Should There Be Term Limits for Leaders of Democracies?

By Conrad Black

There is an almost constant debate in many Western countries about term limits for elected politicians. In general, these discussions are more frequent in non-parliamentary countries, where the executive does not sit in the legislature and many legislative districts tend to retain the same representative, or at least the same party, for many elections.

(L-R) Canadian Prime Minister W.L. Mackenzie King with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Gov. Gen. Lord Athlone at the First Quebec Conference in Quebec City in August 1943. (CP Photo)

In the parliamentary system, the government almost automatically changes when the composition of parliament changes, and the phenomenon of a long and unbroken incumbency of the head of the government is comparatively rare. If Justin Trudeau leads the Liberal Party in the next election next

year, he will be seeking to become the first Canadian federal politician to win four consecutive elections since Wilfrid Laurier succeeded in doing that in 1908.

The nature of the parliamentary system is that instead of very long and unbroken encumbrances, party leaders may remain for a long period but go back and forth between heading the government and leading the opposition. If Donald Trump is elected president of the United States this November, he will be only the second person, after Grover Cleveland, to be elected to non-consecutive terms in that office. The United States is so attached to undivided presidencies that it officially considers Cleveland to be both the 22nd and the 24th president, and if Trump returns to the White House he will be regarded as the 45th and the 47th president.

The United States initially had no restriction on the number of terms to which a president could be elected, but after Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected four consecutive times and died in office, and despite his great prestige and popularity, the Constitution was amended to limit presidents to two elections to that office.

My own opinion has always been that this is a mistake—that if you have a good leader who enjoys the confidence of most citizens, you should celebrate that fact and hang on to that leader. In Roosevelt's own case, if he had not been re-elected to a third term in 1940 and been able to modify the official American definition of neutrality, as he did, there is a strong unlikelihood that we would have won World War II. Without Roosevelt's assistance, aid to the British and Canadians would have been much less substantial, and the American opposition to the aggression of Japan in China and Indochina might not have provoked Japan into enlarging the war.

Roosevelt redefined American territorial waters from three miles to 1,800 miles, and ordered the United States Navy to

attack any German ship in that zone—half of the North Atlantic—on detection. And on the other side, he sold the British and the Canadians anything they wished and they could pay for it when they could. At this point, Hitler realized that he was effectively at war with the United States, which Roosevelt would make official at a time convenient to him, and it drove Hitler to the desperate gamble of invading Russia. If he was successful, the Anglo-Americans, if they wished to dislodge Hitler, would be facing a Germany with no threat from the east.

It is also unlikely that Roosevelt's Republican opponents, led by the estimable Wendell Willkie, would have the political support or the self-confidence to impose an oil embargo upon Japan, which required that country either to abandon its invasion of China or to gain access to adequate oil supplies in what is now Indonesia, and commit what Roosevelt had made clear he would consider an act of war.

These are vast questions of geopolitical strategy that would not normally arise in a discussion of term limits, but they also raise questions of the number of people any jurisdiction might have at any given time, who are thoroughly competent to lead their government. Canada illustrates this point. From the early days of the united Province of Canada in 1856 to the retirement as prime minister of W. L. Mackenzie King in 1948, three men—John A. Macdonald, Wilfrid Laurier, and Mackenzie King—led the government or the opposition, first of the united Province, then of the Dominion, and finally of the Commonwealth realm of Canada for all of those 88 years, and for 66 of them as prime minister or principal co-premier.

Canada was at first an awkward and involuntarily unified Province set up because of the mistaken conviction of the British governor, Lord Durham, that the French Canadians desperately wished to be liberated from the burden of being French-speaking, and to be assimilated. Of course, this was precisely what they did not want, and as a device for

assimilation, the united Province of Canada was a total failure. But it was a successful springboard for the creation of Canada as the first and so far the only transcontinental, bicultural, parliamentary Confederation in the history of the world.

Only Macdonald, among his contemporaries, could have done this, and among his successors, only Laurier and King in their times could have successfully assisted the country through two world wars—as leader of the opposition in Laurier's case and prime minister in King's—with the knowledge of the necessity of achieving the agreement of both English and French Canada on matters of absolutely vital importance: Canada's participation in the world wars, and the avoidance of coercive conscription for mortal combat overseas, when the safety of Canada itself was not directly threatened.

There were many French Canadian volunteers to those efforts, but the French Canadians as a whole did not feel the filial attachment to France or Great Britain that most English-speaking Canadians felt toward the United Kingdom. Those three men were indispensable, and except for the election of 1891 when Laurier lost narrowly to Macdonald, they never overlapped each other and were throughout that long period the only people capable of guiding Canada through the many crises that it faced. All three men had the chastening, and perhaps renovating, experience of sitting in opposition, Macdonald and King for eight years and Laurier for 17 years.

In Great Britain, most of the outstanding prime ministers have served non-consecutive terms: Pitt the Younger, Peel, Russell, Palmerston, Disraeli, Gladstone, Salisbury, and Churchill. Walpole, Pitt the Elder, Lloyd George, and Thatcher led only one government, though Walpole's lasted 21 years.

The resentments of apparently permanent members of parliament and congressmen is understandable, and since holders of such positions are almost never so important that national

security—or as in 1940 with Roosevelt, international security—depends upon them, an argument can be made for rotating them, or requiring them to seek election elsewhere, or take a pause from the legislature.

Requiring the head of the government to stand down may deprive a country of a person who is absolutely essential to its interest. On the other hand, it must be said that the absence of term limits leads to an embarrassing exit for even the greatest leaders, such as France's Charles de Gaulle, Germany's Konrad Adenauer, and Britain's Margaret Thatcher. The last leaders of important countries who retired in excellent personal and political health were the post-Roosevelt Americans Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan.

In functioning democracies, leaders should not be term-limited, though there is a case for rotating the legislators.

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