

Why the World's 3 Senior Large Democracies Are Floundering



by Conrad Black

Living in Canada, it is easy to succumb to the fear that the principal mainly English-speaking countries of the world, despite the seniority of their institutions, have lost the capacity of self-government.

Of all countries in the world with over 20 million people, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada are the three senior nations in terms of continuous political institutions. When Canadian Confederation came into effect in 1867, both Germany and Italy were divided into many smaller states; France was in the latter stages of the second Empire under

[Napoleon's carnival nephew](#); Japan was in medieval isolation; China was in shambles; India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Burma were governed by the British; and the Ottoman, Habsburg, and Romanov dynasties ruled almost all of the rest of the Eurasian landmass. Africa had been carved up between the European powers, Australia and New Zealand were still colonies, and Latin America was a congeries of despotisms.

Only the smaller European countries of Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Belgium, which then had a larger population than Canada, could have been seriously described as democracies. In the intervening years, democratic government has generally flourished. It now governs almost all of Europe west of Russia, as well as India, Japan, much of Latin America, and the old British Empire, transformed into the Commonwealth.

Britain had five prime ministers in the six years ending in 2022, for the first time in 193 years. It could easily make it seven in 18 years at the next election, which would be a triumph of ministerial evanescence without precedent in the history of the British office of prime minister of more than three centuries, and a state of revolving-door government reminiscent of the French Fourth Republic and some periods in recent Italian history. In his famous address to the British Parliament in 1960, a 3,000-word speech delivered entirely from memory, the president of France, General de Gaulle—who had just founded the Fifth Republic, which has proved probably the most successful system of government France has ever had—made the contrast in the recent histories of Britain and France. He pointed out that in the 20 years since he had first visited England, while Great Britain had been ruled with stability and distinction by “my friends, Winston Churchill, Clement Attlee, Anthony Eden, and Harold Macmillan,” France had had three republics, a brutal foreign occupation, a degraded collaborationist government, a provisional government, and thanks to British hospitality, a government in

exile (which de Gaulle led).

The spectacle of contemporary American political affairs is distressing to anyone who wishes that country well. And given its continuing importance to the Western world, even those people who are not particularly admirers of the United States can recognize the dangers to the whole world if the quality of government in that country deteriorates significantly. There have been five American presidential elections in which the man who emerged as president received fewer votes than his chief opponent. This in itself is not a disturbing event, and in Canada in the last two elections the official opposition received more votes than the government, but the government was re-elected; it is a matter of the opposition winning fewer states in America or constituencies in Canada, but winning some with unusually large pluralities.

In the United States there have been four presidential elections where there was substantial doubt about the accuracy of the tabulation of authentic ballots, on a scale that would have affected the result. In 1876 there was a dispute over which electors to seat, and it was resolved by the acceptance of the apparent result in exchange for three conciliatory steps that the president-elect undertook to take (and did implement). In 1960, although President Eisenhower counseled Vice President Nixon, who won the popular vote, to seek a judicial recount with an investigation of ballots in a number of states that were extremely close, Mr. Nixon declined to do so because he thought it would be harmful to the country. In 2000, Vice President Gore led the popular vote but lost the Electoral College by one vote because he apparently lost Florida by only a few hundred votes where 5 million votes were cast. The issue was tested in the courts and a bare majority of justices of the U.S. Supreme Court settled the election in favour of Gore's opponent, George W. Bush.

In 2020, to facilitate voting during the COVID pandemic, many millions of votes were collected by unspecified parties and

deposited elsewhere than a voting place over an extended period without any verification of their authenticity. The judicial system, from local courts to the U.S. Supreme Court, declined to hear any of the challenges to the authenticity of the result based on the fact that a number of key swing states did not amend their voting and vote-counting rules through the state legislatures as the Constitution requires, but by either executive fiat by the governor or by elected state courts.

This is the basis of the profound fissure in American politics now. Donald Trump claims, plausibly, that he was shafted, and the response of his opponents has been the unprecedented quadruple-indictment of a former president who happens also to be, if the position existed in the American system, the leader of the opposition. The indictments involve 91 counts, most of which objective legal scholars who do not vote for Trump, such as professors Alan Dershowitz and Jonathan Turley, regard as shabby and probably unfounded in law and in fact.

Naturally, recourse to such illegal methods of political gamesmanship has profoundly shaken the American public's faith in the system. Only a completely clean and indisputable election will restore that confidence. And presumably, well before then, the farce of factional backbiting that has left the House of Representatives without a speaker for prolonged periods in the last year will have been resolved.

In Canada, we don't have revolving-door governments and the electoral system appears to work adequately. However, Canada is steadily losing its competitive position by almost every economic yardstick, and the incumbent federal regime has shamed the country unjustly by affirming that the government-sponsored residential schools buried large numbers of indigenous children who died for reasons of negligence or even homicide in unmarked graves. There is no evidence whatever to support these assertions; the schools in question had their failings but the glee with which this government has allowed Canada to be portrayed in the world as a semi-genocidal regime

is a self-inflicted national disgrace that only the removal of this government will begin to erase.

At the same time, the government's acquiescence to comprehensive measures by successive Quebec governments to exterminate the English language in that province, constitutes complicity in another collective injustice so enormous that the moral credibility of the Canadian federal system will be compromised until all provinces return to the constitutionally guaranteed respect for both official languages and the rights, linguistic and otherwise, of all Canadians.

Of course, these three countries will all bounce back, but this has been a freakish and disconcerting time of inept, nasty, and sometimes venal government in the world's three senior large democracies, and the sooner it is over the better.

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