

Canada - After the federal election: the dangers, and the challenges, that lie ahead

Friday 25 October 2019, by [BEAUDET Pierre](#) (Date first published: 23 October 2019).

It is still early to interpret fully the results of Canada's October 21 federal election. But behind the immediate results some trends are clear.

Canada's Federal Election, 2019						
	2019			2015		
Party	Seats	Votes	% of vote	Seats	Votes	% of vote
<i>Liberal</i>	157	5,915,950	33.1	184	6,930,136	39.5
<i>Conservative</i>	121	6,155,662	34.4	99	5,600,496	31.9
<i>NDP</i>	24	2,849,214	15.9	44	3,461,262	19.7
<i>BQ*</i>	32	1,376,135	7.7	10	818,652	4.7
<i>Greens</i>	3	1,162,361	6.5	1	605,864	3.4

* Quebec only, where the party took 32.5% of the vote.

The “right-wing wave” the Conservatives hoped for proved to be little more than a ripple. In Ontario, and in particular the immense metropolitan area of Toronto, the fear campaign mounted by the Liberals was effective. Premier Doug Ford was the perfect scarecrow. The “Ford Nation” of the angry suburbanites had little presence. In Western Canada there was little change. The Tory super-majorities in Prairie ridings did little to increase that party's overall representation in Parliament. While they picked up a few seats in the Atlantic provinces, the Liberals maintained their overwhelming majority there. In Quebec, as expected, the Tories made no headway, winning only 8 seats. Their far-right offshoot, the climate-change denier Maxime Bernier was defeated and his People's Party of Canada went nowhere, polling less than 2%.

An initial conclusion: Canada is not fertile ground, at least for now, for the kind of ultra-reactionary wave that we have been seeing in the United States, England, Germany and elsewhere. Notwithstanding many nuances, this is positive.

The Liberals saved their day despite the serious mauling delivered to Justin Trudeau's cultivated image of a young and dynamic modernizer. Now deprived of a parliamentary majority, however, it was a victory by default, a rejection of the Conservatives especially in Ontario. The Liberals' achievements since their election in 2015 were scarce. Their major promises — on the environment, a “feminist” foreign policy, reconciliation with the First Nations, etc. — were revealed as little more than fine words, far short of the changes that are so necessary. The Trudeau government's discourse has shifted from that of Stephen Harper, particularly in relation to the Indigenous, but in reality there has been little change.

Economically, Canada's relative prosperity is largely a spillover from the apparent but ominously fragile boom in the United States, where Trump has simply postponed the toxic effects of his economic policies; almost everyone predicts an imminent rebound of the great recession, which will hit the Canadian economy very hard, given how closely anchored it is to Wall Street's — and

reaffirmed in the new NAFTA successor deal, yet to be ratified.

As expected, the New Democratic Party took a hiding, especially in Quebec. Only the most naïve could have thought that Jagmeet Singh, with his skilful evasions, could save things for a party that under Thomas Mulcair's stewardship had become little more than a milder version of the Liberals. The party had little credibility in Quebec, despite the last-minute attempts taken by deputy leader Alexandre Boulerice to plug the holes in this hull of a sinking ship. With only Boulerice to represent it from Quebec, the NDP is now back to where it was before 2011, when it swept up 59 seats in the province in the "orange wave."

The Bloc québécois is clearly the big winner, taking enough seats from both the NDP and Liberals to limit the latter to managing a minority government for the next period. The Bloc and its leader, Yves-François Blanchet, skilfully courted the nationalist vote that tilted in the Quebec elections last year toward the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ); the BQ's rise from 10 to 32 seats has no doubt also given some renewed hopes to what remains of the Parti québécois.

