ECHOES OF 1957: A REALIGNMENT IN THE MAKING?

John Meisel

The 1957 election unexpectedly ushered in an era of minority governments in Canada. Following John Diefenbaker's stunning minority win in the election of June 10, 1957, he was returned with the famous landslide of 1958, only to be reduced to a minority in 1962, followed by the Pearson Liberal minorities of 1963 and 1965. Of all these minority results, the 1957 outcome was the most significant one, "a realigning election," as John Meisel writes. Author of the classic text, *The Canadian Electionof 1957*, Meisel observes from his listening post at Queen's University that there are remarkable similarities and obvious differences between the 2004 and 1957 elections, but suggests that many signs point to a minority government and concludes "a realignment is taking place no matter what the outcome of 2004."

Le scrutin fédéral du 10 juin 1957 a inauguré au Canada une ère de gouvernements minoritaires. L'élection inopinée de John Diefenbaker a certes été suivie de son écrasante victoire de 1958, mais ce dernier a été réélu en 1962 à la tête d'un gouvernement minoritaire renversé dès l'année suivante par les libéraux de Lester B. Pearson, également minoritaires. Tout comme ils l'ont été deux ans plus tard, en 1965. Mais le tout premier de ces scrutins minoritaires, celui de 1957, reste le plus marquant pour son effet de « réalignement », écrit John Meisel, auteur de *L'Élection canadienne de 1957*, un grand classique du genre. Depuis Queen's University, il note de frappantes similitudes entre les élections de 2004 et 1957, par ailleurs différentes à maints égards. Il n'en repère pas moins plusieurs signes annonciateurs d'un gouvernement minoritaire et conclut qu'on « assiste à un réalignement, quel que soit l'issue du prochain scrutin ».

A short while ago the impending election was seen as a sizeable yawn. But then the sponsorship scandal turned into a puff of smoke the expectation that Paul Martin would coast effortlessly to a majority government. The long-standing, seemingly unassailable Liberal lead in the polls has shrunk dramatically, raising the spectre that Canada would find itself in 2004 with a minority government, and might even witness moving day at 24 Sussex Drive. These possibilities invite us to examine the events from 1957 to 1968 — one of Canada's most striking eras of electoral instability and minority governments. Pierre Trudeau also failed to win a majority in 1972 but this was a minor blip in our electoral history, offering few parallels applicable to the present situation. Nineteen seventy-two was clearly not what political scientists categorize as a realigning election; 2004 may become one.

Whatever the case, 1972 confirms the fact that even though our first-past-the-post electoral system normally produces Parliamentary majorities, there are exceptions. When the electoral support of the major contenders is close, and when at the same time "third" parties do relatively well, no one party can muster a majority in the House of Commons. The recent emergence of regionally based voices, like the Bloc Québécois, Reform and Alliance, enhances this tendency, even though their geographical concentration of support may impede their votes being translated fairly into seats. More about that later.

In what follows I compare the present scene with that prevailing almost fifty years ago. I then explore the question of whether history may repeat itself and again deprive the expected winner of a majority, thereby initiating a realignment of the Canadian party system. It will be recalled that the hegemonic Mackenzie King-Louis St-Laurent Liberal party sailed into the 1957 election with full anticipation of victory, only to be deprived of a majority by the Progressive Conservatives under the newly elected John Diefenbaker, who replaced St-Laurent as prime minster. He converted his 1957 House of Commons minority into an unprecedentedly

massive majority in the 1958 election, sharp on the heels of his unexpected assumption of office. But his unrivalled performance on the stump was not matched by his skill in running a government. He lost his majority in the 1962 election and was removed from office by that of 1963, when he was challenged by Lester Pearson.

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Despite his glittering reputation, and undoubted legislative achievements, Pearson, however, failed to win a majority in either the 1963 or 1965 elections — something the Liberals only achieved in 1968, when Pierre Trudeau succeeded him.

Since there are both parallels and divergencies between 2004 and 1957, it is instructive to explore the two situations and particularly to ask ourselves what circumstances in the earlier period facilitated the emergence of an era of minority governments.

