

## **SAFETY FIRST: CANADA'S 2008 FEDERAL ELECTION**

by

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Canada's 40th federal general election was held on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008. This was the third time in four years that Canadians had been asked choose a national government. The frequency of recent national elections has been due to a succession of minority governments that yielded a plurality for the Liberals in 2004 and a plurality for the new Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) in 2006. The 2008 election was called on September 7<sup>th</sup> when Prime Minister Stephen Harper violated his promise to make fixed election dates a reality in Canadian federal politics and asked Governor General Michaëlle Jean to dissolve Parliament. Ostensibly, the early election call was prompted by what Harper called a “dysfunctional” parliament that he saw as hopelessly deadlocked. Lurking behind his rhetoric were polls that had the Conservatives receiving just less than 40% of the national vote, enough to make a CPC majority government possible, perhaps probable. Since many analysts were predicting the onset of a global recession, the Prime Minister likely surmised that an early election would be the best opportunity for his party to secure a majority before the economic roof fell in.

A CPC majority was not to be. Although the Conservatives captured 143 seats—19 more than in 2006—the party needed at least 155 to form a majority government. Aided by a strong showing in the western provinces, the CPC gained the support of just under 38% of the electorate, an increase of about 1.5% over 2006. The Conservative advance was stalled by a failure to make gains in Ontario, Canada's most populous province, and Quebec, where the party had hoped to make further inroads after its promising showing in 2006. In the Atlantic provinces, the Conservatives picked up an additional two seats, but still less than one-third of the MPs from this region were returning to Ottawa to sit on the government benches.

The biggest losers on election night were the Liberals. Often called Canada's "natural governing party," the Liberals had been in power continuously between 1993 and 2006, and had governed Canada for most of the post-World War II period. Campaigning under the direction of their new leader Stéphane Dion, the Liberals' seat share dropped from 103 to 76, and their vote total declined from 30% to 26%—their lowest total in Canadian history. The pro-sovereignty Bloc Québécois also lost a seat and went from capturing 42% of the Quebec vote in 2006 to only 38% in 2008. The small Green Party, whose leader Elizabeth May was allowed to participate in the leader debates after considerable inter-party wrangling, improved its vote share from under 5% in 2006 to almost 7% in 2008. However, the Greens did not live up to expectations. They failed to elect a single MP and their vote total was well below campaign polls showing them running above 10%. Perhaps the only winner among the opposition parties was Jack Layton's New Democrats, a long-lived social democratic party with roots in the economic hardships and political unrest of the Great Depression. The NDP was able to

parlay a small increase in its vote share (up 0.7% to 18%) into a gain of eight additional seats, giving the party a total of 37 MPs.

Regardless of which party they supported, all Canadians who believe that a flourishing democracy is characterized by high levels of citizen participation were disappointed with the 2008 result. Turnout in Canadian federal elections has been trending downward for some time, and only 59.1% of the eligible electorate cast a ballot in 2008. The 2008 figure was down nearly 6% on 2006, and was the lowest in Canadian history. In their post-mortems, some observers have suggested that the dismal showing is due in part at least to fatigue—Canadians are simply tired of having to cast their ballots so often. Another *ad hoc* explanation is that news of the deepening international economic chaos took center stage during the campaign, pushing possibly mobilizing stories about the election out of the limelight of media attention.

Many of those who did make it to the polls had the worsening economy on their minds. Recognizing their concerns, Prime Minister Stephen Harper attempted to portray himself and his CPC colleagues as the “safe pair of hands” needed keep Canada out of recession as worldwide economic growth slowed. At the beginning of the campaign, many voters appeared to trust Harper and were sceptical of changing government amid the growing turmoil. However, as the campaign progressed, the situation continued to worsen, as what little of the remaining faith investors had in the global credit market disappeared. Opposition parties sensed an opportunity to capitalize on public fears, and accused Harper of being a right-wing ideologue whose “hands off” approach to regulating private enterprise threatened the livelihoods of millions of Canadians. The resulting political theatrics peaked during the French-language leader debate when Green Leader

Elizabeth May shook her finger in Prime Minister Harper's face and called him a fraud. (She apologized for not knowing the French word, and was informed by the moderator that it was "un fraud.") Although these strident attacks on the prime minister did not prove fatal, they likely helped to frustrate the Conservatives' quest for a majority government.

Rather than fight the election solely on trying to convince voters that they were better than the Conservatives at handling a tough economic situation, the Liberals also tried to regain power by running on a novel "Green Shift" platform. Stéphane Dion and his colleagues tried to convince Canadians that their country could and should show the way forward in developing taxation programs that rewarded prudent environmental stewardship. The key element in their plan was a stiff tax on carbon emissions which, Mr. Dion argued, would generate the revenue needed to reduce business and personal income taxes. Voters were encouraged to go to the Liberals' Green Shift website to learn about the plan (some 40 pages in length) and calculate the size of their tax rebate.

Although the Green Shift was touted as a "win-win" for the environment and the economy, polls showed many people were sceptical of the ability of the eco-friendly taxes to generate enough revenue to permit tax breaks and "grow" the economy. The Green Shift agenda appeared to damage the party's candidates in rural areas where people rely on their own vehicles for long distance commutes and in the areas of the country just beginning to tap untouched deposits of oil and natural gas. For example, in one election post-mortem, the policy proposal was blamed for the loss of three Liberal seats in energy producing areas of New Brunswick. More generally, it appears that many Canadian voters favour environmental protection in the abstract, but recoil when the

sacrifices necessary for carbon emission reductions are spelled out to them. They are not ready to match their "Green words" with appropriate "political deeds."

