



FASTFACTS



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Prospects For a New Parliament

On January 23, Canadians gave a decisive two thumbs down to the radical right-wing agenda of Stephen Harper's Conservative Party.

Harper did, of course, eke out a slim minority with 36 percent of the votes and 40 percent of the seats. But almost two-thirds of Canadians voted for a party other than the Conservatives. And each of these three other parties—which now hold 60 percent of the seats in the House of Commons—is more committed than are the Conservatives to the creative use of government to improve the lives of Canadians.

Given this outcome, Harper has little choice but to jettison the baggage he has carried forward with him from his days in the Reform and Alliance parties, and his stint as the head of the extremist National Citizen's Coalition.

Canadians have made it clear that we do not want a government that revives divisive debates about gay rights and women's right to choose, that privatizes health care and the Canadian Wheat Board, that abandons our

global environmental responsibilities, and that leads us into American-led wars and dangerous ballistic missile systems. Canadians rejected such extremism. Harper must too, or pay the price at the polls.

Setting such extremist policies aside will create an opportunity for the four parties to work together to solve some problems too long neglected.

The number of children living in poverty has grown by 20 percent since 1989. Over 300,000 Canadian children now use food banks. This is obscene. Yet the obscene growth in the already bloated incomes of those at the top of the income distribution, at the expense of people at the bottom, scarcely figured in the platforms of any of the parties.

Cleaning up Corruption

The key factor in the defeat of the Liberals was the perception that they are corrupt, and have been using the powers of government to benefit their political friends. All parties, including the Liberals, have stated they will support reforms aimed at curbing corruption. It is important that the House of Commons follow through on this.

It is equally important that the House address the broader culture of entitlement in the upper reaches of the private sector that flourished under the Mulroney, Chretien and Martin governments, exemplified, for example, by the relentless lobbying of private interests seeking deals at the expense of the public purse.



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Electoral Reform

Electoral reform also needs to be addressed. This Parliament should ignore the trivial proposals that have been advanced— for example, fixed election dates— and concentrate instead on reforms that will encourage citizens to become engaged in politics. Replacing the current system with Proportional Representation (PR), or a mixed PR/Representation by Population system, would help to do this. The indisputable advantage of Proportional Representation is that it equalizes the voting power of all citizens. This House of Commons should immediately convene a citizen's commission with a mandate to devise a system of Proportional Representation to be voted on in a referendum.

Inequality and Poverty

The economic and fiscal policies of federal governments in the past 30 years have resulted in a major increase in the shares of income going to the richest people in the country, at the expense of everyone else. For example, a recent study by Michael Veall and Emmanuel Saez found that the share of total income earned by the top 1 percent of Canadian income earners grew from 7.5 percent in 1980 to 13 percent in 2000, a level almost back to the 15 percent that prevailed at the time of the Great Depression.

Meanwhile, Campaign 2000's 2005 Poverty Report Card showed that the child poverty rate in Canada is 18 percent—almost one child in five— second only to the USA, which has the highest poverty rate of all industrialized countries. The number of children living in poverty has grown by 20 percent since 1989. Over 300,000 Canadian children now use food banks. This is obscene.

Yet the obscene growth in the already bloated incomes of those at the top of the income distribution, at the expense of people at the bottom, scarcely figured in the platforms of any of the parties. They need to bring it forward now and address it collectively. What is the point, after all, in sustaining an economic system that allows a small minority to appropriate almost all of the gains of economic growth, while vast numbers of our children are forced to rely on charity in order simply to eat?

A United Canada - Equalization and National Social Programs

Much was made during the election campaign of the 'fiscal imbalance' between Ottawa and the provinces. The provinces have the responsibility for health, education and social welfare, but most don't have the fiscal capacity to meet those responsibilities, even while federal governments run up huge surpluses. This imbalance threatens cherished social programs. A big part of the

solution is reform of Canada's Equalization program. Equalization and the national programs it funds are an important part of the ties that bind Canadian provinces and regions together. Reform of the Equalization program - namely, a return to a 10-province Equalization formula - is what is needed. The majority in the House of Commons should push for this in order to fund the social programs that the majority of Canadians have said they want.

Concluding Comments

There are some issues on which the Conservatives may find support in the House of Commons to move dangerously to the Right. For example, the strongly decentralist Harper government may try and join forces with the Bloc - which seeks greater power for Quebec - to further gut the power of the federal government and thus advance their Right-wing agenda. Any such initiatives would be inconsistent with what Canadians have said they want and should be vigorously opposed.

On most issues, however, the Conservatives will not be able to find support in the House for their extremist policies. The majority in the House reflects the somewhat more collectivist, more socially conscious views of the majority of Canadians. If all parties act wisely, this majority could be the basis for some positive outcomes.

- Errol Black and Jim Silver

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