

...PARTISAN REALIGNMENT

"...Canada has been experiencing a political transformation which... is...momentous."

By Everett Carl Ladd

Last month's election in Canada produced what is probably the most sweeping turnabout in the entire history of democratic politics.

Where else can we find in a stable democracy an election the equivalent of what just happened in Canada—with the ruling party, the Progressive Conservatives (PC), having won 169 of parliament's 295 seats in the preceding contest, plummeting to just 2 seats in this one? Or an election where two parties, Reform, and the Bloc Quebecois, which earned no seats at all 5 years earlier, now gained 106, 36% of all constituencies?

To be sure, the Canadian results reflected in part only the normal rhythm of democratic politics. Led by a young Quebecer, Brian Mulroney, the Conservatives came to power in 1984 and then won re-election in 1988. In this 9-year span in which the PCs ruled, Canadians frequently found themselves out-of-sorts with the state of public affairs—with the continuing constitutional confrontation over Quebec's status, the performance of the economy, and relations with the US, especially involving the free trade agreements. By October 1993, it was "time for a change."

But, some extraordinary new political developments have been added on top of these ordinary circumstances. For a quarter-century now, Canada has been experiencing a political transformation which, while entirely peaceful and democratic, is nonetheless far-reaching.

We can begin to understand it by looking first to the country's two historic major parties, the Progressive Conservatives and the Liberals. Both have names which are familiar-sounding to Americans, but in fact both originated in political traditions different from those of the US. The Canadian parties were conservative and liberal more in the European than in the American sense of the terms.

European conservatism embodied a defense of the state, initially in the form of the institutions of monarchy and aristocracy, not a claim for limited government. The latter, together with a defense of free markets, emerging business interests, and the like, has been the province of European liberalism.

In recent decades, though, Canada's Liberal party has been evolving from its historic roots into a moderate left-of-center party along the lines of the US Democrats. For a time it left an opening on the left which was filled by two social democratic parties—both of which are today members of the Socialist International.

The Parti Quebecois (and now its ally/affiliate the Bloc Quebecois) reflects this development imperfectly because it has gained much of its support not from its New Left philosophy but from French Canadian nationalism. The other new alliance, the New Democrats (NDP), have offered themselves as a conventional left-liberal party, and for a time enjoyed considerable success as a clearer left alternative to the evolving Liberals.

But contemporary Canada probably doesn't really offer a sufficient base for a full-fledged social democratic party. Last month, with the Liberals moving to undercut them, and beset by all sorts of problems as the governing party in Ontario and British Columbia, the NDP stumbled badly, going from the 43 seats it had won in the previous parliament to just 9, and from 20% of the popular vote to 7%.

Under Mulroney, the Progressive Conservatives seemed to many Americans to have become almost a sister party to the Republicans. He established close ties with Ronald Reagan and then George Bush. Abandoning their historic British Canadian nationalism, with its anti-US tinge, the PCs also took up the torch of free trade.

But the PCs are in no sense American-style conservatives. In particular, they are vastly more supportive of a broad and expanding role for government than are the Republicans. Mulroney and Reagan apparently liked each other, but the two men were far apart philosophically. The Canadian would never be heard describing modern government and the welfare state as "the problem, not the solution."

In fact, in the American sense of the term, Canada never had a conservative party until very recently. Enter Preston Manning and the Reform party. Manning has often been called in the US press, "the Ross Perot of Canada," but this is nonsense. He might far more accurately be thought of as Canada's Barry Goldwater.

Listening to Manning this past campaign, an American could not help but be struck by the echoes of Goldwater's movement. In both, a new-style conservatism was aborning. Manning is, it should be noted, a far better speaker than Goldwater was, and presents a friendlier TV personality.

Filling a void on the right, advocating curbs on the state, Reform surged to 19% of the popular vote in last month's elections (compared to the PCs 16%), and 52 seats. Strongest in the West where they arose, the Reformers gained what was perhaps their most impressive share of the vote in Ontario, where 20% backed them.

The next few years should test whether Canada now offers the kind of philosophic base needed to sustain a major US-style conservative party—and whether Reformers are adroit enough to build upon it, if it's there. What's evident is that in this year's election voters wanting to choose "conservative" split into "old" and "new" camps, thus ensuring a sweeping Liberal majority in parliament.