Although Mr. Dion marshalled a bevy of economists who claimed that the plan was "revenue neutral" and most voters would profit as a result of the proposed tax shift, they ultimately failed to make his case. The program may have provided some people who were especially passionate about the environment justification for casting a strategic ballot for the Liberals rather than voting sincerely for the Greens in competitive ridings where the latter party had little chance of winning. However, early results suggest that gains from Liberal gains from the Green Shift program were, at best, marginal. Getting voters to focus on saving the planet when saving jobs was a manifest priority, was a very hard sell. As news about closing plants, failing banks and plunging stocks poured in, the Liberals quietly deemphasized their innovative plan and mounted a conventional attack on the government for its failed stewardship of the ailing economy.

Economic concerns were at the forefront of the 2008 campaign, but disagreements between the parties on other hot button issues made headlines. The forecast Conservative resurgence in Quebec was probably halted in part due to Stephen Harper's unwillingness to back away from cuts his Government made to the arts. At one point in the campaign, the Prime Minister depicted arts funding as welfare for the urban elite, noting "ordinary working people [are] unable to relate to taxpayer subsidized cultural elites when they see them at a rich gala on television." Conservative pledges to send youth offenders to adult prisons were another issue that did not play well in Quebec. Gilles Duceppe, long-time leader of the Bloc Québécois, played the Conservative policies as yet another example of how an "Anglo-dominated" federal government "disrespected" Quebeckers. Many so-

called "soft" Quebec nationalists who had been tempted to vote CPC reconsidered their choice, and their failure to "go Bleu" was an important reason that Mr. Harper and his party were denied a majority government.

Foreign affairs issues, especially Canadian participation in armed conflicts overseas, also were in play, especially at the elite level. In the English language debate among the party leaders, Gilles Duceppe enticed Stephen Harper to admit advocating Canadian involvement in the American-led invasion of Iraq. The Liberals then ran ads reminding Canadians of Harper's position on the issue and suggesting that the Prime Minister was too close to heartily disliked President Bush. In fact, Canadian troops were not Iraq, but they were in Afghanistan. With troop fatalities in the latter country nearing 100 at the onset of the campaign and Harper supporting the presence of Canadian forces until 2011, the issue could have been fodder for the NDP. Unlike the Liberals who had joined the Conservatives in advocating a 2001 pull-out, the New Democrats had called unequivocally for immediate troop withdrawal. But, the NDP did not get much traction on the issue. Afghanistan, like the Green Shift, drowned in the mounting tidal wave of news about Canada's worsening economy.

Concerns about national unity and federalism are perennial issues in Canadian elections. Unhappiness with Ottawa was prevalent in Newfoundland and Labrador in 2008. Angry at what he perceived was Harper's failure to discount revenues from offshore energy projects in equalization formulas Progressive Conservative Premier Danny Williams launched an "ABC" campaign with the aim of convincing voters to support "Anyone But the Conservatives." The plan worked—the Conservatives lost the three seats they had previously had in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Similarly, in Quebec concerns about getting a “fair deal” from Ottawa figured prominently in the Bloc Québécois campaign. This helped to keep the BQ viable at a time where many veterans of the sovereignty movement were questioning the party’s relevance because of Duceppe’s “soft-peddling” the goal of political independence for Quebec. Realizing that support for a sovereignty referendum had declined, the BQ railed against Harper’s free-market trade policies which they contended hurt Quebec’s manufacturing sector. This emphasis in the BQ campaign strengthened the larger economic theme that was increasingly dominating the issue agenda as election day approached.

When the ballots were counted on the evening October 14th, the Conservatives had increased their vote and seat totals, and their once powerful opponents, the Liberals, were in disarray. Learning of his party's dismal performance, Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion reluctantly resigned, after complaining bitterly about how the Conservatives had used their money and power to castigate his leadership abilities. However, the CPC did not do as well as Prime Minister Harper and his colleagues had hoped. As in 2006, the goal of a majority government proved elusive. The Conservatives have returned to Ottawa with only a plurality, not a majority of parliamentary seats.

Heading a minority CPC government, Stephen Harper has the challenge of setting the agenda and sustaining the life of the 40<sup>th</sup> Parliament during a period of great economic uncertainty. Mr. Harper will need very considerable skill and perhaps more than a little luck as he faces the task ahead. In the immediate aftermath of a third election in four years, not wants yet another one. However, several months down the road, things may be different. The Liberals will have a new leader and, if the economy should

weaken further, they and the other opposition parties may decide that the Conservatives are vulnerable. This, in turn, would trigger a vote of "no confidence" that would topple the government and force it to go to the people in the midst of what might be a major economic downturn. But, this bleak scenario is not the only possible future for Harper and his party. Rather, by demonstrating in the months ahead that he is indeed a "safe pair of hands" who can be entrusted to deal with very serious national problems, the prime minister has an opportunity to turn adversity to advantage. Whether he can do so is an open question.