

The Liberal Party at 150: The Centre Still Holds

Thomas S. Axworthy

“I propose the adoption of the rainbow as our emblem. By the endless variety of its tints the rainbow will give an excellent idea of the diversity of races, religions, sentiments and interests of the different parts of the Confederation.”

— Sir Henri-Gustave Joly de Lotbinière, in the debate in the Legislative Assembly of Canada on the proposed scheme of British North American Confederation, Quebec, 20 February 1865.

Even as Canada was being born, diversity was recognized as our pre-eminent distinguishing characteristic. Joly de Lotbinière, a member of Parti Rouge, and subsequently the first Liberal to become premier of Quebec, recognized, too, in his celebrated metaphor that rainbows were fragile—“an image without substance”—and that Confederation would be far from solid without constant attention to how our diverse varieties could congeal. Understanding this diversity, reflecting it, and working to help Canadians appreciate what they have in common rather than what divides them, has been both the vocation and the main achievement of the Liberal Party of Canada since its formation in 1867.

The mathematical exactness of election results and the numerical expression of surveys give party politics a seeming concreteness that its actual practice belies. Party politics is all churn: new voters enter the electorate, issues emerge, opinions alter and societies change. Successful party management requires alertness

to this vast kaleidoscope of change, a willingness to innovate to meet new demands or conditions, and creativity to achieve compromise, or at least acceptance, among the thousands of active supporters and the millions of potential party voters. Party politics is a constant juggling of a great many balls to keep as many as possible in the air. And no party has been as good a juggler for as long a time as the Liberal Party of Canada.

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tions since 1867, the Liberal Party has captured more votes than any other. In the 19th century, the Conservatives, led by the vision and wizardry of Sir John A. Macdonald, were the dominant party. In the 21st century, the Conservatives and Liberals have been essentially even: holding office the same amount of time, with the Liberals averaging only 32 per cent of the popular vote in the past decade and a half. In between, however, in the 20th century, the Liberals were so successful that they became known as “the natural governing party.” As the late political scientist Steven Clarkson quipped, “If the last century did not belong to Canada, Canada turns out to have belonged to the Liberal Party.”

After the First World War and the extension of the vote to women, Liberal governments were in office three-quarters of the time. Other parties, like Japan’s Liberal Democrats or Sweden’s Social Democrats, have had streaks of similar accomplishment, but none have come close to doing this decade after decade for over a hundred years. R. Kenneth Carty in his excellent study, *Big Tent Politics*, concludes “the Canadian Liberal party’s particular claim to fame lies in its extraordinary longevity.”

How have they done it?

John Meisel, the dean of Canadian political scientists, uses a compelling nautical analogy to explain elections. “The courses of electoral outcomes,” he writes, “can be likened to forces affecting the surfaces of oceans.” Fluctuations in sea levels are determined in

the long term by the shrinking of glaciers, in the medium term by the force of the tides, and in the short term by waves. Elections are similarly influenced: long term historical and societal conditions set the context; leaders respond to and shape these basic conditions to influence the tides of public opinion; and skillful party managers and active volunteer organizations ride the waves of the tidal swell.

Canada in 1867 had a population of 3.4 million, 5 million in 1900, and 36.5 million today. In 1867, 268,217 men of property voted; in 1900, a million men, about a quarter of the population, were entitled to vote; in 2015, 26.4 million Canadians were eligible to cast ballots.

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In recent times, fuelled by immigration, the electorate grows by an average of three quarters of a million votes from election to election. Not only does size increase but the distribution changes: Quebec, the bedrock of Liberal support, has seen its proportion of Canada's population fall from 30 per cent to 24 per cent, while the West, where Liberal support is weakest, has grown so that now 1 in 3 Canadians live in Western Canada, the highest share ever recorded. If current Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau spends a lot of time in British Columbia and the cities of the Prairies, he does so with good reason.

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Mackenzie King hosts Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill at the Quebec Conference in August 1943, which approved the Allies' plan to liberate Europe in 1944. King was Canada's longest serving prime minister—22 years in office, including the entirety of the Second World War and the emergence of the post-war world. *Library and Archives Canada photo*

electoral sea have been continually changing and thus, every generation or so, the Liberal Party has had to reinvent itself to continue to be relevant to the society of its time. But in those re-inventions, the party has always applied the same formula: stick to the centre and invite all to join.

