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CANADA'S MIDTERM BLUES: THE HARPER GOVERNMENT HITS ROCKS

By David T. Jones

David Jones, an FPRI alumnus, is a retired senior Foreign Service Officer who was Minister Counselor for Political Affairs at U.S. Embassy Ottawa. He coauthored Uneasy Neighbo(u)rs—a study of U.S.-Canadian bilateral relations in the twenty-first century.

Canadian activity has an *entr'acte* (intermission) quality. We are in a period of pause, more confident of what has gone before in federal government action, politico-military affairs, and Quebec politics than what is to come.

The Harper/Tory government has suddenly found itself hip deep in scandal, affecting them more psychologically than politically. The Opposition is energized—perhaps disproportionately and prematurely. The Canadian Armed Forces are braced for cuts—but know not when or what. Quebec has a new separatist (minority) government which appears at loose ends before barely beginning to govern. A third sovereignty referendum recedes into the distance.

One hesitates to deploy the “wait and see” bromide, but Washington is not a major actor/factor at present.

MIDTERM BLUES, BUT PERHAPS WORSE

The ancient aphorism is that “A week in politics is a lifetime.” It can be complemented by the equally ancient observation to “Be careful of what you wish for since you may get it.”

And as the Canadian Parliament rises in June for summer recess, the Harper/Tory government has seen these axioms come to pass—much to their chagrin.

Its current problems came out of nowhere. Having won a majority in the October 2011 national elections, Harper was running on cruise control. His primary objective, which seemed well in hand, was maintaining the economy's positive direction reflected *inter alia* with steady GDP growth, job increases/unemployment reduction, low inflation, and increased trade. The consequence was to be a balanced budget by 2015 justifying the Harper/Tories re-election as good stewards of the Canadian economy with commensurate promises of tax reductions following this economic success.

But then the wheels came off (a) in the form of (alleged) financial malfeasance by a number of senators and (b) rebellion among “trained seal” back bench Members of Parliament (MPs), leading one to resign from the Tory caucus and sit as an independent.

The Canadian senate is not an analogue to the U.S. senate. Its political origins lie with the British House of Lords, and it is hardly associated with democracy. All Canadian senators are appointed by the prime minister, and the consequences of this unelected status are invidious. The Canadian constitution gives the senate considerable political powers that ostensibly permit a vigorous chamber of respected “sober second thought” but, lacking the

legitimacy of election, it dares not exercise them. To be sure, there are some serious, thoughtful senators who produce carefully designed studies incorporating insightful conclusions and recommendations—virtually all of which are ignored. In reality, the senate is largely a collection of second-tier failed politicians, bag men, favorites of the prime minister of the day, and generally undistinguished individuals known primarily to their families.

In the most recent illustration, Senator Mike Duffy, a former media figure/broadcaster, ran afoul of rules regarding living expenses for his official residence. The regulations are relatively simple: to be a senator, you must have property in the province from which you are appointed. You are supposed to spend significant time there, but if distance precludes you returning “home” every day the senate is in session, you can claim modest expenses for hotel and related expenses in Ottawa. Duffy’s senate appointment is from Prince Edward Island, an east coast province to which Duffy’s attachment is minimal (reportedly a small summer cottage), and hence he claimed expenses for not living there. However, a rather gentle audit by the senate finance committee concluded that he owed \$90,000 from inappropriately requested/paid expenses.

And then the problems began. Duffy had been a vigorous/successful fund raiser-campaigner for the Tories during the 2011 election campaign—one of the reasons for his senate appointment. Reportedly, he believed he should be compensated for his efforts—and ultimately Harper’s wealthy chief of staff cut Duffy a personal check for the amount. Why he took this route, which was unpropitious and perhaps illegal, remains a basic question? Did he consider it the equivalent of his private petty cash that would just make Duffy go away? When asked, the now former chief of staff, said nothing beyond, “it was a moment of weakness.” Nevertheless, in a moment of perhaps overly refreshed garrulousness, Duffy told media colleagues how he had obtained the money to repay the disallowed expenses.

