

# Election aftermath

*Oh brave new house, that hath such MP's in it!*

An eerie quiet has settled over the land. Televisions are once again dominated by the usual vapid offerings of sugary sitcoms, overblown melodrama, and entertainment scandals. Canadian coffee shop chitchat has turned from political speculation to such perennial preoccupations as the fortunes of those puck-chasing paladins who hold the national imagination (and national airtime) in their icy grip. The election is well and truly over, and Canadians voted for change in overwhelming numbers, electing a brand-new majority government and voting completely new political parties into the role of our country's opposition. The political scene is unquestionably transformed, but it remains to be seen whether this will translate into a significant change in the governing of the country and the conduct of its Parliament. Radical change, regardless of politicians' promises, does not come overnight. Whether the new Parliament is their cup of tea or not, many Canadians may soon find themselves waking up and smelling the political coffee.

Politicians who for months shouted their platforms from the rooftops are now strangely silent. Doug Henning and his Natural Law cohorts have done a disappearing act. The Green Party has withered away into obscurity. The National Party remains a national joke. God only knows what the Christian Heritage Party is up to. The New Democrats are old hat. The Progressive Conservatives have become the Regressive Conservatives, devolving from a two-time majority government to a two-member parliamentary contingent that is well below the total needed to claim official party status, let alone be any kind of contender in the new political order of Ottawa. After the New Democrats and P.C.'s coming out on the losing end of a political bloodbath that saw a massive shift of power in the House of Commons, Parliament is awash in a sea of red-Liberal red. Jean Chretien's Liberals, "the other big party", the political bridesmaids of the past decade, have filled the gap left by the ousted Conservatives and then some, winning a commanding majority to form the new government. Even more astounding are the upstart regional parties that have arisen to fill the role of our country's opposition: the Reform Party (self-proclaimed anti-establishment scourges of traditional government) and the Bloc Quebecois, a Quebec-based separatist party whose majority within Quebec gave it enough seats to become the official opposition for the whole country, even though the party is publicly dedicated to the dissolution of the federation it has now sworn to serve in parliament. Politics may make for strange bed The dust has settled, and the House of Commons is virtually unrecognizable, largely populated by politicians who for years have espoused the most radical of changes in Canadian government.

The radical shift of power does not necessarily mean we should expect a radical shift in government, though. The Liberals are a mainstream national party, seasoned veterans well-apprised of political realities. That being the case, we probably should not expect anything too radical from them. They do seem to be pursuing some of their election promises in good faith (compact government, curtailing political perks, and cutting defense spending, for instance); however, Liberal indignation over such things as the GST and NAFTA has long since given way to promises to modify these unpopular policies rather than eliminate them (though Chretien is trying to haggle with Clinton on the NAFTA front). As the fiasco-filled rise to power of the NDP in Ontario has shown, even the most idealistic of parties must act in accordance with harsh economic and political realities. No one (despite Doug Henning's claims to the contrary) can wave a magic wand and make our financial difficulties disappear. No government can solve all our problems, and the Liberals

will prove to be no exception.

In their own ways, the new opposition parties are facing even harsher realities. The Reform Party, which has always savagely attacked traditional government and its privileged elite, now finds itself in the awkward position of being solidly among that elite. Along with all the other challenges they face, the legion of rookie Reform MP's must decide to what extent they will adopt the perks and privileges afforded members of Parliament (including such goodies as unlimited travel funds, a lucrative pension plan, tax-free allowances, and free services like an exclusive restaurant, a steam room, barber, hairdresser, tailor, and masseur). Now that they are in Ottawa, some Reformers seem to have fewer qualms about these privileges, describing some as necessary conveniences for the job. One Reform MP, quoted in the *Globe and Mail*, nicely summed up the sad reality of the situation by saying that the Reformers would be "disadvantaged" if they gave up all the perks of power and the other parties didn't. While Reform Leader Preston Manning claims there will be discussions of how to reduce the privileges of office to at least some extent, some of his MP's seem content for now to line up at the trough. When in Rome...

Still more astonishing and blackly humorous is the hypocritical position the Bloc Quebecois finds itself forced into- a party dedicated to the independence of Quebec from our federation, serving as the official opposition for a country that, outside of Quebec, they don't give a flying French fig about. Lucien Bouchard's drive for power in Quebec worked too well, saddling his party with the responsibilities of the national opposition despite their insular, separatist agenda. This paradox is made all-too-clear by the recent swearing-in of the Bloc MP's as members of parliament. When Gilles Duceppe became the first MP elected to parliament as a B. Q. representative in a 1990 by-election, he made a media show of rejecting the Parliamentary oath of loyalty to the Queen thereafter. Now that the B.Q. has been elected as the official opposition, all fifty-four members were sworn in quietly, oath of loyalty to the queen and all, without a peep of protest, let alone the French kiss-off that any self-respecting separatist would reserve for the institution of monarchy, symbolic or otherwise. The B.Q., for now, seem content to speak softly and carry a big grudge.

What this amounts to is that Canada's most infamous political rebels, the B.Q., have joined the Reformers in surreptitiously donning the conformist trappings of mainstream Parliament. Their joint complicity in traditional Parliamentary practices is amply illustrated by their shared contention that the fallen P.C.'s and NDP should not be allowed to retain official party status. While this is a perfectly justifiable contention, it makes clear the massive role reversal the B.Q. and Reform have undergone- the one-time political fringe groups kicking the new underdogs when they're down, working to disempower the mainstream parties as they themselves were once excluded. The Reformers and the B.Q. have become what they always opposed- instead of beating the system, they are becoming the system. What does this all mean? While the policies and practices of the government and its opposition have yet to clearly emerge, it is clear that, no matter how much pre-election hype there was to the contrary, none of the newly empowered parties can guarantee quite so much sweeping reform as quickly as they may have led voters to believe. You can't remake national politics overnight, and any dreamers who thought swapping old political parties for new ones would do this may be in for a rude awakening.

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