Report from Canada

Putting Justin Trudeau's Triumph in Context

BY MARK WEGIERSKI

In the Canadian federal election of October 19, 2015, Justin Trudeau's Liberals decisively won 184 of 338 seats, making Trudeau Prime Minister. The Conservatives, who had won a majority in the 2011 federal election, won only 99 seats. The New Democratic Party (NDP) — Canada's social democrats — who had won 103 seats in the 2011 election, were reduced to 44 seats. The separatist Bloc Quebecois was able to win 10 seats in Quebec, while the Green Party won 1 seat.

The election campaign was one of the longest in modern Canadian history. At the beginning of the campaign, the NDP led in the polls. However, the Liberals were able to position themselves as "more progressive" than the NDP — who were led by the sober-looking, centrist-tending Tom Mulcair. There was a period of time in the campaign, when each of the main parties had about one-third of the popular support, but, in the last two weeks or so of the campaign, the NDP faltered, and the Liberals pulled ahead.

The Liberal win was really the restoration of a long-term trend in Canadian federal politics — long periods of Liberal government with relatively brief Conservative interludes. Indeed, Justin's late father, the Liberal Pierre Elliott Trudeau, had held power from 1968 to 1984 (except for nine months in 1979-1980). Pierre Trudeau's sixteen years in power were fundamentally transformational for Canada. Until the 1960s, Canada had been frequently considered a relatively conservative society. Although Liberals like Mackenzie King, Canada's longest-serving Prime Minister, usually held power, they could be seen as part of a "traditionalist-centrist" consensus embraced by all major parties. Pierre Trudeau — by pushing forward multiculturalism, bilingualism (French), high dissimilar immigration, and various social liberal policies — transformed Canada decisively. And he capped this transformation by introducing the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) into the Canadian constitutional framework. Reinforced by an "activist judiciary," the Charter essentially enshrined virtually all of Trudeau's agenda as the highest law of the land. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find even one solid conservative on the Canadian Supreme Court since the 1980s. These multifarious structures created by Pierre Trudeau have sometimes been dubbed "the Trudeaupia." With the whole context of Canadian political culture and intellectual life shifted towards a "progressive" mindset, genuine conservatives found themselves harried without quarter.

In 1984, the Progressive Conservative Brian Mulroney won one of the largest majorities in Canadian history. (The Conservative Party had changed their name to "Progressive Conservative" already in 1942.) While derided as "hard right" by the Canadian media, Mulroney was in fact mostly liberal in his outlook and policies. For example, he raised immigration to a quarter-million persons a year, from the 54,000 or so it had fallen to by Trudeau's last year in office. By 1987, genuine conservatives had had enough, and they tried to form the Western-Canadian-based Reform Party. Mulroney won the 1988 federal election by making it a referendum on the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. Ironically, Free Trade with the U.S. had been traditionally opposed by Canadian Conservatives, who had looked to Britain, and supported by the Liberal Party. In the 1993 election, the time of reckoning arrived, with the Progressive Conservatives reduced to *two* seats in the federal Parliament, with Reform winning 52 seats, and the separatist Bloc Quebecois, 54. The Liberals, however, easily formed a majority government, under Jean Chretien.

The continuing climate of derision against the Reform Party, and the unwillingness of the Progressive Conservatives to dissolve, or make an electoral alliance with the Reform Party, resulted in another Liberal majority in 1997.

Preston Manning then undertook the United Alternative initiative, an attempt to broaden the Reform Party. The new party which emerged was called the Canadian Alliance (the full name of the party was the Canadian Reform-Conservative Alliance).

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Stockwell Day, who began well, was selected leader of the Canadian Alliance in 2000. In the 2000 federal election, he was demonized as a "fundamentalist Christian extremist" — and the Canadian Alliance was able to win only 66 seats — 64 of them in Western Canada.

After the caucus revolt against Stockwell Day in 2001, Stephen Harper was selected as leader of the Canadian Alliance.

In December 2003, the long-awaited merger of the Canadian Alliance and the federal Progressive Conservatives was enacted, creating one new Conservative Party. The dropping of the adjective was electrifying and significant.

Stephen Harper was selected leader of the new Conservative Party in 2004. He faced off in the federal election against Liberal Paul Martin, Jr. (who had succeeded Jean Chretien as of November 2003). The Liberals were reduced to a minority government in the 2004 election, holding a plurality but not a majority of seats in the federal Parliament. They were finally defeated in the federal Parliament on a "non-confidence motion" in November 2005.

In the federal election of January 23, 2006, the Conservatives won a minority government. Through adroit maneuvering and centrist policies, they were able to remain in power until Harper himself called the 2008 election, where they strengthened their minority. Defeated in the federal Parliament on a "non-confidence motion" in 2011, the Harper Conservatives were finally able to win a majority in the federal election of that year.