Media galloped into print/broadcast; the chief of staff resigned, claiming full responsibility; the prime minister declared he knew nothing about the sequence of events—but only 13 percent of the population believed Harper was unwitting.

Other Tory senators (and one Liberal) have stumbled into comparable expenses/repayment tar pits facilitated partly by the old-boys/girls-club, honor system associated with senate financing. Faced with 2013 fiscal rectitude, this casual system came apart with breathless revelations by the media swarm on a daily basis. Consequently, in a desperate effort to stanch the bleeding (and to hit back at the Liberals who were depicting the Tories as uniquely dishonest), the Tory senate leader called for auditors to examine the expenditure claims of *all* senators. But as one senator privately contended, this move would prove to be the equivalent of a suicide bomber—wreaking havoc on the entire senate with revelations of improprieties and further reducing the senate’s popular support.

The issue goes beyond some senators behaving badly (the public believes all politicians behave badly). It damages Harper’s personal credibility as an adroit crisis manager and decision maker since he selected each of the Tory senators in question. Even more damaging is the intimation that after seven years in power, Tories are now putting four feet in the trough (rather than one discreet toe). As Tories had repeatedly campaigned on clean government themes and excoriated various Liberal fiscal irregularities, the damage is more than trivial. One constituent commented to a Tory power broker, “Now, we are they.”

Consequently, there is a palpable sense that the scandal has “legs,” and the blithe acceptance of a smoothly operating, Harper-dominated government has taken a serious hit. Nobody seems to be able to answer the classic “Watergate” question regarding the Duffy fiscal maneuvers, “What did you know and when did you know it?” And with the RCMP also investigating, one observer commented, “Duff may yet go out of here in handcuffs.”

Four dismal years in opposition and five years as a minority, the Harper/Tories longed for the power associated with majority rule. But the strength accorded a majority can be overrated. To be sure, among other actions, the majority Tories have eliminated long-gun registration, implemented stricter “tough on crime” legislation, passed modernized intellectual property rules, and taken strong foreign policy stances, e.g., implacable support for Israel, dismissive reaction to United Nations’ fibrillation, support for military action against Gaddafi and for French intervention in Mali. But such were not the objectives that a sizeable contingent of the Tory caucus entered politics to implement.

To provide perspective: the current Conservative Party of Canada is an amalgam of the traditional Progressive

Conservative Party and the Western-based Reform Party. Progressive Conservatives were a mainstream, get-along/go-along, Canadian political party supporting business and anxious to keep a strong federal presence in Quebec. Reform was a populist-driven movement deeply concerned about cultural issues such as abortion, gay marriage, “Christian virtues” and about honest government; and indifferent regarding Quebec’s vagaries. This element of the party kept silent and sat on its hands (other than to clap on command) when obtaining/retaining power and placed a premium on party discipline. Since Stephen Harper’s personal political and intellectual skills were leading them steadily toward “Promised Land” power, they also accorded him respect despite the absence of warm-and-fuzzy charisma characterizing many politicians.

However, with a political majority, this party faction believed more time and attention should be given to its concerns. One of these issues was restriction on abortion, particularly limitation on the time and circumstances when an abortion could be implemented. Canada is one of the rare countries with no abortion law, but Harper also knows that whatever his personal views may be, the majority of Canadians are comfortable with the ambiguity that absence of law permits and would be hostile to any Tory attempt, regardless how modulated, to define or restrict abortion. Avoiding such a “wedge issue,” the Tory leadership pressured one MP to drop a private member bill prohibiting selective sex abortion and blocked the bill from coming to a vote.

The proximate cause of the current backbench eruption, however, was Tory leadership modifying a bill presented by MP Brent Rathgeber to require disclosure of salaries of public servants making more than \$188,000. The revised bill, done without consulting Rathgeber, would apply only to those making more than \$320,000—a tiny handful of the civil service universe. Highly incensed, Rathgeber declared he was tired of acting as a “trained seal” reduced to reading talking points constructed by PM office twerps half his age. Although stating he believed in Tory principles and (mostly) supported Harper, Rathgeber left the Tory caucus and is now sitting as an Independent.