The Bloc's gains hint at the possible formation of a new nationalist alliance linking the CAQ and PQ around defense of Quebec, not as a project of emancipation but rather as a defense of identity and provincial autonomy. Since this is Quebec, and not Alberta or France, this defensive nationalism does not assume a far-right expression (although many progressives in English Canada do not understand this). In the last analysis, Blanchet adopted the centre-left discourse that was long associated with the PQ around defense of the environment and social programs, because in Quebec those are objectives cherished by a sociological majority.

Now, allow us to make some forecasts.

The Liberals will govern with the support, both implicit and explicit, of the Conservatives. On most essential issues the two major parties have much the same vision, which corresponds to that of "Canada Inc." The shift in recent years toward a Toronto-Calgary financial and resource axis has disrupted the postwar historic bloc with the unions and rising middle classes — centred in industrial Ontario and a rising Quebec — that spawned the limited social welfare provisions now under increasing attack.

The differences between these parties pertain more to how this is to be done. A faction of the Conservatives, led by Jason Kenney, favours harsh and brutal cutbacks and restrictions on critics, while placing the blame on the "grasping" Quebecers living off equalization grants and the profits from the tar sands. It's a rational project, but in the present circumstances it lacks credibility. The Liberals do not differ radically, but prefer a "war of position" that weakens the provinces (especially Quebec) through a political and economic centralization that facilitates the turn in Canada's political economy. Neither party, however won much more than a third of the votes cast. Although the Conservatives' total vote was marginally higher than the Liberals', both Trudeau and Tory leader Andrew Scheer emerge weaker politically.

In view of the election results the now-minority Liberal government may well be inclined to curry Tory support on major projects, for example by speeding up its planned expansion of fossil-fuel production and export.

As for the New Democratic Party, the election marks a further step in its long-term stagnation, interrupted in the past only by a few very fleeting advances as in the 2011 "orange wave." It seems unable to reinvent itself, to offer a credible alternative to the dominant projects of Canadian capital. Although public opinion polling identified climate change as a major concern, the NDP spoke with a forked tongue on some major environmental issues: for example, endorsing the B.C. NDP

government's massive LNG and natural gas pipeline project while opposing a similar project in Quebec. After some hesitation Singh came out in opposition to the Liberals' Trans Mountain bitumen pipeline expansion, but the party was hobbled by the conflict between the B.C. government, which opposed TMX, and its Alberta NDP counterpart which had championed it while in government.

On Quebec, the party has ultimately failed to engage with the progressive nationalist consciousness of the Québécois. Its major attempt, the 2006 Sherbrooke Declaration, endorsed Quebec's right to national self-determination but said its national character could be "expressed in the context of the [existing] Canadian federation." Underlying its ambiguities is the party's inability to incorporate within its conception of state power the plurinational reality of the Canadian social formation and the ways in which that reality is denied and violated through the constitutional regime established in 1867. Moreover, the NDP (like much of the left) has never understood the role of the federal state as the mainstay of the domination and class interests of Canadian Capital, including its subaltern Quebec component.

Is it time — once again — to declare "the party is over" and find ways to begin anew in building a broad anticapitalist left? Easier said than done. At present the Canadian left is dispersed and fragmented and seems more inclined to focus on organizing and campaigning around particular issues (environment, feminism, Indigenous solidarity, etc.) rather than attempting to build a united radical left alternative. The positive experience of progressive regroupment in the building of Québec solidaire, from which many lessons can be learned, is largely unknown in Canada Outside Quebec.

What can the Bloc québécois really achieve in Ottawa? It can exert some sort of pressure on the minority government, but its means are limited. Meanwhile, the big winner in the election is François Legault, who emerges with his soft nationalist agenda reinforced, giving him greater ability to confront the unions and the environmental coalitions. And he is certain to take advantage of the foreseeable neoliberal alignment of federal Liberals and Tories to accelerate the turn to austerity already heralded.

However, we must be cautious in our predictions, as there are many contingencies that remain unclear, including the next resumption of recession in the U.S.

