



Former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, campaigns with Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau. Chrétien was the leader of the last Liberal dynasty. Will Trudeau be the next one? Photo by Adam Scotti

Then and Now: Liberal to Conservative Dominance?

Thomas S. Axworthy and Rana Shamoon

Has Stephen Harper effectively ended the historic reign of the Liberal Party of Canada as the “Natural Governing Party”? With Justin Trudeau presenting the first credible threat to Harper’s evident mastery of Canadian politics since 2011, the 2015 election may be historically important for providing an answer to that question. Will it mark the death of a “tough old bird”, or “Some chicken, some neck”?

In 2015, Stephen Harper could win his fourth straight election, a feat no Conservative has achieved since Sir John A. Macdonald. To be eligible for selection to the same electoral pantheon as the legendary Sir John A. is an indication of how much Harper has mastered Canadian politics since becoming prime minister in 2006. The 2015 election will be important, like every electoral contest in deciding who forms government. But beyond the horse-race perspective is a larger historical question: will 2015 confirm that the Conservatives have, in the early 21st century, established a new dynasty replacing the once dominant 20th-century Liberal party coalition?

V.O. Key Jr., the great Harvard political scientist, published in 1955, *A Theory of Critical Elections*, which called attention to the fact that not all elections are the same: occasionally, there are electoral realignments “in which the decisive results of the voting reveal a sharp alteration of the pre-existing cleavage within the electorate.” If the realignment is confirmed in subsequent elections, and endures overtime, then there has been a “critical election” leading to a fundamental shift.

Key’s criteria apply to the 1896 Canadian federal election, for example, as Wilfrid Laurier, the francophone leader of the Liberal Party, won 49 seats in Quebec to the Conservative Party’s 16, making Quebec the bedrock of the Liberal Party for the next hundred years. In their book, *Dynasties and Interludes*, Lawrence LeDuc and his co-authors write that the Laurier dynasty was established in 1896, tested in the election of 1900, then confirmed in the elections of 1904 and 1908. The authors posit that there are three keys to establishing a political dynasty: to be well positioned on the key economic questions, to ensure confidence on issues of national unity, and expanding or sustaining the welfare state.

Known as the Natural Governing Party of the 20th Century, the Liberal Party was adept at positioning itself on these three key requirements. In the 2000 election, Jean Chrétien won his third majority government in a row, and the Liberal dynasty seemed well placed to go on and on. But as the ancient Greeks wrote, “Those whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad.” Through hubris, the Liberals embraced the madness of civil war, and in doing so, they destroyed a coalition that had taken them a century to build.

It is instructive to compare the electoral pillars of the “Big Red Machine” in 2000, the last year of a Liberal majority, with the results of the 2011 election, which saw the Liberal Party not only lose for the third time in a row (that had hap-

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pened only once before in Canadian history) but fall to third place behind the NDP, a calamity that had never happened before. From first to third in a decade takes some doing.

If the Liberals have fallen spectacularly, the Conservatives of Stephen Harper have built incrementally. The Harper breakthrough is not due to an eruption like the Jack Layton’s “orange crush” in 2011, or charismatic appeal like Pierre Trudeau in 1968. Instead, carefully and methodically, Harper united the right-leaning parties, therefore consolidating his base. Then he worked to make the Conservatives the preferred party on economic issues, a competence of most concern to Canadian voters, while reducing fears that he has a radical right-wing agenda on social issues. Governments traditionally defeat themselves, but Harper has added two percent to his vote total and 20 seats in each election since becoming prime minister. The Conservatives had 29.6 per cent of the vote and 99 seats in 2004 and this grew to 39.6 per cent of the vote and 166 seats in 2011. Like a batter who steadily increases his average month by month, year by year, no matter who is pitching, Stephen Harper has become a political all-star.

However, Harper never faced Jean Chrétien in an election: Chrétien has all-star credentials too, and comparing his last majority in 2000 with Harper’s first in 2011 demonstrates what has happened between then and now.

The last Liberal dynasty of Chrétien and his partner—then rival—Paul Martin had many of the same pillars of support as past eras of Liberal success. The Liberal Party became the governing party because of great support from francophones, Catho-

lics, immigrants (especially visible minorities) and women. In 1980, with Pierre Trudeau as leader, for example, the Liberal Party took 68 per cent of the vote in Quebec and 74 of 75 seats. In 2000, under Jean Chrétien, despite the rise of the Bloc Québécois, the Liberals still had 44 per cent of the vote and 36 seats in Quebec. In 2000, more than half of Catholic voters supported the Liberal Party, as did 80 per cent of visible minorities and 46 per cent of Canadian women (compared to 24 per cent for the Canadian Alliance).

