, and politically he insists that Canada must strengthen its relationship with the U.S., with an eye toward fuller interdependence. Nonetheless his approach to Canada-U.S. relations does not imply absolute subordination to U.S. interests.

Recently the U.S. government has reasserted its claims to the Arctic, with specific reference to Harper's initiative to place ice-breaking vessels in this region. U.S. Ambassador Wilkins declared that Washington does not recognize Canadian sovereignty over Arctic waters, in alignment with other countries with a similar stance. Harper responded that the U.S. should defend its own sovereignty, and Canada would do the same, since his mandate comes from the Canadian people, not from the U.S. ambassador.

THE FIRST SIX MONTHS

One of the most important achievements of the 2006 elections was the fact that Quebec joined the mandate for the New Conservative Party, which for the first time consolidated rightwing gains in Eastern Canada (particularly noteworthy in a province considered

quite liberal, such as Quebec), in part due to a series of alliances between the conservatives and the Bloc Québécois.

For its part the opposition in parliament is wagering that Harper's government will be short-lived and that meanwhile they will have the opportunity to reconstruct their bases and recover popular support. This approach could be costly since Harper knows how to play this game and is determined to impose his vision and program, while the opposition trusts that his time will run out before he is successful.

Harper has inherited a heavy burden of international commitments such as CUFTA and NAFTA, which date from the Mulroney administration, and others from his Liberal predecessors, such as the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America, the Kyoto protocol, and more recent commitments related to NAFTA and Canada's role in the WTO.

These include some that weigh on him more heavily, such as Kyoto, because he disagrees with their substance, and others in the commercial realm that he is sympathetic to but would rather approach on a more ad hoc basis.

The prime minister's agenda can be summarized in terms of three principal centers of gravity: decentralization, reduction in the size of government and deeper integration with the U.S. In order to pursue these he must activate cer-

tain related mechanisms, such as the Security and Prosperity Partnership. He can try to work along two parallel tracks, activating both the internal reforms he believes are necessary and those related to North America, but if he feels that his domestic measures are faltering, he will opt for a deepening of Canada's relationship with the U.S. This implies an acceleration of measures of economic and military integration with his neighbor, including greater liberalization in terms of U.S. access to Canadian sources of energy and natural resources.

During the recent North American summit held in Cancún in March, besides reviewing the latest advances and planning next steps in terms of the Security and Prosperity Partnership, Harper focused on his main unifying aim: closer relations with the U.S., since he is very conscious of the fact that Mexico's President Fox is about to complete his term in office, and that his own time may be short before he has to call for new elections.

In Cancún both Harper and Fox sought Bush's acquiescence about two problems which, if resolved, imply major political victories for each. President Fox pressured on migration policy,⁷ while Harper sought a negotiated solution to the longstanding dispute with the U.S. regarding Canadian soft wood exports.⁸ For his part Bush took advantage of his colleagues' expressed concerns regarding security issues to reinforce his policy of building a shared North American Security Perimeter, and "smart" borders.

None of the three proposed to reopen existing provisions of NAFTA for renegotiation, and instead agreed that its impact over 12 years had been positive, and any such steps to re-open its

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provisions would be counter-productive. In this fashion they swept aside a long trail of citizen protests that have demanded revision of NAFTA's Chapter XI regarding standards for investment, and the criteria used to select those who serve on the conflict resolution panels provided for in the agreement.

The recent summit meeting offers some helpful insights into the likely dynamics of the Harper administration. The fact that the three governments accepted a work plan according the greatest priority to bilateral meetings by each of the partners with the U.S., with greater emphasis than their trilateral agenda, clearly reflects both Bush and Harper's sentiments. Both of them are very inclined to negotiate matters bilaterally despite the existence of a trilateral framework both as a result of NAFTA and of the evolving partnership.

Even before Harper's taking office, Canada had begun to insist on a strategy for relations with the U.S. leading to a new bilateral agreement for deeper integration. In order to follow through on this agenda Harper must send certain signals to the Canadian population, such as the resolution of the soft wood commercial dispute. Without some spectacular advance along these lines it will be very difficult for the conservative Harper government to move ahead along the road of its own North American agenda. In this context it would also be

important to assess the current state of relations between Canada and Mexico, particularly when Canadian corporations, frustrated by the failure to carry out fundamental reforms in Mexico's energy sector, have decided to look elsewhere for countries where it would be easier to invest their capital.

A possible triumph by Andrés Manuel López Obrador, characterized as a populist, in Mexico's elections might facilitate the option that Canada has been prioritizing for some time: the recovery of the exclusively bilateral character of its relations with the U.S. It is worth considering whether the U.S. government will acquiesce to this approach, or continue promoting a trilateral dialogue which, although imperfect, might enable it to consolidate its geoeconomic strategic objectives in North America. **MM**

NOTES

¹ There have been prime ministers like Sir John Macdonald (1867-1873 and 1878-1891) who governed for 19 years; Sir Wilfrid Laurier (1896-1911) who did so for 15; William Lyon MacKenzie King (1921-1926, 1926-1930 and 1935-1948) who served for 22 years; and Pierre Trudeau for 15 (1968-1979 and 1980-1984). Others, such as Joe Clark, served only nine months (1979-1980); John Turner served for three months (1984);

and Kim Campbell, the only woman who has served thus far in this office, who governed for four months (1993).

² In 1985, almost two years after being re-elected, polls indicated that 60% of Canadians wanted to replace him.

³ A no confidence motion is a measure whereby one or various members of parliament can exercise their right to promote the prime minister's removal from office, which implies parliament's withdrawal of confidence in his government and compels the dissolution of the cabinet and a call for new elections.

⁴ The no confidence motion was proposed by Jack Layton, leader of the New Democratic Party. The House of Commons approved it by a vote of 171 to 133, with support from three opposition parties: the New Conservative Party, the New Democratic Party and the Bloc Québécois.

⁵ Only 64.9 percent of registered voters cast votes for 309 members of the House of Commons. Canada employs the British "winner-take-all" system whereby the only winner in an electoral district is the top vote-getter; the remaining votes are discarded since there is no system in Canada of proportional representation.

⁶ The New Conservative Party won 124 seats, followed by the Liberals with 103; the Bloc Québécois won 51 and the New Democratic Party 29; one seat was won by an independent.

⁷ Concretely, Fox proposed to President Bush that they share responsibility for the migration issue and seek domestic solutions for improving border security. He also committed himself to shoring up border surveillance with Central America and openly asked the U.S. president for support in the congressional debates for the creation of a temporary worker program.

⁸ Trade litigation about soft wood exported to the United States and the return of U.S.\$5 million collected as compensatory duties by Washington were the central topics of the bilateral Harper-Bush meeting. Also touched on was the growing opposition by Canadians to legislation that will come into effect December 31, 2007, which will require the use of a passport designed in accordance with anti-fraud specifications imposed by the United States. Another issue that came up was the need for Harper to give greater backing to the functioning of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD).