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A VICTORY LAP: CANADA'S FIRST YEAR UNDER TORY MAJORITY

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“Be careful about what you wish for as you may get it.” The old adage is a cautionary note for those who have long sought a specific objective and then must face the ancillary “What next?” question. In this instance, after struggling through more than five years of minority government, the Tories finally secured a majority electoral, parliamentary victory on May 2, 2011.

The election was more than a Tory victory; it reshaped Canadian political geography by leapfrogging the New Democratic Party (NDP) to the previously unknown heights of “Official Opposition,” while plunging the Liberals into previously unplumbed depths of third place with their lowest ever vote percentage.

Consequently, much of this first Tory parliamentary majority year has been devoted to sorting out—both by the government and the opposition. Meanwhile, both the West and Quebec, politically quiescent for years, have begun to bubble. For the West, Alberta once again feels “dissed” over intimations of federal management of its oil reserves/production. For Quebec, a student strike has churned Montreal for four months leaving analysts at a loss (but never for words) over its meaning and consequences. And, thus, Quebec separatists’ hopes are reawakening.

THE GOVERNMENT

For Prime Minister Stephen Harper, a majority government was the vindication of an almost 20 year march inside and outside government, starting with election as a Reform MP in 1993. The 1993 election shattered a working Tory parliamentary majority, virtually annihilating the then-governing Conservatives, reducing them to a two seats, “telephone booth” caucus. The subsequent political challenge for federal conservatives was to reassemble their shards into political relevance when faced with dominant Liberals governing in the best economic times of a generation.

To conflate a long political hegira, after two leadership changes, Stephen Harper became leader of a rebranded “Conservative Party of Canada” having orchestrated a takeover of the old “Progressive Conservative Party.” Continuing to be known as “Tories,” Harper forced the Liberals into a minority government in 2004 and then won a very slim minority in 2006 which he increased in 2008 until finally orchestrating his long sought majority in May 2011.

In so doing, Harper managed the classic—but exceptionally difficult—political transformation of an outlier party into acceptable mainstream governance. Slowly the social conservative/“red neck” elements of the Reform party were sidelined. Reform Party shibboleths such as a “Triple E Senate” (equal, elected, effective) were shelved. Politically incandescent (not just “hot”) buttons such as abortion (Canada remains one of the few countries with no law governing abortion) and gay marriage that are defining for social conservatives have been studiously ignored.

In their grinding pursuit of power, the conservatives slowly expanded from their Western/Alberta base into the mother lode of parliamentary seats in Ontario. However, after a promising “French kiss” expansion in Quebec in 2006, the province has returned to being a Tory wasteland.

Given his accomplishments, Harper qualifies as the best politician of his generation. And over time, he has become acceptable (he will never be loved) to most Canadians while still vituperatively dismissed by others. Nevertheless, he can no longer be depicted as “scary” with a “hidden agenda.” Instead, reluctantly he is viewed as a “hockey dad” who is writing a book about the Canadian national passion. He is capable of playing piano and singing a Beatles song at a national music event accompanying cellist Yo Yo Ma and appearing in a cameo role in a TV sitcom. He benefits from old-fashioned personal probity/family values with no interest in Cardin suits or Gucci shoes. His children are postcard perfect (but media shielded) backdrops, and his wife performs with panache some of the typical good works (humane society/rescued animals) without ever leaving the impression that she is a “stay at home mom” rather than a competent professional partner of the prime minister.

The basis for Tory victory and prospect for continued political success is simple: the economy (“stupid”). By a combination of good luck and good management, Canada avoided the worst of the 2008 Great Recession and has recovered better than the United States and the European Union. To be sure, this is not “to die for” economic vibrancy. But the federal budget deficit should be eliminated by the next (2015) scheduled election; the jobs lost in 2008 have been recouped; unemployment at 7.2 percent is a point below U.S. levels (reversing historical patterns); GDP at slightly over 2 percent is currently acceptable albeit hardly stellar. Additionally, Canadian banks receive international plaudits; trade levels are again rising; energy prices although dipping from historic levels remain a major economic driver. There is worry over a housing “bubble,” but it has not yet popped, and Canadian mortgage requirements should preclude anything approaching the U.S. housing disaster. If the world had more Canada, it would be considerably more content.

THE TORIES IN CONTROL—YEAR IN REVIEW

Exercising Power. A traditional description of Canadian politics was “every four years, we elect a dictatorship” and the Liberal Chretien/Martin government from 1993-2006 earned the “friendly dictatorship” sobriquet. Such reflects the reality of parliamentary majority government: a Canadian prime minister can push through virtually any legislation desired tempered only by the recognition that come the next election, the people might *de facto* reverse actions that overreach. And thus, reflecting their political platform, the Tories:

Eliminated the long gun registry and ordered records destroyed. Much despised by political conservatives, rural dwellers, and hunters, the registry was a sop for urbanites that would like to see all weapons of individual destruction banned. It suffered from massive cost overruns at inception and remained of arguable value for police. Mass killings were undertaken with legally registered weapons. The federal government has beaten down provincial efforts to maintain such registries, insisting that privacy protection requires all records be eliminated.

Implemented a crime package. Tory opponents campaigned against “jets and jails”—supposedly the Conservative objectives instead of socially sensitive good government expenditures. Consequently, in victory, there will be more jail construction as well as tougher minimum sentences, stiff provisions against marijuana growing, and provisions to restrict parole/bail notably for young offenders. Opponents insist that such attitudes/expenses are unnecessary when crime is falling and claim that mandatory minimum sentences have failed. The Tories ignore the whinging while embracing the principle that crime should be punished.

Moved immigration legislation. Preparations are in process to adjust Canadian immigration policy to emphasize recruitment of best and brightest and reduce pure family reunification. Immigration advocates are incensed.

Reducing government. As part of the effort to shrink government size and spending, the Tories project civil service cuts. While some will come from attrition, sufficient real reductions will generate angst among federal professionals. As the Tories have never trusted the civil service mandarins, their concern for such pain is minimal.

OPPOSITION IS GENERATING SLINGS AND ARROWS IN RETURN

The role of the Opposition is to oppose, and the NDP/Liberals have responded like porkers being hauled squealing

to a Canada Day barbeque. In the process of opposition, they have been disconcertingly effective at times, forcing the Tories to push Parliamentary decisions with limited debate and/or defer action on key propositions. Some illustrations:

--The "Omnibus" Bill C-38. This 425-page Rube Goldberg concoction is only peripherally a budget bill. Reportedly, it will adjust 70 separate pieces of legislation and contains some 700 clauses, including provisions to boost the age of eligibility for Old Age Security and adjustments to employment insurance laws. It includes substantial, controversial revisions for environmental regulation (notably the management of environment impact statements) and fishery control. At such breadth and magnitude, it had the potential to energize every critic of the government—and such presented some 871 amendments (regrouped into 159 packages) prompting a 22-hours voting marathon on June 14, 2012. Opponents sought to extract some of the elements, e.g., environmental issues from the omnibus for separate review; they failed.

-- Bill 30 ("Lawful Access") is a complex legal effort to expand security officials ability to access citizens' electronic information without warrants. (Comparable measures were attempted/failed under the Liberals and reportedly are law in countries such as the UK, Australia, and the United States.) Introduced in February 2012, it generated a firestorm of criticism from privacy advocates across the political/social spectrum, as well as some extreme Internet/Twitter releases of the Public Safety Minister Vic Toews's divorce provisions and publicizing the name of his mistress. Faced with full spectrum furry, the government flinched, referring the bill back to the parliamentary Justice/Human Rights Committee before any further action. It may sit there for a long time.

-- "Robocalls" was either a nefarious Tory effort to steal the 2011 election or a tempest in a thimble. The basis for the yet-to-be-born scandal is the slowly emerging analysis, based on claims by losing Liberal candidates, that supporters in at least a half dozen electoral constituencies received duplicitous telephone calls, claiming to be from Elections Canada, directing them to false voting locations. Tedious and painstaking investigation identifies a cell phone owned by "Pierre Poutine" as the source of many calls. Circumstances are muddied as Tories also claim some supporters received comparable calls. With evident frustration, one journalist privately noted that although the story broke in February, it had not been tied to Tory party officials. Another insider suggested the possibility of excessive enthusiasm by "tiny Tories" i.e., young, computer savvy partisans trying to gain an edge for specific candidates in tight elections. A skeptic might wonder whether *anyone actually listens* to a robocall.