A few thoughts, perhaps, on what all this may mean for the Quebec left. Throughout the federal campaign Québec solidaire, which as an independentist party does not participate in federal elections, kept silent, even in the face of the explosive debate among the other parties over what to do if anything about the Legault government's Bill 21. A major reason was the QS leadership's fear of reigniting the difficult debate in the party over identity and "values" sparked most recently by the CAQ's Bill 21, a debate that left behind some bitter feelings. The firm and positive position adopted at the QS national council meeting in April did not meet with anything like universal acceptance, even among the party membership.

We agree with the decision taken by a large majority of the council members to oppose Bill 21, on the grounds that the bill's discrimination against faith communities and genders that identify their personal religious beliefs through various forms of clothing (e.g. the Muslim hijab) is inconsistent with true *laïcité* or state secularism, which registers state neutrality toward religion. But what the QS debate may not have addressed adequately is the insecurity that continues to plague many Québécois — especially in regions outside the Montréal metropolis where very few if any Muslim women or other ethnic minorities are encountered — over their national culture and language, in short identity, in a continent and a state that are overwhelmingly non-Francophone and predominantly English-speaking. The CAQ, the Bloc and the PQ have effectively wielded this insecurity to begin forging a new right-wing nationalist alignment in which Bill 21 is a key element, camouflaging its divisive xenophobic content behind opposition to the "multiculturalism" program

originally manufactured by Trudeau Senior as a means to reduce Quebec's foundational national identity to just another residual ethnic identity in the Canadian popular consciousness.

Québec solidaire still needs to find ways to address these underlying insecurities by deepening our inclusive and emancipatory project to include a stronger defense of Québécois culture and language. Our project, which is already characterized by its commitment to ecology, feminism and *altermondialisme*, could benefit from some additional explorations. We cannot be indifferent to the gap between Montréal and the other university towns where QS is strongest, and the rest of the nation in which the working-class and popular majority are likewise seeking a better life, in dignity. The point of departure, as our sympathizers in the regions often remind us, is that our project cannot thrive without the creation of a new political space recognizing French as the common language, and deeply attached to democratic traditions — a true popular sovereignty that comes from the people and is deeply imbued with a sense of social solidarity. A project that is inclusive, democratic, secular (*laïc*) and popular.

We can take inspiration from Scotland, where the rising movement for independence is strongly supported by the people referred to as “immigrants” even if they have lived there for two or three generations. And why is that? Because a new left in recent years has redefined the project as a call to transform the society, to break from the neoliberal prison of the British state, and to promote the interests of the great majority of Scots in their diversity and their utopias.

And there is another task awaiting us, one that is equally monumental. We cannot change Quebec without changing Canada. We must at all costs avoid the terrible error of the right-wing Catalan independentism, which from the outset ruled out the forging of an alliance or at least closer links with the left in the Spanish state. Yes, we know this is not Spain and there is no Podemos or anything resembling it west of the Ottawa River. The Canadian left, such as it is, will some day have to make its own “revolution in the revolution,” incorporating in its program, among other things, a plurinational conception of the Canadian social formation.

Will that be done in or through the NDP? Can it begin with a totally new project? Will it proceed from the local or municipal level, progressing to a higher level? Those are some of the questions confronting our Canadian comrades. Perhaps we can help them, even if only minimally, by waging alongside them the struggles that will develop against climate catastrophe, the austerity and selective repression that awaits us with the next federal government. And to put at least a few grains of sand in the alignment of the Canadian state with the neighboring Empire and its endless wars.

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* With some helpful input from Richard Fidler, a QS member “hors Québec” (outside of Quebec) based in Ottawa, who blogs at [Life on the Left](#).

P.S.

This article is an English adaptation of Pierre Beaudet's article “Péril en la demeure” published in the current post-election issue of the on-line journal [Presse-toi à gauche](#). He currently teaches international development at the University of Quebec Outaouais campus in Gatineau.

- Life on the Left. October 23, 2019:

https://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/2019/10/after-federal-election-dangers-and_23.html