Again, the action by a lone, largely unknown backbench MP normally would be viewed as a fit of personal pique. Rathgeber, however, is respected by the social conservative faction of the Tory caucus, which is also fed up past the over-stuffed point by management tactics of the House Whip and the House Leader. Their point is the ostensibly democratic, but not parliamentary, principle that an elected member should be able to speak his/her mind on issues of concern and reflect his constituents’ interests. That is not “message discipline” as practiced by the Harper Tories, but its implementation has become unpalatable for an important element of the Tory caucus irritated as much by the Darth Vader school of management style of the House leadership as by the realities of parliamentary discipline.

The Opposition has been consigned for much of the past two years to enduring Tory sneers and slights as they struggled to educate their neophyte caucus in basic parliamentary practice (New Democrats under Thomas Mulcair) and find new leadership (Liberals now under Justin Trudeau). The suddenly flailing Tory leadership has been as delightful and unexpected a gift as shoving your hand into a pile of manure and extracting a gold coin.

Both Mulcair and Trudeau have had their struggles. Mulcair, the first New Democrat (NDP/socialist) to reach Official Opposition status, has a mean streak and still looks upon occasion like a bearded revolutionary (and had to endure a debate over whether he should shave his beard as Canadians haven’t elected a bearded leader in a century). He is trying to fill the shoes of Jack Layton who led the NDP to unparalleled political success in the 2011 election, but then abruptly died. Trudeau, son of the iconic Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, has a genuine asset—a charisma rare in Canadian politics and totally absent in Harper or Mulcair. However, he has yet to harness it productively and meld charm with parliamentary skill or political substance in a party platform. A resignation this month by Bob Rae, an experienced, effective parliamentarian and former interim Liberal leader, will leave Trudeau exposed to tough issues in Parliament’s question period.

There is no question that Harper is struggling with his greatest crisis since becoming prime minister. Liberals are all but jumping up and down with delight; under Trudeau they are polling in majority territory. Tories are glum, ranging from desperately down-hearted to something-will-turn-up Micawbersque cheer. There are even trial balloons afloat to the effect that Harper will take the equivalent of Trudeau *pere’s* “walk in the snow” and decide to retire, permitting new party leadership to fight the 2015 election.

But the Harper Tories have blown past other crises that experts thought would crimp election chances in 2011 (e.g., parliamentary censure, projected F-35 expenses), but the electorate regarded them as inside-the-Ottawa-beltway

inconsequential. In the long view, if the economy continues to improve (e.g., a new free trade agreement with the EU) and the Tories are able to maximize strength in the 30 new parliamentary seats scheduled for nominally conservative areas, the senate follies will be ignored and the free-range independent conservatives will return to the fold.

In the short run, the Tories are desperate to reset. Their objectives in mid-June were to get out of town with Parliament adjourning; hold a successful annual convention at the end of the month in Calgary; shuffle the cabinet to bring some emerging female talent closer to center stage; officially conclude (“prorogue”) this Parliament; and resume Parliament later in the autumn with a Throne Speech and an attractive program to cover the second half of the mandate. Also they need some identifiable successes: U.S. agreement that the Keystone XL Pipeline can proceed and a free trade agreement with the EU. Will such maneuvers distract the population and give the Tories still another second chance and four more years? Or are popular attitudes “setting” with the conclusion that nine years (duration of Tory rule by 2015) is enough; that Justin may be untested, even ignorant, but a *beau risqué*? And concurrently, the Tories continue efforts to define Justin downward, most recently with charges that he inappropriately collected speaking fees from nonprofit organizations.

The stage is set for a bitterly fought 2015 election.

POLITICAL-MILITARY CONCERNS: CANADIAN ARMED FORCES BRACING FOR HARD TIMES

The Canadian Armed Forces (also “CF”) remain at a cusp. They are probably as capable as they have been in several decades—particularly the Army—and the “Canada First” defense plan projects significant expenditures for all services.