Liberal governments had been in office for 22 years prior to the 1957 election and eleven before 2004. But the "time for a change" theme was not as inappropriate as might seem at first glance even at the start of the Martin era. The Liberal Party (a.k.a. "the government party") had come to see itself, and be seen, as the natural and normal ruler of Canada, only to be relieved of governing under rare and exceptional circumstances. As such, it developed many characteristics associated with long tenures in power: arrogance, inefficiency, extensive reliance on patronage and whiffs of scandal turning into gales. The principal *cause célèbre* in 1957 was the government's effort to ram through the House legislation favouring the construction of a pipeline, in part benefiting some American businessmen friends of C.D. Howe — the tough "Minister for Everything." An equally provocative decision was to amend the *Defence Production Act* giving the ministers powers that were deemed to be quite extraordinary and threatening, particularly in peacetime. The repeated imposition of closure and arrogant stance of the Liberals provoked not only the opposition but also alienated many of the government's supporters in the media and the public.

Thus, the St-Laurent government was vulnerable on issues that lent themselves to powerful exploitation by the opposition in Parliament and on the hustings. The latter venue turned into a formidable resource for the Progressive Conservatives. The party's patrician leader, George Drew, had just retired and was replaced by the somewhat quirky John Diefenbaker, a Saskatchewan lawyer and MP who had made a name for himself as a civil libertarian.

A populist Westerner, Dief injected a completely new element into the party and in fact altered its visage and orientation. During the campaign, he countered the rather tired image of St-Laurent with the fiery and impassioned oratory of a revivalist preacher. He also offered a catching (if unrealistic) vision of the future, in which Canada would develop its vast North. The new leader also subtly played another card: he did not discourage being seen as a Westerner, not identified with central Canada, and he presented himself also as the champion of various, often overlooked groups — ethnic minorities among others — excluded from the Canadian establishment. The Liberal Party was ubiquitously seen as the party of French Canada and of Quebec. While not overtly attacking this link, Diefenbaker tacitly distanced himself and his party from any Gallic taint, thereby sidling up to many in the West and in rural Ontario. There was a clear electoral payoff here, one which may also await Stephen Harper's Conservative party, although Quebec is no longer a Liberal bastion. The difference between now and then, however, is that the St-Laurent Liberals had a lot to lose in the West, whereas the Chrétien and Martin Liberals have been underdogs there thanks chiefly to Trudeau's policies and demeanour.

Among the reasons for minority governments in 1957, and then again in 1962, 1963 and 1965, is that the CCF/NDP and the Social Credit parties won respectable numbers of seats, ranging from 35 in 1965 to 49 in 1962. The current revival in Quebec of the Parti Québécois and the survival of the NDP elsewhere guarantee that the third-party phenomenon, which was of critical importance in the earlier period, will again be present in the 2004 contest.

The principal convergences in electoral factors between the present and the earlier contest are, therefore, the baggage the Liberals carried, and carry, for being a long-standing overbearing government party; profoundly upsetting scandals and shocking government offences; the arrival of a new leader challenging the Liberals in areas of their weakness; and the presence, among the contenders, of third parties possibly depriving the Liberals of a majority. All of these point to a likeli-

hood that the government party might come to grief. But other factors underscore significant differences between then and now, which may affect the outcome in contradictory ways — they may annul the *déjà vu* phenomenon, or reinforce it.

Both major parties offer telling contrasts between the two elections. Harper is *not* Dief. Quite apart from the stigma (anathema to important parts of the electorate) linked to the right wing and reactionary positions of Reform and Alliance, with which he was associated, and his one-time flirtation with a Western separatism, he completely lacks his predecessor's exciting and catching vision and oratory. Harper's image of a competent accountant is no match to Diefenbaker's inspired Pied Piper. The Prairie lawyer really had that much-abused word, charisma, and succeeded in igniting the multitudes.