-- The Ongoing Bev Oda Debacle. Minister for International Cooperation Bev Oda was an unending source of embarrassing improprieties. During a 2011 conference in London, Oda switched from the conference hotel to the Savoy, hired a limousine, and consumed \$16 orange juice—subsequently overbilling the government for these expenses. In April 2012, these improprieties came to light, and she apologized publicly and repaid the overbilling. Unmentioned in the media mudslinging is Oda's unrepentant chain smoking: the first hotel was nonsmoking; London taxis are nonsmoking; and \$16 orange juice is a "gotcha" charge at many hotels where the patron foolishly assumes that the buffet breakfast includes orange juice. Oda's chain smoking is an explanation, not an acceptable excuse. The failures lay in her own blithe behavior and the absence of "minders" who should have noted the hotel price differences and perhaps suggested a brisk walk from her hotel to the conference center would also do her lungs some good. An obvious target for an anticipated summer cabinet reshuffle into retirement/back bench, she announced her resignation from politics on July 3. Not even her status as one of Harper's earliest supporters and a Tory female minority was enough to salvage her career.

--The F-35 Imbroglia. The "fifth generation" stealth, fighter-of-the-future F-35 has become a morass of anticipated skyrocketing costs and much delayed delivery. A decade ago, Liberals endorsed participation in an F-35 international production consortium with upfront buy-in funding. The long-term result was to be contracts benefiting Canadian manufacturing plus an inside track on lower cost, well-timed deliveries of the F-35s.

The aircraft is widely regarded by aircraft experts as a potentially outstanding replacement for increasingly obsolescent CF-18s; Canada projected purchasing 65 for \$9 billion. But the slips twixt cup and lip have ranged from disconcerting to politically embarrassing. Costs have escalated; such increases are traditionally associated with state-of-the-art equipment still in development and testing, but....Consequently, in lean budgetary times—globally—the prospective purchasers are having third thoughts. Is this a fighter too far for the RCAF? Even accepting that the F-35 is designed to be the NATO standard well into the 21st century does it connote a politico-military parading in which Ottawa wants to participate, for example, a Libya or former Yugoslavia equivalent in

2021?

The domestic political consequence has been relentless hammering at Defense Minister Peter MacKay whose flailing struggle with the costs has made him appear dumb, deceitful, or duplicitous. One basis is the absence of a formal competition to replace the CF-18s, but rather the enthronement of the F-35 without even mock competition. Subsequently, the GOC spent considerable effort denying the legitimacy of the cost estimates by the Parliamentary Budget Officer and Auditor General—projections that retrospectively appear entirely legitimate. Simultaneously, MacKay's contention that he was not aware that accounting standards required full lifetime costing appears disingenuous. MacKay has been thoroughly charred by the debate, but as a senior minister (ranking Tory party member and CPC cofounder) replacing him would appear difficult and also require a shift in the GOC's F-35 policy. As of mid-June, the muttering over switching MacKay with another senior Cabinet officer persisted. Separately, the GOC announced creation of a National Fighter Procurement Secretariat with a mandate to review the circumstances, ensuring a transparent choice of the CF-18 successor. This looks like a mechanism to escape forward—at least until Parliament returns in the autumn.

Ultimately, Canada must decide on its national security role: a more muscular “punching above its weight” stance harking back to World War II/Cold War practices or an embrace of “light peacekeeping” as the limit of its military capacity. Perhaps something, still struggling to be defined, in between is in the process of being born.

An Interim Bottom Line. As Parliament rose for a three-month break on June 21, 2012, the Conservatives were acting according to their principles—steadily implementing long-standing political objectives for reducing spending and downsizing government. In the process, however, they are piling up a legacy of ill will for the manner in which they have operated. Harper aside, there is a mean-spirited edge of dancing-on-your-grave Tory exultation following parliamentary votes. There is no grace in their victories, rather a rub-your-nose-in-it attitude with the equivalent of the “Trudeau salute” to the frustrated Opposition.

Harper's ultimate objective remains the elimination of the Liberal Party as a viable political force. He seeks a two-party Canada, believing the electorate will prefer right-of-center politics than the reverse of the coin. Again, a success in this effort could be a Pyrrhic victory as 60 percent of the Canadian electorate votes against conservatives.