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In addition to keeping the traditional Liberal coalition intact, the Chrétien-Martin partnership strengthened Liberal appeal in the crucial area of the economy. Elections from the 1960s to the 1990s more typically had the Liberals trying to make unity and just society concerns the dominant issues, while Conservatives spotlighted the economy. By eradicating the deficit, creating jobs and reducing taxes, however, the Chrétien government gained legitimacy in economic management. In the 2000 election, the Liberals were slightly ahead of the Alliance on which party was closest to voter opinions on the deficit (a traditional strength of the Reform Party). While neutralizing this issue on the right, the Chrétien Liberals also enjoyed the support of 43 per cent of

union households, far above the NDP at 30 per cent.

For all these reasons, the Chrétien Liberals enjoyed the support of the largest core of partisans: 40 per cent of voters identified with the Liberal Party in 2000. This meant that the Liberals could win by turning out enough voters from their core while at least breaking even with independent or swing voters. In fact, they did better than that, winning 40 percent of independent voters in 2000 compared to 30 per cent for the Alliance. The most sincere compliment is to emulate and the Harper Conservatives soon became masters of the Chrétien strategy by turning out the base, encouraging the splits in the opposition and gaining enough swing votes to replace the Liberals as Canada's dominant party.

Harper's step-by-step demolition of Liberal dominance began with his successful effort to unite the right through the merger of the Alliance and PC parties. No longer would Liberals enjoy the split between conservative-inclined voters. To the traditional Conservative base of the West (in 2011, Harper won 67 per cent of the vote and 27 out of 28 seats in Alberta), Harper added Ontario. By courting the ethnic vote, a constituent group identified by the Party as ideologically similar to the Conservative base, Harper offset losses in Quebec. The Conservatives swept Ontario, where 28.5 per cent of the population was foreign-born, taking two-thirds of the seats in 2011, including 30 seats in the GTA, the former Liberal fortress. The Conservative ballot question on the economy registered as voters thought Stephen Harper was the best leader on the economy compared to 11 per cent for Michael Ignatieff. The West-Ontario base is now as central to Stephen Harper's success as the Quebec-Ontario axis was to the Liberal Party in its glory days.

The Chrétien era Liberal coalition fell apart in 2011: only 15 per cent of Catholics, 20 per cent of visible minorities and 20 per cent of wom-

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en supported the Liberals, and the Party lost over 850,000 votes from the election of 2008. In 2011, only 20 per cent of respondents in a pre-election survey identified themselves as Liberals, a drop of 50 per cent since the days of Jean Chrétien. Now, the Conservatives have the largest base of partisans at 30 per cent, still below the Liberal high, but loyal, durable and active.

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As we approach the 2015 election, there is no obvious crack in the Conservative base, but Harper cannot afford too many errors. The Conservatives have been very efficient in turning out the base, but it is a smaller base than the Liberals used to enjoy. In Justin Trudeau, the Liberals have a leader with the most identifiable name in Canadian politics and even his severest critics will acknowledge that Trudeau is a tremendous retail politician with a sunny personality. Current surveys place the Liberals tied or even slightly ahead of the Conservatives, a large jump from third place in 2011.

But Stephen Harper has a few things going for him too. Redistribution will increase the number of House of Commons seats by 30, 27 of them in the West-Ontario Conservative stronghold, with 15 new seats in Ontario and six each in Alberta and British Columbia. The budget deficit has

at last been eradicated, and tax cuts and credits, the tried and true elements of a Conservative platform, are on the way. Once again, the Conservatives will campaign as the party of economic management and stability.

Brian Mulroney once described the Liberal Party as a "tough old bird". In 2004, Stephen Harper ruffled its feathers and then in the elections of 2006, 2008, and 2011, he plucked the old bird clean. In 2015, he hopes he can finally wring its neck. Then again, as Winston Churchill famously said in the Canadian House of Commons in 1941: "Some chicken, some neck!" **P**

Figures cited are largely taken from *The Canadian Election Study*, the flagship project of Canadian social science, which has surveyed voters in every Federal election since 1965.

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