

The Rise and Fall of Prime Ministers

In the dramatic fall of the Harper government and the meteoric doubling of the Liberal percentage of the popular vote, and quintupling of that party's number of MPs, it is easy to lose sight of what the outgoing regime accomplished and even of what the most important shifts of electoral currents have been.

Stephen Harper cobbled together two fragments of the old Progressive Conservative Party and this week even had the parting pleasure of taking back some territory from the third element of that party, the Bloc Québécois. (The Conservatives substantially increased their vote in Quebec and gained five MPs there, even as they lost ground elsewhere.)

The Harper government shrunk the federal government's share of GDP and cut taxes, and it is unlikely, despite wails of alarm in many circles, that the incoming government will return to fiscal incontinence. It was the Liberals, Paul Martin and Jean Chrétien, after all, who started balancing the budget, albeit largely by dumping the federal share of concurrent spending obligations on the provinces without yielding any tax sources, and by benefiting from Brian Mulroney's GST and Free Trade with the United States, both of which they had promised to repeal. The country has slipped into a mild recession, and despite indications that the recession may end soon, Justin Trudeau's proposal for modest deficits due to intelligent stimulative spending is not unreasonable.

As I have written here and elsewhere ad nauseam, defence spending is the most effective economic stimulation. Trudeau has said he will fund the armed forces to retrieve them from the withering emaciation they have suffered under the Conservatives; this could be a win-double. Harper's resolute

foreign policy was severely compromised by Canada's physical inability to swing a big enough defence hammer to command attention. It would be very unfortunate if the new government took the prolonged Liberal mythology about peacekeeping so seriously that the geopolitical value of a defence build-up was squandered in undeserved reverence for the hypocrisies of the United Nations. The announcement that Canada will cease to bomb the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria should be ascribed implicitly to erratic U.S. leadership rather than slackening of hostility toward ISIL. With an increased defence budget, Canada could play a serious role in reviving the moribund NATO alliance.

Harper salvaged and reconstructed a coherent political option and built it through four elections, but could not renovate a tired government and chose not to make way for someone who would. He decreed an over-long campaign, and then offered no incentive to vote for his government's re-election except excessive denigration of his opponents and a dismal series of distractions about a woman wearing a niqab at a citizenship swearing-in after identifying herself privately to authorities; hypothetical dual-citizen terrorists; and protecting the country from the spectre of "400,000 Syrian refugees," arriving by an as yet unimagined method of inter-continental travel.

The whole reelection campaign of what was a generally successful government was a pastiche of contemptible low-balling and fear-mongering. Stephen Lewis's statement on election night that he was proud that Canadians had not approved such a campaign and such a high-handed government, even though his party was not the beneficiary of its failure, resonated. It was an undignified and self-inflicted end that combined elements of hubris and nemesis both with the merely banal and with Harper's heroic faith.

Harper sought above all to shrink the federal government and has always assumed that no successor regime would dare to

raise to raise the federal sales tax. With this goal, he refused to broaden the base of his party through raising HST on elective spending and massaging the proceeds around centrist voters. His continuation in office depended on a favourable split between the Liberals and NDP in a great number of constituencies. The most important element of the election result is the bone-crushing defeat of the NDP, and with it, the reassertion, after 20 years, of the dominance in Quebec's vote in federal elections of unambiguously federalist parties.

Jack Layton's big Quebec break-through in 2011 was a levitation, as Quebec realized that it was a cul-de-sac to support a separatist party in a federal election and went for the party that promised repeal of the Clarity Act (requiring a strong majority on a clear question for a province to secede from Canada, and not a bare majority on an eat-and-still-have-the-cake-trick question such as the Parti Québécois presented in the referenda of 1980 and 1995). Layton and his successor, Thomas Mulcair, also promised abolition of the English language in Quebec in the federal workplace, which includes the federal government and the whole federal corporate sector, such as banks and transportation companies.