Nevertheless, NDP/Liberal bitterness is palatable. Abetted by a media whose skepticism toward Tory policies frequently verges on open hostility, the Opposition claims Tory parliamentary action, both current and prior to the 2011 election, deliberately avoids institutional rules and is essentially undemocratic. Tories respond that they are doing nothing not done by Liberals when governing. Analysis, like noting severe debate restrictions, unresponsive answers to Opposition questions, and “omnibus” bills indicates they are correct—it is just that they have pushed the margins further and more frequently. Indeed, one can recall a comment by then Liberal House leader Herb Gray responding to frustrated conservatives seeking coherent responses to their daily parliamentary queries, “It is Question Period, not Answer Period.”

Those who predicted (hoped) that a majority victory would mean kinder/gentler Tory governance have been extremely disappointed. The prime minister has shown a scintilla greater confidence in key ministers (ForMin Baird; Finance Minister Flaherty; Citizenship Minister Kenney) to speak for themselves, but nobody doubts PM Harper is the final decider on anything worth deciding. Caucus loyalty and message discipline remain remarkably tight (another element of frustration for the media). As Harper is not a “hail fellow well met” leader, constantly schmoozing with his members (as was a successful Tory predecessor Brian Mulroney), the depth of caucus loyalty is somewhat of a mystery. Critics sneer that it is fear enforced by “baseball bats” (but Ottawa is hardly a KGB gulag); consequently, an observer might conclude that caucus discipline originates in respect for Harper's political success and acumen, as well as hopes that an extended run in power ultimately will mean rank and position for obedient backbenchers now occupying tertiary parliament positions or doing no more than clapping in unison for their superiors statements.

THE OPPOSITION

Both NDP and Liberals have spent the year in a “reset” search mode. Both had interim leaders throughout much of the year with the NDP concluding its search in February and the Liberals about to embark on the process. The Bloc Quebecois remains paralyzed and the Greens continue fighting for media attention.

THE NEW DEMOCRATS

On May 2, 2011, NDP leader Jack Layton surpassed all expectations and predictions by smashing the separatist Bloc Quebecois (winning 59 seats in Quebec) and pushing his party to unprecedented heights nationally while becoming leader of the Official Opposition with 103 seats. By August 22, he was dead from cancer.

After a protracted and acrimonious campaign, Thomas Mulcair was elected leader, defeating Brian Topp, the insiders' choice. Essentially, rank-and-file NDP party members rejected Topp as a lackluster, backroom apparatchik who having never sought elected office could not match PM Harper in parliamentary exchanges or political dexterity.

Mulcair is high risk/high gain. He gets a "triple A" rating: arrogant; abrasive; ambitious. But he is also accorded a fourth "A"—able. Critics hypothesize that his incandescent temper will lead to self-immolation with memorable public comments, but such has not (yet) been the case. And some suggest that his ostensibly negatives are not necessarily negatives for political success. They note that the prime minister also qualifies for such a "Triple A" rating.

Nevertheless, the NDP has succeeded, during its first year in Official Opposition,—by not failing. Its very inexperienced caucus (several were still university students when elected and few had been elected even as dog catchers) has avoided the political pits and pratfalls awaiting neophytes. They get grudging respect for having mastered "critic" briefs and have not been caught in the type of viral video debacles all too often typical of youthful inexperience. More adroitly, they have balanced their need to show strong support for Quebec interests with maintaining a careful distance from overt support for the Montreal demonstrators/student strikers—ducking the ideological/educational questions by defining them as provincial issues.

On the other hand, Mulcair deliberately picked a fight with the Alberta oil producers which he declaims have led to a case of the "Dutch disease" for Canada. Translation: the high price for oil has boosted the value of the Canadian dollar leading to harder times for industrial exports. He hypothesizes a carbon tax and "sustainable development" for the economy. Albertans snort and intuit a return to a federal tax grab for their natural resources. Mulcair may have embraced the old Liberal maxim of "Screw the West and take the rest" by kick-starting Western hostility. But as the NDP has virtually nothing to lose in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, a purist stance on the environment may well help them turn a "green" posture into Ontario/BC/Quebec votes.

THE LIBERALS

The once "natural governing party" that dominated Canadian politics throughout most of the twentieth century is in profound disarray. And with the mid-June 2012 decision by current interim party leader, Bob Rae, not to seek leadership, the questions for the Liberals deepen. Who leads us and where are we going?