Another feature favouring a minority outcome in 2004 is the difference between the earlier and recent Liberal governments. St-Laurent, although in decline by 1957, was a much loved and profoundly respected leader of whom the whole Liberal party was proud. Although he had become a bit tetchy by then, his handlers managed, most of the time, to revive the previously irresistible benign persona of the lovable Uncle Louie. The government party was, at any rate, completely united. Compare that to the 2004 Liberals. The long festering challenge by Paul Martin of Jean Chrétien's leadership, the bitterness of their antagonism, the shabby treatment of Chrétien loyalists by the Martinis (as I like to think of them) and the decimation of the antebellum cabinet — all resulted in deep Liberal disunity. Morale is low and resentment deep. It is difficult to foresee electoral *élan* in constituencies where parachuted new candidates replaced folks who had stuck with Chrétien.

There is no doubt that enthusiasm for the new Liberal party has diminished substantially among a large number of activists identified with the old regime. This affects the leadership but may not necessarily diminish the effectiveness of forces on the ground. It is easy to exaggerate the disarray among the old guard. I have not seen survey data on this point but expect that in at least some constituencies Liberal organizations will miss the services of the old hands, and Grit turnout will be low.

The Gazette, Montreal

Prime Minister St-Laurent meets with Conservative Leader Diefenbaker several days after the watershed election of June 10, 1957, to agree on the handover of power. When Diefenbaker formed a government on June 21, it was the first Conservative Cabinet since 1935.

A quite different but related phenomenon, attributable this time to Messrs. Trudeau and Chrétien, strengthens the impression that the current Liberals will, at least in some areas, confront problems greater than those encountered by their predecessors 47 years ago. In St-Laurent's day, the cabinet comprised strong ministers — none more so than Jimmy Gardiner in the West — who were visible and powerful departmental and regional barons delivering not only patronage but also votes. In the era of a lordly PMO, other mighty central agencies, and the Imperial prime ministership, the government case is presented by fewer and less exalted members of the cabinet. Absent a

much admired, telegenic and ubiquitous prime minister, this can become a serious handicap.

Recent Liberal victories were achieved in part because the vote on the party's right was split between the old Tories and Reform or Alliance. Now that a new Conservative party has emerged, the third-party factor is, in one way, less acute. The Liberals are bound to feel this in many constituencies, particularly in populous Ontario. While this is irrelevant to a 1957/2004 comparison, it bears on the likelihood of a minority government. As the protagonists of a "united Right" have correctly argued, the fusion of the voters to the right of the Liberals under one umbrella is bound to affect the number of seats the Liberals are likely to take. It remains to be seen whether former PC supporters will flock to the new party, switch to others, or abstain. Much will depend on the program and campaign of the Harper party. There is no doubt, however, that the Liberals will no longer be able to dominate Ontario as before.

It looks as if they were also going to suffer in Quebec. The sponsorship scandal, which not only upset Quebecers but also insulted them (it is seen by many as growing out of the assumption that its targets were gullible idiots), has led to a fantastic revival of the Bloc and its massive superiority in most Francophone constituencies. This will make it much more difficult to retain a majority of seats, since the expected compensation in Quebec for certain losses in Ontario is unlikely to occur. The strength of a third party in Quebec thus enhances the chances of a minority government and of creating an echo of 1957.

It used to be said, without much hard evidence, that Quebecers like to be on the winning side in an election and therefore vote for the party which they think will form the government. Martin's strenuous efforts to persuade Quebecers of how essential it is that they give him their support is a direct appeal to this alleged desire. Whether it will work this time remains to be seen and will, in any event, depend on the nature of the campaign. There is some dissatisfaction within the party over Martin's choice of leaders within the provincial campaign team — notably former MP Jean Lapierre, who in 1990 bolted the Liberals to help found the Bloc — which will make the task of compensating for Ontario losses more difficult. The unpopularity of the Charest government only compounds the problem. Equally in Ontario, there could well be a sideswipe effect on the federal Liberals as a result of the provincial Liberal government's budget and its hefty increase in health care premiums, deducted at source from voters' paycheques.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, which implicitly argues for a minority government, there is evidence that the new Conservative party is also not as unified or homogeneous as it might wish. More precisely, not all previous supporters of Alliance and the Tories may vote for the Harper party. The treachery of Peter MacKay in burying the Progressive Conservatives, and the manner chosen to form the new party and elect a leader, offended some conservatives, particularly a few prominent Red Tories. While the anti-merger group, which sees the change as a takeover by Alliance of the PC party, is relatively small, it includes some highly visible and respected individuals. Their discontent and that of other former Tory voters will not affect the outcome in the West but may be felt in Ontario. If this happens, the likelihood of a majority Liberal government would be enhanced. Still, the schism within the Liberal party, and the way in which it is being handled, is much more serious than that confronting their principal opponents. Overall, the internal tensions within the major parties are more likely to hurt the Martinis than the Harperites and hence increase the chances of a minority result.

