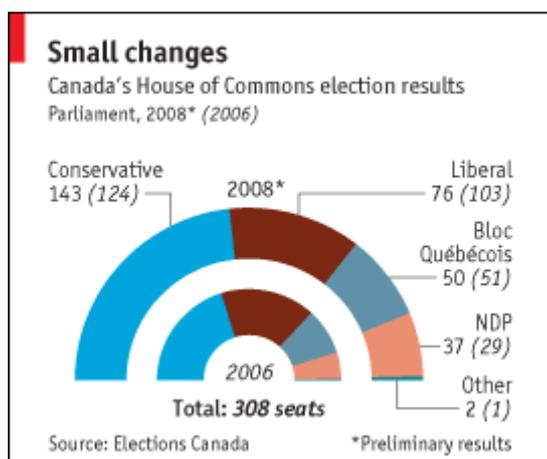


The Conservatives by a bigger head



IT WAS not the result Stephen Harper had hoped for when six weeks ago he called a general election. But it was much better than the outcome he must have feared a fortnight ago, when voters seemed gripped by panic over the economy. In the event the prime minister seemed happy enough at a victory rally in his adoptive hometown of Calgary on the night of October 14th. Canadians have returned his Conservative Party to power, still with a parliamentary minority but in a much stronger position. "Our party is bigger, our support base is broader," Mr Harper told a cheering crowd. And his main opponents, the Liberals, fared so poorly that they can no longer honestly call themselves a national party.

The Conservatives increased their share of the popular vote by little more than a percentage point (to 37.6%). But that translated into 19 more seats (see chart). That is because of the country's growing political fragmentation. What was basically a two-party system has turned into one with five significant parties in a Westminster-style first-past-the-post system. The newest of the five, the Green Party, won nearly 7% of the vote, but no seats.



In victory Mr Harper struck an unusually inclusive note, promising to govern for all Canadians, set aside partisan differences to make a divided parliament work, and keep his modest campaign promises. In reality, the deteriorating economic outlook is likely to trump most election pledges. And the prime minister would not have had to promise to be nice to the opposition were it not for several campaign stumbles.

A majority was "within his reach if not in his grasp" in early September, according to Peter Donolo, a pollster. Then things began to go awry. The farm minister joked about an outbreak of food poisoning that has killed a score of Canadians. There were other minor gaffes by

officials. But the most damaging missteps came from the prime minister himself. First he alienated French-speaking Quebecers, for whom preserving their culture is important, by sneering at artists who receive government grants. That revived an old stereotype of the Conservatives as "Philistines from the west, sweeping out of the prairies towards the outposts of civilisation in Toronto and Montreal," says Roger Gibbins of the Canada West Foundation, an Alberta think-tank. Mr Harper also seemed insensitive to public anxiety about global financial turmoil, suggesting that the crashing stockmarket offered "good buying opportunities".

In the event Mr Harper consolidated the Conservatives' solid western base of Alberta oilmen and Saskatchewan farmers, and picked up seats in suburban Ontario and the Maritime provinces. But he failed to increase his party's ten seats in Quebec. His former foreign minister, Maxime Bernier, held his seat by a landslide, surviving a kiss-and-tell book by a former girlfriend whose links to gangsters had prompted his resignation. But elsewhere in the province the separatist Bloc Québécois blocked any Conservative advance, even though independence never surfaced as an issue during the campaign.

If Mr Harper did not quite win the election outright, the Liberals certainly lost it. Their share of the popular vote fell to 26%, their lowest since the party was formed in 1867. Their leader, Stéphane Dion, a Quebecer, struggles to make himself understood in English. He chose to fight the election on a brave plan for a carbon tax just when voters began to worry about the economy rather than the environment. He seems certain to be dumped at a party convention next May. (Sadly his defeat may make other politicians think twice before championing a tax on carbon emissions.) Some of the Liberals' erstwhile supporters seem to have switched to the socialist New Democrats. Others stayed at home.

The Liberals' woes will give Mr Harper some breathing space. He will use it to fulfil his minimalist, carefully targeted promises to offer a bit more help to groups such as small businesses and disabled people. Despite his larger parliamentary contingent, he may find governing harder in his second term than his first. Canada, with solid banks and a diversified economy, has so far escaped the worst of the credit crunch. But its economy is slowing. Recession in the United States, which buys 75% of its exports, can only make things worse.

Mr Harper was due to welcome European leaders to Montreal on October 17th to launch talks on a trade agreement with the European Union. But it is the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that really matters. To add to the economic uncertainty, Barack Obama has vowed to "renegotiate" NAFTA if he becomes the next American president in January. In practice that may amount to little more than a joint review of what is an international treaty. But to protect Canada's trade interests, Mr Harper will have to open lines of communication to the Democrats who control the American Congress. The Conservatives feel much more comfortable with the Republicans.

Mr Harper's mandate is stronger but not emphatic. Voter turnout was low. Canadians have now voted three times in little more than four years. For now they seem content to have an unambitious minority government. The opposition leaders solemnly pledged on election night to co-operate with the prime minister, but such promises are made to be broken.

Pundits predict that the new Conservative government will not last long, certainly not the 32 months of Mr Harper's first government. Its longevity depends on whether the Liberals, who have several plausible replacements for Mr Dion, revive themselves. Above all it depends on events. Already the provincial premiers have asked Mr Harper to sit down with them next week to discuss the economy. The honeymoon may be short.

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