For much of the year following its May 2011 debacle, Rae's leadership was politically effective. Rae is highly intelligent, an adroit parliamentarian, an effective debater in French as well as in English. His objective was to push Liberal reorganization, increase membership/funding, hammer the Government, and in the process raise the Liberals in the polls. And during the extended NDP leadership campaign, he did just that: the NDP interim leader was a cipher, and Rae benefited from friendly media rarely available to the third party in Parliament. The intimation was that Rae would overcome the technical restriction that the interim leader could not run for permanent leadership as his strengths were clearly needed to reboot the Liberals. With Mulcair's election, however, the Liberals backslid. Liberals polling support declined; NDP's rose.

Although Liberal Party leadership indicated willingness to lift the injunction against Rae's candidacy, on June 13, 2012, Rae indicated he would not run. His weaknesses were as apparent as his strengths: age past the best-before-date (accentuated by a head of white hair) and long memories by Ontario citizens who recall that Rae (then an NDP leader) had a disastrous term as provincial premier.

The Bloc Quebecois and the Greens. The NDP's 2011 election surge was matched by a Bloc Quebecois (BQ) implosion. Dropping from 49 to four seats, the BQ now lacks official party status and is marginalized in parliament. Long-time leader, Gilles Duceppe, was defeated, and new BQ leader (Daniel Paille) lacks a parliamentary seat.

Rebuilding is possible, but Quebec separatists are directing all efforts to winning the Quebec provincial election. A victory would prospectively reignite sovereignty hopes and concurrently spark a BQ revival. Defeat will make them irrelevant.

After running federal candidates since 1984, the Greens elected their first MP—party leader Elizabeth May—in May 2011. Immediate results have been scant as a lone MP facing a majority government gets minimal attention. However, Green Party representation in Parliament will force organizers of national debates during the next election campaign to include May. And, although Green Party vote fell 40 percent from the 2008 election, May is energetic and articulate.

Political Futures—and the Next Election. Unless there is a dramatic political upheaval, the Tory government majority is secure until the next scheduled election in late 2015. There are those who hypothesize that Harper could become Canada's longest serving prime minister, winning elections as long as he cares to compete and comprehensively outmaneuvering feckless opponents. The logic is that the Tories have seized possession of a solid economy as their hallmark, run a clean government, boosted Canadian national pride, benefit from the distribution of an additional 30 parliamentary seats that are located principally in conservative/leaning constituencies, and have highly capable leadership with a tightly disciplined caucus (contrasted with an Opposition that is not).

Conversely, if the adage that “a week in politics is a lifetime,” three years could be a millennium. Dependence on the economy as the rationale for re-election could devolve into a “what have you done for me lately?” popular attitude if the Opposition manages to suggest that continued middling results aren't good enough. Items such as the gap between the rich one percent and the rest could become a major political issue rather than a debating point, the environment may return as a defining difference, and the “cookie jar” could prove irresistible to the corruptible.

In that regard, polls in mid-June 2012 placed the NDP and Tories in a statistical tie. Most observers regard this surge as momentary, but it could also be a “cloud the size of a man's hand” on the horizon. Perhaps indicatively, the NDP continued to hold the lead in Quebec, although the Bloc Quebecois has recovered some strength. Quebecers, a year after their stunning embrace of the NDP, have not shown buyers regret over their choices. Mulcair heads a caucus that believes in itself and that all things are possible.

Nevertheless, you need somebody to beat somebody, even accepting the traditional wisdom that governments defeat themselves. Over the coming years, the NDP must convince Canadians that it has divested itself of traditional economic/foreign policy attitudes that historically skewed unacceptably leftward. And Thomas Mulcair must evolve into a man with a “prime ministerial” stature. For their part, the Liberals must find a set of defining principles not harking back 50 years to National Health, Old Age Payments, and peacekeeping shibboleths. And Justin Trudeau, the most obvious future Liberal leader, must rise above the image of immaturity that dogs him and find a persona not dependent on his sainted father's residual charisma.

In this regard, Trudeau is also “high risk/high gain”—he is the most galvanizing individual in Canadian politics, and Rae's withdrawal has cleared the path for Trudeau's Liberal leadership. In the forthcoming leadership race, his prospective competition lacks credentials and funding. Critics sneeringly note that he is “Margaret's son” without his father's intellectual depth. Others suggest that he needs more “seasoning”—but at age 40, he is no infant, and he has the ability to transform youthful supporters into voters (100,000 Twitter followers available to support him). Political timing is rarely “right” and if Trudeau waits, there may be no Liberal Party to lead—other than into fusion with the NDP.

