

# The Consolidation Of the Conservative Party In Canada (2006-2011)

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The results of Canada's May 2, 2011 elections consolidated Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservative Party as the first government with a Conservative majority in the House of Commons since 1993. Many factors have made this new arrangement in the Canadian Parliament possible, but in this article, I will point to the most significant moments that have projected Canada as a country with a broad Conservative majority for the second decade of the twenty-first century.

## THE REFORMULATION OF THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

After Brian Mulroney stepped down as prime minister and his successor Kim Campbell suffered a crushing defeat in the 1993 federal elections,<sup>1</sup> the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada left the field to new conservative groupings like the Reformist Party, with greater electoral presence in the western provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Later, in 2000, this party became the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance, whose goal was to extend its electoral presence in the important English-speaking province of Ontario and in the Maritime Provinces on the Atlantic.

This phenomenon of re-founding Canada's center-right electoral platforms was formalized in 2003 with the merger of the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada to create what is now called the Conservative Party of Canada.



Canada's PM, Stephen Harper, speaks at the Conservative Party convention in Ottawa.

Patrick Doyle/REUTERS

The first election returns for the Conservative Party of Canada in 2004 placed it as the Liberal Party's main competitor, and its leader, Stephen Harper, as the head of the opposition in the House of Commons. Harper took over as head of the Conservative Party when it was founded in 2003; since then he has tried to take office utilizing the mistakes and political debilitation of his Liberal opponents. This is why Harper took advantage of the conflict between the New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Liberal Party over Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin's refusal to guarantee access to health care in the face of possible future attempts at privatization. Thus, as leader of the opposition in late 2005, Harper got enough votes in Parliament to request a motion of censure

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against Paul Martin's position. As a result, Martin, weakened in the face of public opinion, was forced to dissolve Parliament and call for new elections in the beginning of the following year.

The January 2006 elections gave the victory to the Conservative Party, its 36.3 percent of the votes awarding it 124 seats, compared to the Liberal Party's 30.2 percent and 103 seats.<sup>2</sup> This concluded a cycle of 146 straight months of Liberal governments in Canada.

#### STEPHEN HARPER'S TWO MINORITY CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENTS

From the beginning of his 2006-2008 term as prime minister, Stephen Harper sought to increase Canada's presence on the international stage. Thus, improving relations with the United States was a priority from the start of his administration. Domestically, he proposed maintaining healthy finances, liquidating major public debt, and not legislating either on abortion or same-sex marriage. Socially, he increased the number of child-care centers and gave parents of pre-school children financial support. He also cut taxes on workers' wages to stimulate domestic consumption, and proposed shortening wait times for receiving medical attention. On a federal level, he committed to increased cooperation with the province of Quebec, guaranteeing its autonomy, and allowing it a greater presence internationally.

As a result, Harper racked up high approval ratings that allowed him to call federal elections early, in October 2008, with the aim of achieving a Conservative parliamentary majority, which would allow him to stop having to negotiate with the other political parties to govern. Although he did not get the absolute majority of 155 seats, the elections did increase Conservative Party presence in the House of Commons, with 143 seats, compared to the 124 it had won in the previous elections.

Harper's second period as prime minister (2008-2011) coincided with the grave world economic crisis in late 2008 sparked by the U.S. sub-prime mortgage crack. So, his new mandate concentrated internally, first of all, on avoiding massive job loss, and, secondly, on guaranteeing sustained economic growth in a capitalist world sunk in the most serious economic crisis since the 1920s.

Although as a result of the global crisis Canada displayed the highest unemployment levels in the previous three de-

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acades, the fact that Harper had not led any kind of bank bailout or nationalization like some of his counterparts in other countries in the West strengthened his image among Canadians. He was seen as a leader who had kept his country in a not-terribly-unfavorable economic situation, versus the straits the rest of its developed partners were in.

In accordance with what Harper had proposed from the time of his first political campaign, Canada participated more intensely in the international arena alongside the United States. One example of this is the intense campaign in Afghanistan. However, given the pressure in Canada resulting from the number of Canadian casualties (155 up to March 2011),<sup>3</sup> in 2010, the Harper government announced Canadian troops would begin withdrawal in July 2011.

In March 2011, after the United Nations approved a resolution to create a no-fly zone over Libya, the Harper government decided to send a squadron of F-18 bombers to support operations there, reiterating its commitment and willingness to participate in Security Council-backed missions. This is how Harper has managed to maintain Canada active around international issues as part of his political strategy.