One of the similarities between the two elections privileged here needs further development. It is the consequences of scandals associated with the government party. While they figure prominently in both contests, the effects will likely differ. The sponsorship imbroglio, coming on top of other highly damaging revelations putting in question not only the efficiency of the Chrétien administration, but also its integrity, led to a massive drop in support for the government, but intriguingly only after Martin had taken over. The Liberal party under its teflon-coated little guy from Shawinigan withstood suffering a significant loss of popularity, notwithstanding report after report of bungled programs or "careless" transactions. It is hard to say whether the difference is to be ascribed to his handling of the Martin challenge, damning and highly dramatized reports of the auditor general, the advent of Stephen Harper and a "united alternative," or the pitcher going to the well too often. At any rate, after the assumption of power by the new PM, and the releases of Sheila Fraser's catalogues of crimes, the polls indicated that the Liberals' electoral support which had not been far below 50 percent dropped to below 40 percent, and thus into potential minority territory.

St-Laurent's crew also hovered around 50 percent. The Gallup Poll immediately prior to the election forecast a 48 percent Liberal vote, compared with the actual result which was almost six percent lower. This piece is being written before the 2004 election has even been called, so the critical polling is yet to come. But the public has already been treated to what looks a bit like a Liberal free fall, unknown in 1957. No one expected a minority government in the first St-Laurent/Diefenbaker duel, whereas such an outcome this time is a decided possibility. The far-reaching psychological impact of this difference need not be elaborated. It may induce some wavering Liberals to come, as the saying goes, to the support of their party, but I think

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John Diefenbaker, the Prairie firebrand, at the peak of his oratorical powers in December 1956. Going into the 1957 election, he was given little chance of defeating the Liberals, then 22 consecutive years in office. Instead, in one of the great electoral upsets of the 20th century, Dief broke the back of the Liberal dynasty by winning a minority, which he transformed the next year into the largest majority in Canadian history. Could the 2004 campaign set up as that kind of election?

that a much larger number of potential giant-killers is likely to smell blood and act accordingly. The polls may, in part, fashion a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The pipeline and Defence Production Act issues in the 1950s were shocking to some, but by comparison with the sponsorship and earlier Liberal scandals of the Chrétien era, they were small potatoes. But, accompanied by the arrival of a brilliant Conservative campaigner, they did lead some former Liberals to detach themselves from the party. But, as subsequent elections showed, the alienation was temporary, possibly because the Diefenbaker performance in government was rather feeble. Its short duration was also linked to the powerful grip of the Liberals on Quebec. It is my impression that the recent scandals have been much more shocking and have caused a more profound alienation of the voters from the Grits. Indeed, I wonder whether the impact of current events has not been so powerful as to shock people away, so to speak, from their traditional party moorings. This certainly appears to be the case in Quebec. The process is all the stronger for the general tendency, in contemporary Canada (and elsewhere), of a massive decline in trust in government and party, party identification and loyalty, and in turnout.

We are, in other words, witnessing *systemic* changes in our politics which, *inter alia*, create volatile situations in which people's decisions are becoming more opportunistic, or if this is too loaded a term, more flexible and unstructured. This is likely to produce minority governments more often than heretofore.