Moreover, the distinctions between the center-leaning-left Liberals and the left-leaning-center NDP are hard to define. Such ostensible ideological compatibility leads commentators to urge that the “left” unite as the “right” united under Stephen Harper. Technically attractive, such a fusion is near term unlikely. The Liberals believe they are a great party that has suffered a temporary setback. The NDP believes it is a rising force for the future, capable of winning power if not in 2015 than in a subsequent election.

A FUTURE FOR CANADIAN FORCES

For the second consecutive year, the future of Canadian Forces (CF) has remained in limbo. Post-Afghanistan the CF has greater public respect and appreciation, but is musing over a role for the out years of the twenty-first

century. The government has pushed optics—rebranding the individual services as the *Royal Canadian Navy* and the *Royal Canadian Air Force*, moves ostensibly designed to boost patriotic pride nationally, as well as within the armed services. As no one in the current CF had ever served under the “royal” designation, one suspects that most would have preferred the funds expended to have been devoted to equipment and personnel.

The baseline 2008 “Canada First” Department of National Defense white paper, laying out strategy/policy/spending for 20 years, is no longer fiscally credible but was always regarded as sketched in sand rather than engraved in steel. That said, there is no back-to-the-drawing board incentive as such white papers are exceptionally difficult to bring to fruition and there is no political impetus to do so.

The long anticipated shoe drop came with the February budget where defense will be taking cuts, but reduction precision is lacking. Personnel cuts are projected for civilian headquarters staff and perhaps for reservists. A well-regarded air defense/anti-tank system, recently purchased at significant cost, will be sold for much less (rationale reportedly being that its anti-air capabilities couldn’t effectively defend against helicopters). As noted above, the Canadian Army capabilities have peaked following its Afghan decade with the extant question being “Wither goeth thou?” And the air force, having obtained strategic C-17 transports, is now wrapped around its fighter-of-the-future recalculation. Nobody can be sure that the politically battered F-35 will prevail.

Another obstacle for resisting cuts is that CF *returned* \$1.5 billion in unspent funds in 2010, other money in 2009, and projects returning funds again this year. Although there are explanations, there are no excuses for failing to spend appropriated funds. The impeccable logic from budgeteers remains that “If they didn't spend it, they don't need it.”

Moreover, there is a sense that it is the “navy’s turn”—for equipment rebuilding and strategic attention. This focus is especially true when the army reminds Canadians of the inconclusive/divisive Afghan experience and the air force is in the throes of its gut-wrenching F-35 imbroglio. In contrast, a massive contract for ship building was divided between east and west coast shipyards; the process was regarded as a model for “hands off” government decision making; however, professionals note that the major fights are to come regarding what ships to build.

Following the U.S. “pivot” to Asia, the Canadian navy is also repositioning; one of the long-derided Canadian submarines will participate in Pacific exercises with the US Navy this summer. And the most heavily touted candidates for Chief of the Defense Staff (equivalent to the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) are senior navy officers.

The existential problem for the CF remains the absence of a security/defense consensus across the political spectrum. The parties are juxtaposed: Tories support robust defense spending; Liberals/NDP/Greens support no more than minimalistic spending.

QUEBEC AND THE RETURN OF SEPARATISM

For several years, essentially since the advent of the Liberal/Charest government in 2003, and the concurrent struggles within a sovereignty movement to regain coherence (let alone power), Quebec politics have lacked drama; the dog slept undisturbed. To be sure, for empowered federalists, “dull is good,” and Charest, having won a mandate in 2008 technically doesn’t have to face the electorate until 2013.

Quebec politics *have* been interesting, but until recently intriguing only on the federal level where the NDP virtually annihilated the long dominant Bloc Quebecois in the May 2011 election. The waves from this political tsunami have continued as a storm surge during the past year with no clear conclusion regarding long-term results.