#### THE 2011 ELECTIONS

After five years of heading up two minority governments, constantly forced to negotiate with other parties, Stephen Harper needed to again seek a parliamentary majority to make his government actions more agile and put into practice a series of more ambitious programs. The events that would lead to the call for new elections in 2011 began as early as August of the previous year, precisely when the Harper government announced its intention of acquiring 65 F-35 fighter planes. Officially, the estimated cost of these planes was Can\$14 billion. However, according to Canadian Parliament reports, the real figure was Can\$29 billion, since it was not clear whether the price of the engines was included in the transaction or

they would have to be built and the U.S. arms industry paid separately for them.<sup>4</sup>

For this reason, opposition parties in the House of Commons asked Harper for documentation regarding several matters, such as the purchase of the F-35 fighter planes and penitentiary reform, which includes the construction of more prisons paid for by the taxpayers. The prime minister refused to provide the documents requested and make the information public. This spurred the opposition parties in Canada's Parliament (the Liberal Party, the New Democratic Party, and the Bloc Québécois, or BQ) to vote a joint motion of censure against him and call for his removal.

It should be pointed out that the call for new elections was not made at the most opportune moment for the opposition, given that national polls gave the Conservative Party a 15-point lead *vis-à-vis* its main adversary, the Liberal Party. Naturally, the prime minister was aware of this and sought to capitalize on it to finally get a parliamentary majority; so, after his removal was requested, new elections were convened for May 2, 2011.

From the start of the campaigns, on March 27, the opinion polls gave the Conservative Party a clear advantage. The Conservative campaign focused on maintaining economic stability and growth, particularly emphasizing the fact that Canada had not suffered financial disasters like those of the United States and several European countries. From this perspective, Harper transmitted to the electorate the idea that alternation in office would be a certain blow to the Canadian economy in general. Aware that a coalition of opposition parties threatened his continuation in office, he dedicated the first part of his campaign to denouncing supposed intentions of creating an opposition alliance to oust the Conservatives from government. He emphasized that the Liberal Party, the New Democratic Party, and the Bloc Québécois had nothing in common, and if they came to power, they would threaten Canada's economic and political stability because they would not be able to agree enough to govern.

Now, while coalition governments are considered a possibility in Canada's parliamentary system, they are not common since the electorate sees them as "governments of losers." Aware of this, Liberal Party leader Michael Ignatieff insistently responded that his party would not seek the prime minister's office in a coalition, underlining that the party that wins the largest number of seats in Parliament would be called on to form the government.<sup>5</sup>

After the April 12 English-language debates and the April 13 French-language debates, electoral trends took a turn for

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opponents of the Conservative Party. While there was no visible winner of the two debates in the eyes of the electorate, Stephen Harper's success lay in keeping his approval ratings up around 39 percent. However, his rivals, the Liberal Party and Michael Ignatieff, suffered a serious drop in ratings, tumbling from 29 to 19 percent in the polls. On the other hand, Jack Layton's New Democratic Party jumped from 18 to 31 percent after the debates.<sup>6</sup>

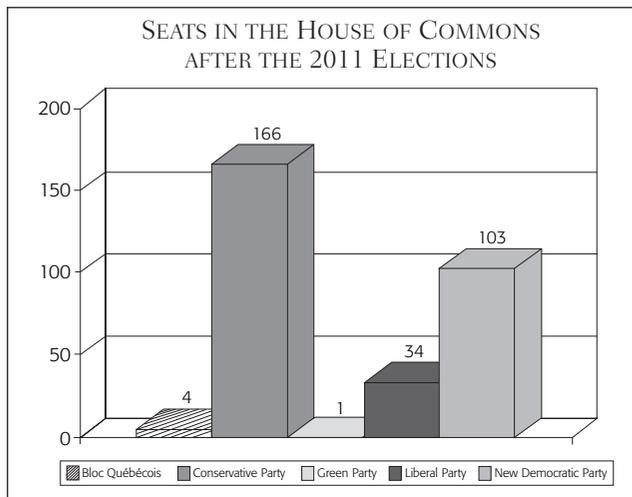
With these opinion poll results and after five and a half weeks of campaigning, the May 2 elections gave the majority to Stephen Harper's party. The balloting won the Conservative Party 166 seats in the House of Commons, compared to the 143 it had had up until May. That is, it surpassed the majority threshold of 155 seats by 11 (see graph).<sup>7</sup>

To a great extent, the Conservative victory is due to Canada's economic stability during the severe world recession at the end of the last decade, despite having registered record unemployment rates from 2008 to 2011. On the other hand, maintaining and guaranteeing Canadian Medicare and not getting into serious political scandals allowed Harper to reinforce his public image nationwide and made a third period of government possible, now in more favorable conditions with a Conservative parliamentary majority ready to support its leader.