* The Tories must feel snake bit; heavy floods in Calgary forced postponement of their convention on 22 June.

The problem is that most observers believe the Canada First levels of expenditure are gauzily hypothetical and will never eventuate. The overriding Harper/Tory objective is being re-elected in 2015, and their major campaign theme will be economic success showcasing a balanced budget. But the balanced budget requires significant spending cuts, and the target with the most discretionary potential spending is national defense and the armed forces.

Thus the fear/concern among national security observers is palpable. Each of the services has a significant requirement to replace obsolescent/obsolete equipment. But each program, whether an Arctic-capable icebreaker, new destroyers, a supply-support ship, a CF-18 replacement, or tanks and armored vehicles, is massively expensive.

It is clear that triage is in the works. But which programs will be cut, delayed, or deferred is still speculative. And senior Canadian government leadership continues to pay lip service to the Canada First procurement policy, frustrating the CF which would prefer answers—even bad answers—to the current decision drift.

And unfortunately, the new Chief of the Defense Staff, General Thomas Lawson, is underwhelming. In comparison to previous CDS (Hillier and Natynczyk), he has been almost invisible. An Air Force officer, Lawson was regarded as selected to manage the F-35/next generation fighter problem, but the challenge is still mastering him.

The Army. After a decade of Afghan combat experience, the Canadian Army created a highly valuable military capability: combat tested, well-trained/equipped, familiar with NATO-U.S. tactics/techniques light infantry battalions. There are few countries that have such capability and, as was recently illustrated by French operations in Mali, their deployment can make a significant game-changing difference in international politics.

Unfortunately, such battalions cannot be freeze-dried/shrink-wrapped for some crisis in 2020. They must be kept up to strength, re-equipped to replace Afghan wear-and-tear, and constantly exercised--most effectively combined with U.S. forces.

Consequently, there is a fear that the Army, which reportedly recovered only 50 percent of required capability during Afghanistan, will be neglected as it is “the Navy/Air Force turn” so far as security spending and procurement are concerned. Moreover, predictions persist that the Army Reserves (which were a significant part of the Afghanistan-committed battalions) will be cut, inevitably leading to reduced capabilities.

The Navy. The Canadian Navy faces the greatest challenges. A variety of vessels, notably destroyers and frigates, are approaching end-of-life, necessitating expensive replacement. The question becomes whether such will eventuate. A sophisticated supply/support vessel has been repeatedly delayed, essentially due to projected expense. And repeated arguments over domestic versus foreign purchase juxtapose sustaining domestic shipbuilding capability versus cheaper/faster foreign procurement. It always seems easier for Canadians to find reasons to delay than decide (although a non-decision is also a decision).

After many years, there now appear to be more operational submarines than those dry-docked for repair and/or maintenance. Nevertheless, many military observers, including those that supported the original 1998 purchase from the UK, are increasingly dubious over retaining the capability. Even when operating normally, the submarines are expensive and their military utility appears marginal, e.g., providing an acoustically quiet foil against which U.S. submarine hunters can exercise.

Air Force. In some aspects, the Air Force has significantly improved. It has upgraded heavy lift, notably C-17s, C-130s, and, prospectively, C-148 Cyclone ship-based transport/anti-submarine helicopter helicopters. However, all are overshadowed by the problem of selecting a next fighter to replace the CF-18s that are nearing the end of their operational life times. Earlier on there appeared to be a straightforward decision path toward procuring the “Fifth Generation” fighter. In 2010, the Canadian government announced plans to purchase 65 F-35s (which also qualified Canada to produce various elements of the developing F-35 fleet) at a price that observers were led to believe was “fixed.” Done! Well, then it completely unraveled in a case-book illustration of mangled management. Essentially, the price skyrocketed, and no “fixed” price for Canada had ever been contractually agreed. The political opposition, which never encounters a dollar spent on defense that could not better be spent on nondefense needs, batted on the political confusion attempting to explain actual costs. This attack next focused on full-cost-funding over 20 years, which extrapolated what might be marginally affordable into out-of-sight costs. Bitter F-35 supporters noted that if anyone purchasing a home on mortgage calculated “full costs” during that period, to include repairs and maintenance, many would decide just to rent.