Now, however, provincial politics are bubbling. A “neverendum” university student “strike” that by mid-June had persisted for four months has left the Charest government at wits end in search of a mechanism to resolve it. Charest’s political opposition has derided him for incompetence, siding (or not siding) with the students when politically convenient. Ostensibly, the strike responds to the government’s effort to increase university tuition approximately \$325/year for five years to respond to ever-rising education costs. The logic is impeccable: Quebec’s tuition is the lowest in Canada (and in North America); it is effectively lower (when considering inflation) than it was years ago, and the increase would be about equivalent to a bottle of designer water per day. Charest is only the

latest in a string of Quebec governments that have attempted (and frequently failed) to increase these tuitions. Students contend that university education should be free—recalling it as a commitment dating from the “Quiet Revolution” of the 1960s still not fulfilled.

For the most part, the students have been no more than an irritant—and their continued efforts through a Quebec winter had to gain them some sympathy for persistence. It appeared to be a residual metastasis of the 2011 “Occupy” demonstrations. However, as they persisted through the spring—and were characterized by intimidating other students who were en route to classes to get the education for which they had paid coupled with refusal to respect court orders for such access by teachers and nonstrikers—public sympathy dropped. Polls showed the public backed the government by better than 60 percent.

In early May, the Charest government attempted to resolve the confrontation with a proposal to stretch the tuition increase over seven years. Student strike leaders declined to support what the government regarded as an agreement, and student unions rejected the proposal. A reshuffle of senior Liberals addressing the issue has not moved it—and throughout much of May, demonstrations, reinforced by union funding and organizers, became more violent—and so did police reaction. On May 18, the government instituted Bill 78, a political bombshell, distinctly limiting association/assembly with rules regarding advance notification of protest marches. Popular sympathy/support for the government flipped; the government-student confrontation was now viewed as a civil rights issue, and demonstrations became even larger while the government looked both feckless and hapless. Bill 78 is not being enforced—it is currently under court review with a phalanx of civil libertarian lawyers assailing it.

The “strike” has long moved beyond the relatively trivial tuition costs into a power struggle. The effort now is to force the government into early elections (and for the labor unions to derail a potentially devastating inquiry (the Charbonneau commission) into corruption that could make the Augean stables look like a mud puddle.

MUDDLED POLITICS—A QUICK SUMMING UP OF THE ACTORS/ACTIONS IN PLAY

Liberals. This is a tired government. Charest has been prominently engaged in Quebec politics since 1998, winning a majority government in 2003, slipping to a minority government in 2007, but gaining an unprecedented third consecutive mandate in 2008. It has struggled with policy failures regarding taxes and the economic Great Recession slowdowns; Charest’s personal *disapproval* rating is about 70 percent. In 2011, Liberals looked like the proverbial dead-man-walking government awaiting the mortician. But partly due to happenstance as well as Opposition flailing, it has resurged into a “tenth life” for Charest so far as his election prospects are concerned.

Parti Quebecois (PQ). A year ago, the PQ also looked tattered. Its first female leader, Pauline Marois, was beleaguered by internal dissent over policy toward holding another sovereignty referendum when the party regained power (a bit of counting chickens before eggs were laid). Some caucus members departed, but Marois hammered the remnants into line partly through draconian loyalty oaths. A prospective leadership challenger, former BQ chief Gilles Duceppe, was derailed by charges (recently dropped) that he misused monies for his federal Ottawa office staff to fund a BQ activist in Quebec. Consequently, still unloved albeit respected, Marois is now the “Concrete Lady”—not yielding to the dissidents. Although the PQ may have overreached by wearing the red square badges of the student strikers, polls this spring indicated they could win a majority government. And, while by-elections are usually irrelevant, the PQ was heartened by taking a normally Liberal riding in mid-June.

And there is another round in the continual battle over whether Quebec receives more in transfer payments from Ottawa than it sends in taxes. The PQ has prepared a sophisticated fiscal analysis attempting to rebut the Canadian/Anglo impression that Quebec disproportionately benefits from taxes on other Canadians. Such efforts become preaching to the choir exercises, convincing none but the already convinced; they have been prepared in the past and found wanting by green-eye shade analysts.

Coalition pour l'avenir du Québec (Coalition for the Future of Quebec or CAQ). A year ago, the still-to-be-formally-organized-as-a-political-party CAQ looked like the answer to Quebec political-social searching. Led by Francois Legault, a businessman and former Pequist, the CAQ was touted as a home for rational voters with a focus on economic progress for the province and, while not abandoning the objective of a sovereign Quebec, deferring debate for a decade. Building on the fatigue factor, polls suggested it could sweep into majority government. But the past year has been hard; there has been no “there, there” so far as systematic party building, candidate

recruiting, and platform creation. It has sagged in the polls to third place with its political “avenir” unclear.