#### CONSERVATIVE CONSOLIDATION AND MAIN CHALLENGES

As soon as the campaigns and the voting were over, Prime Minister Harper's government was obliged to redefine its most polemical policies since, for the first time, the real opposition to the Conservatives in the Commons will be the center-left New Democratic Party (NDP), characterized by its harsh criticism of the Conservative administration's social policies since 2006.

In this sense, Harper will face a more critical, less docile opposition than during his two previous periods. In those



years, the Liberal Party spoke for Canada's opposition. Now, issues like public health care, employment insurance, and access to the university will get the greatest media attention in the debates between the New Democratic Party and the Conservatives in the new legislature.

To this must be added the other big electoral defeat of 2011: that of the Bloc Québécois (BQ). The Bloc only won four seats in Parliament, while in 2008, it had 49; this leads us to suppose that the BQ's traditional regional agenda, focused on Quebec, will make way for a new NDP agenda, more active on social issues and spanning the entire Canadian federation.

In terms of domestic economic policy, the Harper government will seek equilibrium, fulfilling the campaign promise to reestablish internal fiscal equilibrium by 2014 by cutting several million dollars from public spending. This issue in particular will be a measuring stick for public opinion, since the media focused on it for a good part of the campaigns. The far-reaching thing about this campaign promise is that the adjustment will come precisely one year before the next federal elections, slated for October 2015.

In short, it can be said that the Stephen Harper government proposes to concretize a series of political projects that encountered stumbling blocks during his two first minority government terms. Outstanding among these proposals are the repeal of obligatory hunting weapons registration, writing tougher criminal legislation, building prisons, decreasing public funding of political parties, reducing the number of permanent federal employees, making foreign investment in telecommunications possible, purchasing the 65 F-35 fighter planes that triggered his removal, and even reducing the retirement-age for senators (today they can sit in the Senate until they turn 75). To achieve all this, Harper not only has

a majority in the House of Commons, but also in the Senate, with 52 out of 105 seats.<sup>8</sup>

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Canada's new political scenario resulting from the 2011 elections has left the country with a new Parliament in which the left and the right will continually be at loggerheads. Thus, the strategy for Harper's Conservative government will be to avoid direct confrontations and defend the idea among his constituency and society in general that his government will work for Canadians' common good, including that of those who did not vote for him. In this sense, the New Democratic Party and Jack Layton have the historic opportunity of acting as a true opposition, an unprecedented opportunity to bring up more progressive issues and discussions with strong media impact for the first time in an entire generation of Canadians. ■■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In that election, the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada received 16 percent of the vote and won only two seats in the House of Commons. For more information, see "Activists Seek Perdue's Apology," Sept 16, 2006, [http://chronicle.augusta.com/stories/2006/09/19/met\\_97222.shtml](http://chronicle.augusta.com/stories/2006/09/19/met_97222.shtml), accessed Sept 1, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> The figures and percentages used in this article can be consulted in "Canadian Elections Results by Party 1867 to 2008," <http://www.sfu.ca/~aheard/elections/1867-present.html>.

<sup>3</sup> CBC News, "Afghanistan: In the Line of Duty: Canada's Casualties," <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/afghanistan/casualties/list.html>, accessed in May 2011.

<sup>4</sup> For more information, see David Pugliese, "Canada's F-35s: Engines not included. Government will be required to provide power plant for stealth fighters, documents show," April 17, 2011, <http://www.montrealgazette.com/news/Canada+Engines+included/4629251/story.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Taber, "Ignatieff turns coalition accusation back on Harper," March 27, 2011, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/ottawa-notebook/ignatieff-turns-coalition-accusation-back-on-harper/article1958633/>.

<sup>6</sup> For more information on percentages in different polls during the electoral campaign, see Canada Election 2011, <http://www.electionalmanac.com/canada/polls.php>, accessed in May 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Figures taken from "Elections. 2011. Canadian Election Results," <http://www.sfu.ca/~aheard/elections/results.html>, accessed in May 2011.

<sup>8</sup> For more information, see Parliament of Canada, <http://www.parl.gc.ca/SenatorsMembers/Senate/SenatorsBiography/ps-E.htm>, accessed in May 2011.