The pedigree of the Liberal Party dates back to the early 19th century, when reformers

like Robert Baldwin and Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine fought for responsible government against the Tory-led Family Compact and Château Clique. But once responsible government was achieved in 1848, and with Baldwin and LaFontaine retiring in 1851, Canadian politics had to be recast. The man with the most skilled hands at the forge was John A. Macdonald and he fashioned a Conservative coalition that dominated Cana-



Four Liberal PMs: Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson with incoming ministers Jean Chrétien, John Turner and Pierre Trudeau at a swearing-in at Rideau Hall in April 1967. *Library and Archives Canada photo*

da for the next 40 years. Macdonald brought together the old Tories (his faction), the Bleus of Quebec led by Sir George-Étienne Cartier, who was close to the Church, some moderate followers of Baldwin, and Montreal business interests centred around the Grand Trunk railway. As Sir Allen Napier MacNab, a Tory colleague of Macdonald, famously declared “All my politics are Railroad.”

This did not leave much else, but what there was came together eventually to create the Liberal Party. The “Clear Grit” farmers of Canada West (modern day Ontario) demanded electoral reform; economy in government, meaning fewer subsidies for the Grand Trunk; and reciprocity or free trade with the United States. The post-Baldwin Canada West Reformers or Grits were led by George Brown, editor of the *Globe*. Christopher Moore in his book *1867: How the Fathers Made a Deal*, opens with the sentence, “In the 1860s, western alienation began at Yonge Street and George Brown was the Preston Manning of his day.”

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The other remnants of pre-Confederation politics immune to John A’s wiles were Parti Rouge led by Sir Antoine-Aimé Dorion. Les Rouges were heirs of the



George Brown, editor of the *Globe*, and a Grit father of Confederation. *Library and archives Canada photo*

1848 European Revolution and were opposed to excessive clerical influence in politics. Initially, there was little in common between the Grits and Les Rouges, except their opposition to Macdonald. However, in 1856, Dorion began to advocate federalism as a solution to the issue of preserving French Canada’s distinctiveness within a wider union while allowing representation by population, the main Grit demand. Brown gradually warmed to the idea and in 1858, the two parties joined forces to defeat Macdonald in the House and formed a short-lived administration which promised a constitution “coming directly from the people, or by a Canadian Bill of Rights guaranteed by Imperial statute or by the adoption of a federal union with provincial rights guaranteed.”

That promise is the genesis of the Liberal Party: Against the bitter background of sectarian conflict, the differing interests of Catholic and Protestant, and the regions of Canada East and West, Brown and Dorion fashioned a compromise that allowed them to form a ministry. Conciliation and compromise, especially to pro-



Sir Wilfrid Laurier, “the greatest Liberal of them all”. *McCord Museum photo*

tect minority distinctiveness within a system of majority rule, is a template that Liberals have used ever since.

However successful Brown and Dorion were in creating a compromise within the reform movement, they could not match the superior political skills of Macdonald. In 1867, with Confederation achieved, Brown wrote to Dorion and reform allies in the Maritimes about joining forces to oppose Macdonald in the Dominion’s first election. In June 1867, a convention of Ontario Reformers supported Brown rather than continue in the “Great Coalition” that had created the new country. The Liberal Party formally begins at that moment. But the 1867 election confirmed Macdonald’s mastery. Macdonald won a clear majority of Ontario’s 82 seats, Brown was personally defeated, and Cartier swept Quebec. There was now a Liberal Party but it was in tatters. When the federal Parliament met in November 1867, the Liberal opposition consisted of only 36 Ontario Grits and 20 Rouges and Mari-



Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau with his son Justin, then 2, at the National War Memorial in 1974. Pierre Trudeau kept a bust of Sir Wilfrid Laurier in his office, and as with Laurier, the unity and diversity of Canada was his signature issue. *Library and archives Canada, Duncan Cameron photo*

time members who had opposed Confederation itself. It is good for Liberal hubris to recall that the party began in defeat.

The Liberal breakthrough did not occur until 1887, when Wilfrid Laurier became leader. Brown and Dorion had negotiated an agreement that sought to guarantee Canada's diversity: Laurier embodied it. With one inspired leadership choice, the Liberal Party transformed its fortunes. In 1891, Laurier lost to Macdonald but increased Liberal seats in Quebec from 12 to 37. In 1896, Laurier swept Quebec with 53 per cent of the vote and 49 seats. From Laurier onwards, Quebec has been the anvil of Liberal success. Laurier inherited the Grit-Rouge alliance but he added to it key parts of the Macdonald coalition: he promoted railways and the opening of the West thereby bringing business support and he became as skilled at using patronage as the

old Master himself. In short, Laurier appropriated the Macdonald system and made it his own. With the most balanced parliamentary caucus in Liberal history with all regions represented by strong ministers, by his eloquent defence of tolerance in a sectarian age, and with political skills second to none, Laurier created the Big Tent that has sheltered Liberals from his day to ours. He is the greatest Liberal of them all.

