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Canada's general election

Harper's champagne moment

The death of Liberal Canada produces a Conservative majority. What now?

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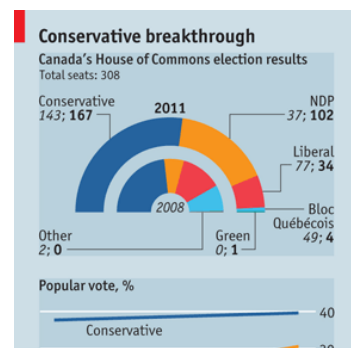
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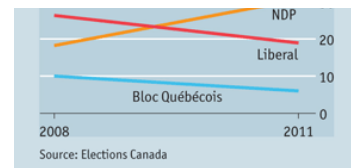
CANADIANS woke up on May 2nd with a Conservative government and went to bed that evening having voted for another one. But their fourth general election in seven years was in many ways the most transformative. Stephen Harper, who has led a minority government since 2006, finally won his much-coveted majority in the House of Commons, where he will command 167 of the 308 seats. Mr Harper, who normally cuts a stiff, cold figure, was, by his standards, relaxed and smiling in his moment of triumph. Although he is “not normally a drinker” he had obliged his staff by quaffing a bottle of champagne—though they had drained it of all but a mouthful, he admitted (see picture).

The prime minister's jubilation was in part because of the manner of the Conservative victory. The election saw the crushing of the once-proud Liberal Party, which Mr Harper had ousted in 2006 after a dozen years in office. Michael Ignatieff, a writer and academic who only entered politics that year after almost three decades abroad, resigned as Liberal leader after losing his seat. The separatist Bloc Québécois was all but wiped out after almost two decades in which it has won a majority of seats in the French-speaking province at federal elections. The New Democrats (NDP), previously little more than a leftish protest party, made huge gains in Quebec and more modest ones elsewhere to become the official opposition.

The election was not of Mr Harper's choosing. The three opposition parties joined forces to bring down his government on March 25th on the grounds that it was in contempt of parliament for refusing to divulge the true cost of various budget plans, including buying fighter jets and building new prisons. But Mr Harper seized the opportunity to tell Canadians that the deadlocked and partisan parliament had become dysfunctional, and that a country still recovering from the world recession needed the political stability that only a majority government could bring.



The Conservatives had prepared for the campaign much more effectively than their opponents. Even before it started, through relentless American-style "attack ads", they had typecast Mr Ignatieff, the Liberal leader, as a carpet-bagging elitist who had returned to Canada only for personal glory. Mr Ignatieff found no effective answer to that: the Conservative taunt of "Just Visiting" stuck as firmly to him as their gibe of "Not a leader" stuck to his hapless predecessor as Liberal leader, Stéphane Dion.



In the event, the Liberals were crushed by a campaign that turned into a right-left ideological battle. Their 34 seats amounted to their lowest haul ever. It was the NDP's cheerful leader, Jack Layton, who captured most of the anti-Harper votes, while also riding a huge wave of protest against all the other parties in Quebec. And Elizabeth May won a first-ever seat for the Green Party, in British Columbia.

Now that he has a majority, Mr Harper is likely to move swiftly to enact measures blocked in the previous parliament. These include an omnibus crime bill that introduces stiffer sentences; the final stage of a five-year plan to cut corporate income tax, from 21% to 15%; and the controversial purchase of F-35 fighter jets, at a cost the government estimates at about \$75m each but which the Pentagon says could be double that amount.

What else might Mr Harper do with his new power? Certainly he is unlikely to rush to introduce measures to curb carbon emissions as the opposition wanted and as the energy-producing western province of Alberta, with its carbon-belching tar sands, feared. "Western Canada can breathe a lot easier," Mr Harper said in Calgary, the Albertan oil capital that he represents in parliament.

His opponents have long claimed that a majority will allow Mr Harper to unwrap a bundle of measures, such as curbs on abortion, that are dear to the social conservatives who make up a chunk of his party's activists. But the prime minister got where he has by being cautious, and in victory he signalled that he would remain so. "One thing I've learned in this business is that surprises are generally not well-received by the public," he said, adding that he would stick to "what Canadians understand about us and I think what they're more and more comfortable with."

The bigger change thrown up by the election is on the opposition benches. The NDP, a collection of trade unionists, farmers and now, soft-nationalists with socialist leanings from Quebec, may not find its new prominence easy to manage. Its 58 MPs from Quebec (up from one in the last parliament) comprise an unlikely group of students (one aged only 19), ex-communists, teachers and activists, sprinkled with some seasoned politicians. One of the new MPs spent part of the campaign in Las Vegas on holiday.

The Bloc Québécois has been reduced to a rump. Its long-serving leader, Gilles Duceppe, resigned. But although separatism will no longer be a force in federal politics, it is not dead. The next provincial election in Quebec is likely to see the Bloc's sister organisation, the Parti Québécois, return to power in Quebec City.

What now for the Liberals? Some in the party favour merger with the NDP to create a new centre-left group. They are mindful of the successful precedent set by the Conservatives, a party formed from the merger of the rump of the once-mighty Progressive Conservatives and the Reform Party, a populist western outfit that counted Mr Harper among its founders. Mr Ignatieff said when he stepped down that he is against a merger and that the Liberals should continue to strive to occupy the middle ground. The next few years may show whether Mr Harper's victory and Mr Layton's success has eliminated the mushy middle, or merely placed it in abeyance.

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