

Triumph of Canadian Conservatives

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Who's the most powerful conservative leader in the Americas, north and south? That may sound like a trick question, but it's not. The answer is Stephen Harper, the Canadian prime minister who triumphed last week in an election that all but destroyed two opposition parties, the Liberals and the Bloc Quebecois (BQ).

Harper, prime minister since 2006, has been called an "elected dictator" — and that was when he headed a minority government with limited power. Now he has a majority (167 of 308 seats in the House of Commons). In Canada's parliamentary system, this means Harper and the Conservative party control both the legislative and executive branches.

For decades, the Liberal party has considered itself Canada's "natural governing party." The election erased this conceit. First, the Liberals lost their status as the official opposition, a role that will now be played by the New Democratic party (NDP). Moreover, Liberal leader, former Harvard professor Michael Ignatieff, lost his seat in parliament and quickly resigned his leadership post.

Replacing Liberals as the default ruling party has been a goal of Harper's. In the election his party took a huge step in reaching beyond its base in western Canada, making significant inroads in Toronto and Vancouver, scoring big gains among Indian and Chinese immigrants, and crushing Liberals in some maritime provinces. The only mandate Harper sought was reelection, for himself and his party, and the defeat of a potential leftist coalition of Liberals, the NDP, and the BQ. Winning a majority was an unexpected bonus. If Conservatives haven't achieved a natural majority, they're getting closer.

Relations with the United States were not a major issue in the campaign. There was no U.S.-bashing, even from the left-of-center NDP and Green party. But dealing with the Obama administration is a top item on Harper's agenda.

Since he became Conservative party leader in 2004, Harper, 52, "has practiced [former Conservative Prime Minister] Brian Mulroney's golden rule for the conduct of relations with the U.S. — we can disagree without being disagreeable," wrote Colin Robertson, vice president of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute. "Now he needs to follow the second Mulroney dictum — Canada's influence in the world is measured by the extent to which we are perceived as having real influence in Washington."

Harper has succeeded in building a solid relationship with President Obama. He never criticizes the administration, at least publicly. Now he needs Obama's cooperation on two issues.

When Harper visited the White House in February, he and Obama announced the Declaration on a Shared Vision for Perimeter Security and Economic Competitiveness, an idea first broached, post-Sept. 11, by President Bush. It would require a new agreement to ease travel restrictions between the United States and Canada, but is yet to be implemented. Also, economic regulations need to be harmonized.

The second issue is a proposed pipeline, the Keystone XL, to carry oil from northern Alberta to the Gulf Coast of Texas. The United States imports twice as much oil from Canada as it does from Saudi Arabia and Mexico combined, and the Keystone XL pipeline would allow us to rely even more on Canada, a friendly and nearby ally.

The problem, however, is that some environmentalists claim this is "dirty oil," which contributes far more than other oil to global warming. It's not true, but the argument has support in the Obama administration's outpost of environmental extremism, the Environmental Protection Agency.

Because the pipeline would cross the Canadian-U.S. border, it must be approved by the State Department. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton seems willing to sign off, but the president also needs to be on board. Harper delivered a personal appeal to Obama at their February meeting and made the case for the pipeline at their joint press conference. The president was silent on the matter. Rejection of the pipeline would be a devastating blow to Harper, his party, and Canada.

The trick for Harper is to get and then keep Obama's attention. Since Canada is not a problem for the United States, it rarely penetrates the White House's radar. For instance, the election occurred a day after the killing of Osama bin Laden and got minimal coverage from the American media.

What seems to hold the interest of American policymakers is Canada's single-payer health care system — even though it barely produced a ripple in the campaign. Health care in Canada is handled chiefly by the provinces, which have considerably more authority than American states. The federal government's main role is to transfer money to the provinces, which are required to abide by the rules of the Canada Health Act. It bars free-market reforms such as cost sharing and extra billing.

Nonetheless, private clinics have sprung up, particularly in quasi-socialist Quebec. "The provincial and federal governments have been afraid to shut down the illegal clinics because they realize there would be a huge outcry from patients," says Sally Pipes, a native of Canada who runs the Pacific Research Institute in San Francisco.

Harper will have a chance in 2014 to ease the health care rules when the transfer act is renegotiated. "There's an opportunity, but Harper has not publicly stated if his government will loosen the strings for the transfers," says Niels Veldhuis of the Fraser Institute in Vancouver. If he does, "reforms might include everything from insurance experimentation and parallel private systems to the use of health savings accounts." Any major reforms would be enormously controversial as well as politically risky.

A more immediate result of the election is the demise of the Liberal party, the party of Pierre Trudeau, Lester Pearson, and Jean Chretien. It hadn't fallen to third-party status since the 19th century. BQ was massacred at home, in Quebec, by the NDP, which won 58 of the province's 75 seats, the BQ only four. The BQ's role in the national parliament has always been conflicted, given its aim for the province to secede from Canada and become a sovereign nation.

For Harper, the NDP is the ideal opposition. It's leftwing but also flaky. Many of its Quebec seats were won by placeholders or college students. One NDP candidate spent part of the campaign in Las Vegas and won anyway. With 102 seats, the NDP might seem formidable. It's not. With their majority, Conservatives won't need NDP votes.

For Harper and Conservatives, it doesn't get any better than last week's election.