Although Harper was again predictably demonized as "hard right," his four years of majority government proved extremely disappointing to genuine conservatives. The Harper government seemed conceptually captured by large elements of the prior "Trudeaupia." He was simply unable to get a transformational dynamic anywhere near to that once exercised by Pierre Trudeau, under way. And then his government was compromised by a scandal over what could be seen as a purely administrative matter — as opposed to a defense of a matter of principle.

So, Conservatives waged the 2015 election campaign in the teeth of a hostile social, intellectual, and media climate. The Canadian media had a fawning adulation for Justin Trudeau comparable to that of U.S. "mainstream media" for Obama. All the mistakes of the Conservatives were enormously amplified, while the shortcomings of Justin Trudeau were greatly downplayed. The media also tended to steer the "progressive-minded" away from the NDP. Given this context, it's not surprising that Justin Trudeau was able to win a landslide victory.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, considered by Conservative critics as a radical left-wing zealot.

Justin Trudeau's win, it could be argued, has rendered into ruin close to thirty years of efforts by genuine conservatives to slowly turn around "the ship of state" in Canada.

Nevertheless, Justin Trudeau's win can also be perceived as part of a wider tapestry of the kinds of societies which exist in the West today.

Politically astute observers have argued for the emergence, in most Western societies, of something called (by its critics) "the managerial-therapeutic regime." The term is derived from a combination of the ideas of James Burnham (author of *The Managerial Revolution* [1941]), and Philip Rieff (author of *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* [1966]). George Parkin Grant (1918-1988) echoed similar critical observations as Canada's leading traditionalist philosopher.

It could be argued that Canada today is among the fullest embodiments of such a regime — which is mainly socially liberal and economically conservative. As George Grant had aphoristically put it: "The directors of General Motors and the followers of Professor [Herbert] Marcuse sail down the same river in different boats." The managerial-therapeutic regime may constitute an insoluble dilemma for the exercise of real democracy. Indeed, it presages the arrival of "soft-totalitarianism."

The managerial-therapeutic regime is based on relatively new structures of social, political, and cultural control. The structures of a regime of this kind are usually able to exercise power in a "soft" fashion. These consist mainly of: the mass media (in their main aspects of promotion of consumerism and the pop culture, not to mention the shaping of social and political reality through the purveying of news); the mass education system (an apparatus of mostly unidirectional instruction from early childhood education to postgraduate studies); and the juridical system (generally speaking, by way of the "judicialization" of important political questions and, more specifically, through restrictions on political and religious speech, and on freedom of religion, by human rights commissions/tribunals).

The diffuse presence of these structures in society throws into question longstanding, classic understandings of government, politics, and democratic self-governance. The right to exercise freedom of speech — a supposed bedrock of democracy — is no longer valued much, even in theory — as opposed to the imperative of being "politically correct." Democracy today is no longer understood as a vehicle for choosing between somewhat differing visions of politics and life, but rather as one, all-encompassing system of "democratic values" — that must be upheld and imposed on everyone in society. The word "democratic" is usually used with the implied meaning of "socially liberal."

The tendentious social and legal instruments of the regime are so deeply entrenched in Canada's social/cultural fabric, moreover, that they are more than adequate when it comes to containing any popular challenges to the regime, whether these stem from the resistance mounted by residual traditionalist enclaves or from more thoroughgoing and deeply rooted channels of ecological or social democratic thought.

It could be argued that the regime is strengthened further by a "pseudo-dialectic of opposition" between an "official" Left and Right, which serves to exclude from the very outset many truly serious issues from public debate and consideration. Thus, elections may bring different parties and candidates into office, but the managerial-therapeutic regime endures.

The end-result of such a regime is a tendency towards so-called "soft totalitarianism" — of which the best known literary foreshadowing is probably the dystopia portrayed by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* (1932). In contradistinction to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), an apparatus of violent coercion has proven unnecessary to maintain the regime. However, the points Orwell made about the importance of the use of language — "Newspeak is Ingsoc, and Ingsoc is Newspeak" — remain pertinent.

When a regime controls the mass media, the mass education system, and the juridical apparatus, it does not need to exercise massive coercion to keep itself in power. Opponents of the system are frequently enough derided as "haters" or "Luddites." Unlike in the case of the former Eastern Bloc, there is no groundswell of tacit popular support for dissidents — indeed, quite pronounced feelings of seemingly popular outrage appear to be directed against them. Despite an ostensibly free society, they find very few public defenders.

Ironically, "soft totalitarianism" may in fact arise in the most ostensibly free and formally democratic systems. All the froth and foam and enthusiasm around the election of a young, physically attractive, celebrity-politician, does not necessarily point to the health of Canadian democracy, but rather may amount to little else but the stage-managed confirmation in office of one of the most effective, pliant, unambiguous, and thoroughgoing exponents of the managerial-therapeutic system. It increasingly moves Canada in the direction where, to be a genuine conservative in social, political, and cultural life "will be made impossible." Given the general tone seen in the widespread denunciations of Harper's Conservative Party as "narrow-minded" and obdurately reactionary, it appears that still less will it be possible for a somewhat more than nominally Conservative Party, to win a federal Parliamentary majority ever again. ■