The reaction was existentially Canadian: form a committee to review the bidding. This expert committee, the Canadian National Fighter Procurement Secretariat, is instructed to review alternatives for replacing the CF-18 and eventually provide a judgment. In theory a decision is scheduled for autumn 2013; however, some observers see the review, which has deflected intense media scrutiny, fading into the never-never and possibly impinging on the 2015 election.

The issue is existential for the Canadian Air Force. The F-35 is the only available aircraft with significant “stealth” attributes and thereby capable of operating with U.S./NATO F-35s in combined operations. If the CAF conceives of operations outside Canada, the F-35 is the appropriate purchase. If it believes that Libya- or Bosnia-type operations lie beyond Canada’s geopolitical interests, an aircraft such as the F-18 “Superhornet,” which has twin engines and extended range, is perhaps more appropriate. That would be the case if Canadian interests are domestic and restricted to its Arctic reaches.

But no follow-on aircraft will be inexpensive and, consequently, a reduced purchase of F-35s and/or a mix of Superhornets and F-35s is also possible (along with further life extension for the existing CF-18 fleet.)

The overall judgment emerging is one of “hollow” Canadian armed forces degrading steadily into third tier levels. Coincidentally, there continues to be declining interest in NATO, which some believe simply pushes for more spending; Canadians push back, noting domestic requirements (while also believing Europeans should be able to defend themselves against minimal threat at this juncture). For their part, Canadians simply do not believe they are threatened; they are convinced that the USG will defend them if necessary; and project light peacekeeping rather than robust peacemaking/enforcing for their future. There is no “national” political consensus over the utility of strong armed forces with Liberals/NDP implicitly hostile to defense as no more than another special pleader for federal funding. To wit, the couch potato that arose to do some basic exercises will return to more comfortable somnolence.

In 2005 then-PM Paul Martin apparently promised but then reversed course regarding participation in U.S. ballistic missile defense against possible North Korean and/or Iranian attack. Political rationales, combined with perceived technical shortcomings and the implicit belief that the USG was paranoid while it should only be neurotic about

North Korea, were decision drivers.

But Kim Jong-un is a game-changer. He is essentially an erratic unknown quality, and simultaneously Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and long range ballistic capability have improved sufficiently to make Kim's unpredictable nature more threatening. Hence, some Canadian defense/security analysts are tentatively examining whether Canada should join the U.S. BMD program.

Canadian participation would be nominal—essentially a political endorsement of the U.S. BMD policy in return for a cost-free insurance policy against potential North Korean insanity. As such, even the idea of probing this “third rail” in Canadian national security policy, is confined to specialty defense/security articles with no government comment. Were it ever to be raised officially, the proposal would have to come from Ottawa and probably require implicit, if not explicit, all-party endorsement. As for Washington, BMD bilateral cooperation falls into the “once burned...” category along with the realization that we can do and have been doing everything we need for BMD without the Canadians.

QUEBEC: THE NEVER-ENDING CONUNDRUM

It is now significantly longer since the second referendum (1995) than it was between the first (1980) and the second. And despite the Parti Quebecois (PQ) once again holding power, albeit in a minority government, the likelihood of another referendum continues to recede into the never-never.

A year ago, circumstances appeared different. An exhausted Liberal government, beset with a sea of problems epitomized by endless student demonstrations over trivial university cost increases and besieged by corruption charges then intimated rather than proven, appeared to be road kill awaiting the sweeper. Long prominent in federal politics and having led Quebec politics as premier for nine years, Jean (“Captain Canada”) Charest looked more superfluous than super.

