

Canada's deadlocked politics

The perpetual campaign

Sep 24th 2009 | OTTAWA

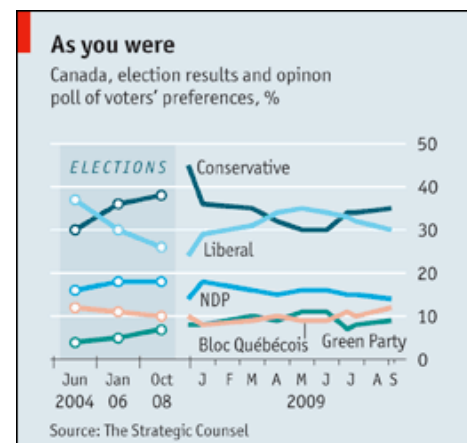
From The Economist print edition

Forever on the brink of an election

THE members of Canada's Parliament returned from their summer break this month braced for a fourth general election in just over five years. Michael Ignatieff, who heads the Liberal Party, the main opposition, vowed to bring down the minority government of Stephen Harper, the Conservative prime minister, at the earliest opportunity.

In the event, Mr Harper, whose party holds 143 of the 308 seats in the House of Commons, survived a confidence vote with the support of the two smaller opposition parties, the Bloc Québécois and the socialist New Democrats. But the reprieve is temporary. The Liberals plan to try again, perhaps as early as next month. Canada is in a permanent election campaign.

Yet polls suggest that Canadians, still grappling with the after-effects of recession, do not want another election. Worse, it would be unlikely to resolve much, since neither of the main parties commands enough support to be sure of winning a majority (see chart). But Canadians may be doomed to vote again, if not this autumn then next year. Mr Harper and Mr Ignatieff both seem to have given up on making an increasingly rancorous and unproductive parliament work, and have turned to brinkmanship.



In 2004 and 2006 when elections threw up minority governments, first of Liberals and then of Conservatives, most Canadians at first seemed sanguine. Now there is an unprecedented sense of stalemate, says David Mitchell of the Public Policy Forum, a think-tank. Although pundits tend to blame the party leaders for the malaise, it has deeper roots.

Canada's first-past-the-post electoral system, inherited from Britain, no longer suits what has become a four-party system (with a fifth group, the Greens, unrepresented in Parliament as its vote is spread too thinly). Although support for independence in French-speaking Quebec has declined, many Quebecers still see sending the separatists of the Bloc Québécois to Ottawa as the best way to defend their interests. The Bloc holds 47 of Quebec's 75 seats but refuses to take part in government; its strength makes it hard for anyone to win a majority. The spate of elections means that two-thirds of MPs have now served for less than five years. They have never experienced the stability of majority government, nor its relative civility—at least compared with today's hyper-partisanship.

Mr Harper has coped with the political fallout from recession surprisingly well. Unemployment has risen steadily to 8.7%, but Canadians accept the government's argument that the outside world was to blame. Having enacted a C\$46.6 billion (\$43 billion) fiscal stimulus, Mr Harper and his ministers spent the summer criss-crossing the country, handing out large cheques. This month the prime minister has met Barack Obama, attended the United

Nations conference on climate change in New York and will head to Pittsburgh for the G20 meeting of world leaders. By contrast a highlight of Mr Ignatieff's diary was a ploughing contest in rural Ontario. And yet the prime minister has proved unable to use office to broaden his appeal. Though Canadians may respect Mr Harper, they do not love him.

The Liberals hoped they had put their troubles behind them last year when they jettisoned Stéphane Dion in favour of Mr Ignatieff, an academic and writer who lived in Britain and the United States for almost 30 years. But Mr Ignatieff has not found the transition to politics easy. The Conservatives have portrayed him as an elitist carpetbagger. His own party's strategists were traumatised by Mr Harper's attacks on Mr Dion's proposal for a carbon tax. They have persuaded Mr Ignatieff to stick to generalities and hold back specific policies for an election campaign. When that comes, he will attack the Conservatives over the growing budget deficit.

Mr Ignatieff has at least succeeded in shifting the burden of supporting the government to the other opposition parties. In August he declared that Mr Harper's "time was up". In fact, since no party can be sure of emerging stronger from a fresh vote, it may not be quite yet.

Copyright © 2009 The Economist Newspaper and The Economist Group. All rights reserved.