PARTIES LEAVING MEMBERS, MEMBERS LEAVING PARTIES: THE REALIGNMENT OF CANADIAN POLITICS, RIGHT AND LEFT

Desmond Morton

With the NDP virtually moribund during the Chrétien years, the Liberals vacated the left and successfully covered their right flank for the last decade. But no longer are the Liberals beneficiaries of a feeble Left and a divided Right. With a media savvy new leader in Jack Layton, the NDP is bidding hard to fill the political vacuum on the Left, while a recently united Right gathers in Toronto on March 20-21 to elect a leader of the new Conservative Party of Canada. Certain to be challenged from both Left and Right for seats in vote-rich Ontario, with fully 106 of 308 seats in the new House of Commons, the Liberals are looking to gain seats from the Bloc québécois in Quebec. But the Bloc is itself showing renewed signs of life in the polls, riding a wave of discontent with Jean Charest’s Liberal government in Quebec as well as the sponsorship scandal. Desmond Morton considers some of the forces and personalities shaping the realignment of Canadian politics.

The other day, a woman phoned from the CBC. “Professor Morton, why are so many people leaving their parties these days?”

She had no lack of examples — mostly eastern Tories fleeing the clammy embrace of the Canadian Alliance, but also Keith Martin, the occasional Medecin sans frontières from Esquimalt, who confirmed the worst suspicions of CA neanderthals by joining the Liberals; or Jean Lapierre, Liberal-turned Bloc québécois-turned Liberal, who plans to manage Quebec for Paul Martin. One might even mention Sheila Copps’ well-publicized phone chat with NDP leader Jack Layton, Ontario MP and John Bryden bolting the Liberals, blaming Paul Martin on the way out, and joining the Conservatives.

“Is it possible,” I rejoined, “that the parties have been leaving their members?”

Well, is it?

After three successive Liberal majorities for Jean Chrétien, and a fourth still possible for his ungrateful heir, the competition should be changing their marketing strategy. Unlike some decades of the old century, Canada for the past ten years has been under substantially conservative management. Yet the official holders of the brand, the Reform-Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives, have not had so much as a whiff of power. Instead it has been the Liberals who skinned the social programs Brian Mulroney did not dare touch, expanded the Free-Trade Agreement to
Ronald Reagan’s original North America-wide dream, and eased the tax burden on corporations and the wealthy while holding fast to the Goods and Services Tax. Who needed Jean Charest or Joe Clark? Especially who needed Preston Manning or Stockwell Day, whose social conservatism sent shudders through much of Quebec and Ontario?

The undignified haste with which Peter MacKay forgot his leadership-winning pledge never to negotiate merger with the Alliance will arm political cynics with evidence for years. In fact, MacKay was under orders from his financial backers to get his outfit out of business fast. If, after more than a decade in the wilderness, right-wingers had even a hope of a comeback, it almost always vanished the moment Tory and Alliance candidates faced each other across every main street in Ontario and the Maritimes. With Paul Martin’s Liberals in office and likely to stay there, Canada’s corporate establishment had no imaginable use for three competing right-wing parties. If David Orchard couldn’t get that message, he and his pals could join the Liberals or, even better, the NDP. Indeed, it might serve the socialists right to have to put up with Orchard’s righteous factionalism.

Ripping a page from Brian Mulroney’s play book, Martin co-opted his old pal, Jean Lapiere, as his Quebec boss, much as Mulroney took Lucien Bouchard aboard his Tory machine in 1984. The hard line architect of the federal Clarity Act, Stéphane Dion, is gone, and Lapiere will have a mandate to stamp out his supporters in the Quebec Liberal organization. For sovereignists, the welcome mat is out.

Back in the 1960s, Canada’s last real reforming age, a small but youthful NDP provided most of the agenda for the Pearson Liberals. The faded green program the New Democrats adopted at their 1961 founding convention was a fair agenda of federal policy, from universal medical care insurance to federally-funded urban renewal, from the Canadian Development Corporation to recognition of the Communist regime in Beijing. With some of its neatest ideas purloined and its batty kind of nuclear neutralism drained away, the NDP became conservative in its own way. From the 1970s, its leaders defended the social democracy Canada unconsciously became in the postwar years. Youngsters who grew up in a home-owning, holiday-taking, university-bound Canada, where a cancer-ridden mother no longer meant family bankruptcy, had no notion that these conditions were won by union-backed socialists squeezing power-seeking Liberals.