A related phenomenon concerns the general nature of society and the electorate. The demographic, socio-

economic and settlement patterns of Canada in the 21st century are colossally at variance with those prevailing when Dief hove on the scene. One question will have to suffice to make the point: do we know whether the current population, whose origins are increasingly non-European and far removed from the conventions of the Westminster model of government, this new electorate, is likely to react to scandals or the notion of majority governments in a manner similar or comparable to that of 1957? Or is it plain foolish to seek comparisons between the Canada of fifty years ago and the new country unfolding before our eyes. Apples and pears?

I guess that the new Canada, less bound by old conventions and shibboleths, is electorally less anchored and more predisposed to change allegiance, and likely also to be less horrified by minority governments. It may even jettison the first-past-the-post electoral system.

While these reflections are a bit remote, they are relevant. I shall, nevertheless, return to more short-term perspectives apposite to the majority/minority dilemma. Electoral outcomes depend, in good part, on the image and performance of the leaders. I have earlier expressed some reticence about the electioneering assets of Stephen Harper. A fuller, and likely better informed assessment, can be found elsewhere in this issue of *Policy Options*. What of the others? Jack Layton has been effective within the limits of his circumstances but it is clear that the NDP is not about to make a breakthrough. This is odd, considering the general party alignment, but need not be analyzed here. Gilles Duceppe has handled himself effectively and may, as we have seen, lead the Bloc to becoming a majority spoiler. He is playing his now strong hand shrewdly and effectively. The Greens are nominating candidates in all constituencies for the first time but are unlikely to exceed 5 percent of support.

That leaves the prime minister. In the Finance portfolio he was widely hailed as one of the most effective Chrétien ministers. The press adored him. What a change! Somehow he has frittered away much admiration and goodwill. Among the reasons is his divisive handling of the leadership issue and the vindictive treatment by his people of several ministers and others who did not support his leadership bid. Once in office, he seemed to be lacking vision, loyalty to his former team and ability to inspire, and he showed inconsistency in tackling the democratic deficit in the Liberal party, and a greater proclivity for campaigning than for governing. These are early impressions and may be revised. But he failed one critical test: his heroic attempt to distance himself from the sponsorship scandal and restore some of the party's previous support was unsuccessful and indeed antagonized important elements in his party. Admittedly, he was caught in an unenviable position but it is exactly such situations that test the mettle of leaders. He does exude an aura of competence and may yet recover lost ground. But up to now he has failed to ignite the new Liberal party. This suggests that he may not be able to stem the loss of Liberal support sufficiently to preserve a majority.

Where does all this leave us? In the 1960s, I acquired some notoriety by accurately and at times improbably predicting minority governments. More grizzled now, and less daring, I am only willing to say that the chances are great that there will be a minority government which may begin a party realignment. I am even willing to go a few centimetres farther and state that chances are greater than not that the Liberals will lose their majority. But having been so foolhardy as almost to commit myself, I hasten to add that it does not much matter one way or another.

Why do I espouse this seemingly insouciant line? Because a realignment is taking place no matter what the outcome of 2004. The right has united, although it did it in a clumsy and extremely dangerous way. What remains to be seen is whether the new hybrid will succeed in escaping the Alliance clutches and provide a Centre-Right program acceptable to the mainstream of Canadians or, more threateningly, whether Canadians who have, alas, supported Neanderthal regimes in some provincial jurisdictions can be persuaded to elect an extreme right-wing government. Before the election and re-election of the Harris government in Ontario and the advent of Premier Campbell in BC, I would have said that this can never happen. History has chastened this naive view. But the chances are much greater that the Conservative party will in its good time — one, two, three elections from now — provide a responsible alternative to the Liberals and that our party system will return to the classic "two plus" model. We are on a realigning track, no matter what happens next.

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John Meisel, Sir Edward Peacock Professor of Political Science Emeritus at Queen's University, is the author of the definitive Canadian campaign text, The Canadian General Election *of 1957, published by University of Toronto Press (1962). He has written on every Canadian election since 1957.*
meiselj@qsilver.queensu.ca