Bottom Line. Confusion. Quebec needs to prioritize its politics and economics. Its population is the most heavily taxed in Canada—but its social services including subsidized \$7/day child care and uniquely low college tuition are very popular. Is the answer more taxes and/or fewer services? For the short term, the prediction is for a clear-the-air election in the autumn, following theoretical student return to classes in August. A Liberal victory would give the government leverage to address the education/student issues; a PQ victory would put the province on a new (old) path for seeking Quebec independence.

Sovereignty has been in remission, but is not quite “never/never” in the minds of many. Pequistes believe that the demonstrators suggest youth can be drawn again into a desire for Quebec independence (others point to declining sovereignty-associated support and vigorously argue that the PQ is pipe dreaming). The point remains that Quebec *could* be a viable independent country, if its citizens were willing to make the economic sacrifices necessary to bring it to pass. But so could California.

CANADIAN RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES

Conservatives seek the best relations possible with the United States that will not cost them the next election. (Conversely, Liberals historically sought the worst relations that would not prompt active U.S. retaliation.) And now, the never previously tested NDP leads the Opposition. Thomas Mulcair, having implicitly called President Barack Obama a liar by suggesting there were no photographs of the dead Osama bin Laden, is unlikely to be a friend.

Consequently, under a Tory government with prospect for more-of-the-same until 2015, we have enjoyed the “Chinese blessing”—may you live in dull times—so far as bilateral relations are concerned. Prime Minister Harper is not looking for trouble, and President Obama has more than enough trouble elsewhere to notice whatever may be happening in Canada.

Thus, their personal relationship is mutually respectful; they are professional politicians appreciative of the exigencies of electoral politics. Consequently, when Obama indulges in pure presidential election politics designed to placate his environment allies deferring a decision approving construction of the Keystone XL pipeline while giving the risible rationale that the environmental impact required more study, Harper expresses regret. And when a congressionally backed demand for XL approval arose and Obama again rejected it, polite regret was again the reaction. The president, “hint/hint” suggested Trans Can apply again—and approved the southern portion of the pipeline—with the intimation that after the election, there will be full approval. To make his own point, Harper pushes for rapid approval of a “Northern Gateway” pipeline that would permit transit of Alberta oil to west coast ports for Asian markets. It is “reindeer games” on both sides of the border but illustrates inability of democracies to take hard decisions in election years.

Otherwise, there has been painstaking (and commensurately slow) effort to improve both border security and movement of trade-related traffic. Regulations require rationalization and the “Beyond Borders” effort is committed to speeding, smoothing, facilitating personal and material border crossing. On the ground, nobody forgets 9/11 and the need to assure that whatever the future may hold for terrorism, we will have done our utmost to secure the borders.

Militarily, after a decade of Afghan commitment, Canada continues its slow-motion disengagement. Combat forces withdrew in June 2011; the training program for police and security officials will conclude in 2014. Ottawa will continue to send money, but declined NATO’s request at the May Summit in Chicago to extend its on-the-ground training program. Still, Washington cannot complain. Canada was there at the beginning in Afghanistan; took a nasty combat commitment in Kandahar and paid in blood; continued that effort when popular tides flowed against *any* casualties; undertook a training mission after concluding combat duty; and has provided public support for our Afghanistan commitment throughout. There have been so surprises. No equivalent of the precipitous Dutch force withdrawal following a change of government. No equivalent of the “political convulsion” when a successful terrorist attack proved the mortality of French soldiers. Canada has coordinated every step of its Afghan road with the United States.

The consequence has been an appreciation of Canadian Forces quality—especially trained, combat tested, well equipped, light infantry battalions that have the additional benefit of having intimately coordinated with U.S. units. A major political question for Canada is what it will do with this capability? It cannot be freeze dried and shrink-wrapped for use in 2020.

Bottom Line. Canada and the United States should enjoy the times that are quite good enough albeit not perfect. There will always be problems—domestic and bilateral—but the current circumstances lend themselves to “management” rather than crisis response. Both the United States and Canada have endured much worse eras; an interlude is to be appreciated.

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