Even worse, when the NDP won provincial power — and by 1991, half of all Canadians lived under a socialist government — their reforms had dwindled to mere tinkering, some of it inept. The NDP’s electoral collapse in 1993, comparable to the death throes of the CCF, owed nothing to Ed Broadbent or even his lacklustre successors, and everything to the performance of his provincial partners, Bob Rae, Mike Harcourt, Roy Romanow and the already beaten Howard Pawley. All that remained was a tiny, battered federal caucus with barely the energy to say “No” to whatever the Chrétien government did. Weary, demoralized backers closed their cheque books and went home in despair. Some of them, polls show, even voted Reform.

Absent the NDP, Liberal politics in the 1990s took on a right-wing tilt. Jean Chrétien was a populist with a strong distaste for the self-important, but he was, above all, an inland waters sailor, watching the wind and keeping off the foreshore. Since the reefs were all to the starboard, they guided his course. Since the reefs were all to the starboard, they guided his course. Just holding the tiller was pleasure enough for the little guy from Shawinigan, especially when it made his patrician colleagues squirm. Paul Martin was one of them, but he bided his time, cultivated the rancorous jealousies of those excluded from the Chrétien circle, captured riding associations beyond the prime minister’s purview and by mid-2003, months before Chrétien quit on December 12th, Martin had the keys to the Liberal party in his pocket.

The pundits who wrote so knowingly of invincible prime ministerial power were wrong. Whether through love, fear or hope of gain, even a dictator like Saddam Hussein needed loyalty. So did Chrétien. A venerable culture of caucus discipline, cultivated by Sir John A. Macdonald, Sir Wilfrid Laurier and William Lyon Mackenzie King, had grown into a parliamentary system that gives durable power only to disciplined ranks of MPs. After Chrétien had unveiled his last, mini-
intra-party conflict vanished in thin air. Only a small handful of ministers who had made their peace with Martin could stay. The rest were toast.

Talk of democratic deficits and new status for backbenchers masked a revolution in MP self-esteem that will matter more than any new name-change on the political right. For veteran politics-watchers, the once disciplined levies of liberalism are a memory. No wonder the defectors went straight to the Liberal caucus: it had become the only exciting party on the hill.

Of course, revolutions are easier to start than to stop. If Martin could depose Chrétien, can someone now depose Martin? How many MPs believe they have the talent for the top job? How soon will embittered Chrétienites use their new leisure and their old contact lists? Will only devoutly loyal Martinites win nominations and seats in the next election? Currently bored by the parliamentary spectacle, will Canadians begin to find it too exciting? The media may rejoice but since when have they had any serious commitment to rational policy and sensible management?

A major delight of politics is the unexpected. In the Chrétien years, an inept, predictable opposition left serious criticism of the government to the auditor general. Huge cost overruns and mismanagement in HRDC and the gun registry were successfully sloughed off by prime-ministerial denial. Many well-connected Montrealers, with the apparent exception of Paul Martin, could detect a faint whiff of corruption among pro-federalist ad agencies involved in a so-called sponsorship program, hurriedly rigged in the wake of the tiny “no” side victory in the 1995 referendum. An earlier auditor general’s report hurled Alfonso Gagliano out of the cabinet and off to Denmark, perhaps to experience a country with allegedly the cleanest politics in Europe. In early February 2004, when Auditor General Sheila Fraser turned sponsorship into a $100 million scandal, Paul Martin embraced the issue as a chance to practice a new openness in politics and promptly demonstrated his predecessor’s cynical wisdom. All at once, it was Martin, not Chrétien, in the media spotlight, and his effort to look like a brand new regime hit the trash can. Not since the Mulroney years had Canadians been given a clearer call to “vote the rascals out,” and Paul Martin himself sent the signal.

Until the sponsorship scandal, Canadians had expected a spring general election, an easy Martin victory, and a fast fade for Jean Chrétien and his pals. Former Progressive Conservatives, pollsters told us, preferred Paul Martin to the likeliest Conservative leader, Stephen Harper.

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This was vital for Martin and his managers. Even if the Alliance takeover cannot work miracles, Ontario cannot remain wall-to-wall Liberal, as it has been since 1993. Targeting soft sovereignist votes was
logical. Sensible Canadians would see that marginalizing separatists forever would be tragically stupid.

What non-Quebecers may not know is that sovereignty support was on the rise in Quebec long before Conan O’Brien, Don Cherry and the sponsorship scandal combined to insult Quebecers.

The most transformed national party in early 2004 is the NDP. Layton has so far delighted the media by being different. Significant coverage has awakened the sleeping faithful and opened their cheque books. Party membership tops a hundred thousand, and the party of the common people promises to spend up to $12 million on the 2004 campaign.