But instead of retreating politely into retirement, Charest elected to fight a final election—and almost pulled it off. Finishing with 31.2 percent of the vote and 50 seats, Charest limited the Pequists to a minority government (54 seats and 31.95 percent of the vote). (The centrist, *Coalition Avenir Quebec* (CAQ) won 19 seats with 27 percent). Thus PQ leader Pauline Marois became Quebec's first woman premier but consigned to sipping from the bitter chalice of minority government's restrictions. Charest, having been defeated in his own constituency, stated that he has retired from politics and still considering his future.

And the Marois government had instant problems, oft of its own making. One Francophone commentator observed that it was not that the Pequists were acting like headless chickens but rather like a two-headed chicken unable to make/sustain its decisions. Hence a tax increase on corporations was announced—and rescinded. Commitments to cancel an unpopular health tax and freeze university tuitions were dropped. Moreover, in comparison with previous PQ governments whose cabinet members were exceptional (10 PhDs in the Levesque cabinet), current Pequiste ministers are mostly unexceptional. There is not a single Anglophone in cabinet, and overall English language capability--epitomized by premier Marois—is mediocre. Moreover, Marois lacks the personal dynamic charisma that can compensate. She is not Levesque, Parizeau, Bouchard, or Landry whose intellectual qualities were stellar and leadership qualities of the first rank.

Additionally, two other parties split the separatist vote. *Quebec Solidaire* at 6.03 percent and the *Option Nationale* at 1.89 percent doubtless prevented a PQ majority government. Efforts thus far to arrange a strategic alliance for the next election, let alone a separatist unification, have been futile. While some separatists foresee a strategic arrangement between *Quebec Solidaire* and the PQ closer to the next election, it is not immediately in the cards.

Still none of the parties is eager for an election. The Pequists' polling numbers are not strong; the Liberals are benefitting from Trudeau's federal Liberals rise in Quebec; the centrist CAC has declined in the polls; and the splinter separatist parties fear being marginalized. Moreover, the Pequists anticipate more and juicier corruption scandals, pushing the Liberals back deep into the tar pit. Investigations led by the Charbonneau Commission have focused thus far on metropolitan irregularities (separately, the interim Montreal mayor resigned on 18 June facing 14 fraud/corruption charges--and he was supposed to be “clean” when appointed to replace his predecessor also enmeshed in corruption issues). However, more fraud is expected to be unveiled during investigation of former

Liberal ministries, notably the Transportation Ministry. Marois hopes/expects to benefit electorally from these reminders of Liberal malfeasance.

As might be expected, federalists are delighted. They know that without separatist unity there is no hope for a PQ majority, and without a majority, no Pequist government would risk a referendum. In contrast to the sanguine federalists, Pequists/sovereignists project a long road back:

-- first, one must unite the separatists. At least one must align the PQ and *Quebec Solitaire* in a productive electoral alliance;

-- next, one must orchestrate an election at the most propitious time, presumably combining revelations of Liberal corruption at every level with further CAQ decline;

-- with a majority government resulting from such an election, the Pequists must design rationales for a referendum by making (unacceptable) demands of Ottawa in the form of greater fiscal support and benefits that would justify a “back to the future” referendum; and

-- finally, separatists must convince a majority of Quebecers that independence will be better than the comfortable, well-paid relationship they enjoy with Canada. After all, Quebecers outside Montreal see very little evidence of “Canada” beyond the Maple Leaf flag outside Canada Post offices. And even some who identify themselves as Liberal/federalists confess to having no emotional connections to “brothers and sisters in Calgary.” One senses that if Quebecers could have everything they have now plus independence, they would opt for independence. But if independence would cost them financially (even temporarily) or create awkward bureaucratic inconvenience, it would be a different story.

Interestingly, as Quebec passion for independence has waned and moved toward “heartbeat beneath the lawn” status, Canadian passion to profess love for Quebec and persuade the *belle province* to stay has also declined. The iconic effort to create a bilingual Canada is faltering with declines in the percentage (although not absolute numbers) of bilingual Canadians for the first time since official bilinguality was instituted. Outside Quebec bilinguality among Anglophones declined from 8 to 6 percent in the most recent Statistics Canada study. It has become an affectation of the upper/upper middle class rather than an internalized commitment by all Canadians.