Laurier excelled at the formula of finding common ground and his successors have followed in his footsteps. Mackenzie King was Canada's longest-serving prime minister—22 years in office. As Canada became an urban nation, King moved cautiously to promote social policy and Keynesian economics. Louis St. Laurent promoted a dynamic foreign and defence policy and, despite the legacy of the conscription

debate, carried public opinion in every part of the country. Lester B. Pearson—urged on by advisors like Walter Gordon, Allan MacEachen, and Tom Kent—moved much more boldly than King to introduce Medicare and the Canada Pension Plan. Jean Chrétien, with the help of Finance Minister Paul Martin, balanced the budget at a time when there were fears that debt was out of control, kept Canada out of the Iraq war, and brought in the Clarity Act to dampen separatist enthusiasm for never-ending referendums. Chrétien gave a classic example of the Liberal formula of common ground when he said in distributing any budget surplus that one-third would go to reducing taxes, one-third to retire debt, and one-third for social spending.

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Pierre Trudeau venerated Laurier and kept a bust of him in his parliamentary office. Just as preoccupied with national unity as his great predecessor, Trudeau changed the unity dialogue from a debate about the division of powers to one about values and individual rights. By highlighting in the Charter the values of liberty, equal treatment, and multiculturalism, Trudeau made the Charter into the Arc of the Covenant of modern liberalism. Through the Charter, Trudeau enshrined in the Constitution Laurier's formula of unity through diversity.

On a miserable winter day in 1980, with snow falling and the wind biting, the Liberal campaign rolled into the old Grit bastion of the Bruce Peninsula. As they had for over 150 years, an enthusiastic crowd of 200 Grit partisans had turned out to welcome the Liberal leader and cheer up the campaign team. Later, adopting his best philosopher king mode as we worked on the next speech, Trudeau asked “why do they come?” Trudeau was not a party man. Unlike Jean Chrétien, he had not joined at an early age or worked his way up the party ladder. At that moment at least, he was genuinely puzzled about what it was that attracted volunteers to spend their time working so hard to elect the party of their choice.

It is a crucial question. Without an organization to attract candidates, raise money and promote public education, even the best strategy will fail. Riding the waves is as important as mastering the electoral tides. The Liberal and Conservative parties, both vestiges of pre-Confederation politics, are two of Canada’s longest established volunteer organizations. Belonging to a party once meant jobs for your family but those days are long gone. The patronage system of Macdonald and Laurier is now a thing of the past. Parties must now attract volunteers by giving them a role in the process such as choosing candidates, electing leaders and influencing policies. The Liberal Party has been blessed with skilled managers and professionals like Keith Davey, Jim Coutts and Martin Goldfarb, but these managers knew that it is the grassroots volunteer activists who bring vitality and credibility to the process. A big tent requires a large crew to raise it, repair it and keep it sturdy against the wind.

On the 150th anniversary of Confederation, the Liberal Party faces challenges on all three of the dimensions outlined above. On voter volatility, the 21st century has been the most competitive for the Liberals since the days of Macdonald. In 2011, the party lost



Justin Trudeau on the campaign trail in Calgary before one of the leaders’ debates in the 2015 election, in which he led the Liberals to a surprise majority. *Adam Scotti photo*

850,000 votes from its previous total, falling to third place for the first time in its history, with only 20 percent of Canadians identifying with the Party. The turnaround achieved by Justin Trudeau and his team in 2015 was remarkable: from third to first with 39 per cent of the vote and with a majority government. The Liberal Party won 6.9 million votes in 2015 compared to 2.7 million votes in the election before. But the 2011 collapse shows what can happen to a centrist party when it is squeezed from both the right and the left. So, the real test begins this fall.

Justin Trudeau has been practising the tried and true Liberal formula of seeking common ground. He has partnered with the current government of Alberta to fight climate change but also promoted pipelines to move Alberta’s oil, though only with the strictest environmental safeguards. But in the 21st century, the success of a Big Tent strategy is not a given. The Harper Conservatives showed that it was possible to win narrow-band campaigns appealing only to the base identified by deep

data techniques. The Trudeau team will be especially challenged by the need to achieve reconciliation with Canada’s indigenous peoples on resource development and much else—the Big Tent must be widened to allow native people lots of standing room. This will only happen if they are given real power and influence.

Maintaining a dynamic volunteer base is another imperative, yet harder in our age of social media. Every organization, from Canada’s mainline churches to the Boy Scouts, is grappling with this problem. But for the Liberal Party’s continued success this, too, must be addressed. At some time in the future, another beleaguered Liberal leader will be visiting the Bruce Peninsula and they, too, will need to be comforted and energized by volunteers who have been cheering the Grits on since 1867. **P**

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