L’Actualité said it all with a cover portraying Treasury Board chair and former IRPP president Monique Jérôme-Forget confessing: “Honey, I just shrunk the state.” Elected with promises of tax cuts, fee-freezes and “restructuration” — read “privatization” — Jean Charest’s Liberals have been making themselves highly unpopular with voters this winter. Add their attacks on the public sector to the fat deficit that seems to be standard inheritance for new provincial governments in Canada these days, and the federalist honeymoon in Quebec is history.

Even without the sponsorship scandal, Paul Martin’s Liberals may get little lift from Charest. As of February, Gilles Duceppe’s Bloc is looking at pro-sovereignty numbers running as high as 47 percent. Jean Lapierre might help Martin win over tired separatists but he will need luck and some breaks that are currently out of sight.

A possible break could come from the Conservative leadership race. The chief excitement, as the campaign nears the wire, is whether unilingual Belinda Stronach’s Quebec agents, mobilized by Brian Mulroney and John Laschinger, can buy enough delegates from moribund riding associations to match dedicated Harper loyalists from Alberta and B.C. If the Quebec ringers and the western party of the common people promises to spend up to $12 million on the 2004 campaign, Layton can remind Canadians that if they haven’t enjoyed the past ten years of growing wealth and deepening poverty, the best single explanation has been the lack of New Democrats in Parliament.

The NDP rise explained why Paul Martin told Maclean’s last Christmas that he considered himself “centre-left.” His February Throne Speech hinted that he might even mean it, with phrases about the poor, and handing cities back payments for a Goods and Service Tax that Martin pledged in the old Liberal Red Book to abolish. Of course, as Liberal spinmeisters and historians who remember William Lyon Mackenzie King assured us, the Throne Speech was devised precisely to deflate Layton and the NDP, and then fade. Bay Street already considers Martin a leftie, but so is Stephen Harper, and almost anyone else who trolls for votes. By more conventional standards, Paul Martin is safely right of centre, as are almost all the Liberals in his cabinet and inner circle.

If any defecting Tories were seriously red, they would have tiptoed past the Liberal caucus door and joined Canada’s Tory Reds, the NDP. Canada’s history reminds us that Tories have nationalized more than the NDP ever threatened to take over, from Ontario Hydro and the Canadian National Railway to the CBC. When John Diefenbaker chose an eminent Tory, Emmett Hall, to report on Canada’s health system, surely he earned at least a supporting role with Tommy Douglas as an architect of Medicare.

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In 2004, not even Jack Layton dares promise a victory for the NDP. Even if he imagined it possible, Layton would keep quiet, well aware that voters may want more voice for the NDP but not real power. Besides, has any prime minister — or even any US president — worn a moustache and won? Shave it, Jack, or lose it.
Despite their sponsorship tribulations, federal Liberals have discreet reasons for confidence. For all their dumping on the departed Chrétien, the Martinites did not derail his much-publicized election expense reforms. No longer, we are told, will federal politics be financed by greedy corporations or arrogant trade unions. While ample loopholes have been pre-bored into the legislation, the intent of the Chrétien package is that a wealthy donor will be limited to a mere $5,000 in donations. Taxpayers will make up the shortfall, paying much more of the cost of getting our politicians elected. Elections Canada predicts that our bill will rise from $7 million to $22 million for the coming campaign.

Will we pay all parties and candidates equally, so that a Liberal, say, and a resurrected Rhino candidate can squander equally? Never. Will taxpayers indicate their party preferences on their T-1s? Don’t be an idiot! No, Mr. Chrétien insisted, we will remember whom we loved last time, and distribute the taxpayers’ largesse according to those past preferences. In his campaign finance reform, with funding to parties based on their performance in the previous election, Jean Chrétien generously gave Paul Martin the most money to spend. With its scant showing last time, Layton’s NDP will have the least. With two parties’ loot to share, in case you were worrying, the new Canadian Conservatives should do fine.

Meanwhile, as Chief Elections Officer Jean-Pierre Kingsley has warned, veteran MPs can still sit on millions in trust funds accumulated secretly over the years to wage election and nomination battles. Donors to politicians’ trust funds may not get a tax rebate but the beneficiaries get money they deeply appreciate.

Back in 1957, after 22 years in office, the Liberals boasted that they could run Louis St-Laurent “stuffed” if need be, against the prairie firebrand, John Diefenbaker. They lost. In 2004, Paul Martin has to persuade Canadian voters that, as finance minister and vice-chair of the Treasury Board, he didn’t have a clue about the squandering of a hundred million of their dollars, but that he still has clues enough to be our prime minister. The other parties have the equally difficult job of proving that they could run the country in the public interest without an ideological bloodbath. If they can’t, we’ll probably get the Liberals again, and we’ll deserve them.

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