However, having twice leaped on the “hot stove” of divisive referendum, the separatist “cat” is unwilling to try again—even if the stove is cold.

Despite these positives, Quebec’s Anglophones feel besieged. They see PQ government proposals for additional restrictions on English language use as further marginalizing their community. The implemented (and then rescinded) ban on Sikhs wearing turbans while playing organized soccer demonstrated yet again that “reasonable accommodation” of Quebec’s non-Francophones has severe limits, particularly as Marois supported the turban ban.

Federalist Parties in Quebec

The national federal scene as reflected in Quebec is equally confused. Following the 2011 election, the NDP annihilated the Bloc Quebecois, winning more seats (59) than the Bloc ever held. The Liberals and Tories both lost seats but, for the first time in recent history, the Tories were able to form a government without requiring Quebec seats. The Tory rump represents a beachhead characterized by Harper’s comment to Quebecers to the effect that “we want you, but we don’t need you.”

A year later, circumstances may—or not—be different. The Tories remain nowhere in the polls; four of their five MPs sit in cabinet, but Quebecers, even Anglophones, appear unaware of them. The Liberals are surging as the national Trudeau tide raises Liberal boats also in Quebec, but one wonders whether Quebecers who oft excoriated the father will embrace the son.

The Bloc Quebecois has gained in the polls, but there is no sense that it is ready for prime time. Its four residual MPs were not the BQ’s best-and-brightest prior to the 2011 election and, despite a fifth defecting from the NDP, still are not. To spark a resurgence, it needs strong candidates, funding (federal money will continue through 2015), and

a sense that Quebec independence is more than the glimmer in the eyes of old (wo)men. All remains possible, but it first would require a Pequiste provincial majority government.

NDP leader Mulcair must retain his Quebec representation (two of whom have changed parties) if he is to have any chance for a victory in the 2015 election. But while polls continue to give the NDP respectable numbers, the on-the-ground sense remains that the 2011 NDP victories were a one-off, Layton effect that will evaporate. Moreover, in catering to his Quebec constituencies, Mulcair has made statements, e.g., any referendum on sovereignty would require only 50 percent plus one majority, that don't play well in the rest of Canada. Additionally, while his vastly inexperienced caucus has performed remarkably well in Parliament and avoided the infelicities that media gleefully anticipated, individual members have not done the tedious, on-the-ground organizing and representational work in their ridings. Many remain totally unknown to their constituents and remain vulnerable to being swept away by fickle voters in 2015.

AND WHAT DOES THIS CANADA-AT-INTERMISSION MEAN FOR THE UNITED STATES?

The United States remains fortunate in the Canada that it has. A Tory majority government, regardless of its current struggles, is better for Washington than a government led by either the official Opposition NDP or the resurgent Liberals. At the minimum, we know that we won't be insulted gratuitously; at best, we can enjoy steady improvement in border security ("Beyond The Borders" agreement); national security cooperation; economic coordination to improve trade; and general foreign policy agreement.

The primary "hanging fire" event is the U.S. decision on the Keystone XL pipeline. Canadians generally expect that President Obama will agree to its construction, not to be nice to Canada but further to assure U.S. energy security. They believe that the wink-and-nod suggestion that Trans Canada reapply for Keystone construction and Obama's agreement to the southern portion of the pipeline telegraphed an ultimately positive decision. Some also project that Obama's decision will be caveated by simultaneous environment-friendly announcements to alleviate the sting of the pipeline approval. Obviously, a negative decision would damage PM Harper's reputation for maintaining good relations with the United States.

Otherwise, we have no need to "view with alarm" anything now developing in Canada or Quebec. There may be clouds on the horizon, but no predictions of immediate storms.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Eli Gilman at 215-732-3774, ext. 255, email fpri@fpri.org, or visit us at www.fpri.org.