There was an incongruity in Mulcair's admirable defence of the right of a woman to wear a niqab at a citizenship swearing-in ceremony and his craven and opportunistic effort to put the 1.5 million Québécois whose first language is not French over the side, and to play referendum footsie with the separatists. Layton pulled it off because the Liberal leader four years ago, Michael Ignatieff, did not notice. Mulcair couldn't suck and blow at the same time: he lost support to the separatist Bloc and to the federalist Liberals and Conservatives. The NDP is back to its ancient status as a third party, having secured this week less than 20 per cent of the vote, enough to elect a mere 11 per cent of the MPs.

Reclaiming much of his father's hold on Quebec must have been

one of the sweetest aspects of election night for Justin Trudeau. When the NDP started to crumble in Quebec, partly because of Harper's peddling the spurious issue of the single infamous niqab, the government was doomed, and Harper walked resignedly to the electoral gallows in the last three weeks of the campaign. Far from preserving conservatism, he is bequeathing a party that knows it must capture more of the centre to return to government, but he deserves the respect due to the true believer, even though he took his party and his ideology down with him.

All of us who have followed political events for a while will be familiar with the process of an aging government dying and a new one entering office full of the purposeful and confident airs of the new broom. We have heard it all before, and at my age, many times before, in many countries. I recall the celebration of my conservative parents at the election in 1957 of John Diefenbaker over Louis St. Laurent, who had won an immense majority in 1949 (190 MPs in a much smaller House of Commons than we have now). I was an undergraduate when Diefenbaker, who won a colossal majority in 1958, was defeated and succeeded by Liberal Lester B. Pearson in 1963. I was a university graduate student when Pierre Trudeau won a huge mandate in 1968, and had just turned 40 when my friend of nearly 20 years already, Brian Mulroney, won a great victory over Trudeau's Liberals, then led by another good friend of 20 years at the time, John Turner, in 1984. Jean Chrétien won a decisive mandate over the severed factions of the Conservatives, in 1993, and Harper then led those reassembled factions to a gradual victory over the post-Chrétien Liberals. Pierre Trudeau's son has just visited vengeance on the party that still reviles his father.

One of the highlights on election night was the appearance on different television networks of former prime ministers Mulroney and Joe Clark. Both departed the country's highest office amid some contumely and are now widely respected.

Mulroney is generally considered, as he deserves to be, a very capable prime minister who was the last person to bring to the country's highest office an ambitious program of enhancement of the Canadian nationality, with the GST, Free Trade and Meech Lake. It was not his responsibility that he did not succeed with constitutional reform, a fact which is generally regretted now. He had great influence with President Ronald Reagan, as the United States led the West to the supreme and bloodless triumph of democracy and the free market in the Cold War, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union and of international communism. Yet he was widely disdained as an American lackey, an outrageous charge. Chrétien was a placeman, Martin didn't last, and Harper was a rather narrow ideologue.

Mulroney and his former internecine rival, Clark (the only politician ever to defeat a Trudeau, in 1979), both spoke with great elegance, good humour, and natural articulation on election night, and both were treated with evident courtesy by their interviewers, hard-bitten journalists experienced at conducting tough interviews. Twenty or more years from now, Harper and Trudeau will appear on such nights on television and will have earned and will receive such deference, and both will speak with the relaxed authority of those who have sought and held great public office.

Politics is, at one level, the most riveting of entertainments and at another, the most exacting of occupations. Those who scale its pinnacles, even if they turn to precipices, when they have taken their distance, finally savour in public and media esteem, the rewards of their efforts. It all sanitizes and can even ennoble the tawdriness and cynicism and hucksterism of much of public life. It reassures us that this garish and vulgar democratic process ends usefully for those who, in Disraeli's phrase, climb to the top of the greasy pole. A civilized member of the polity can only wish the best to those who govern as best they can, when they depart, as

when they begin.

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