

Luncheon Keynote Address

Public Policy in a One-Party Democracy

Canadian Club of London

**Check against delivery*

Tuesday, October 22, 2003

12:00 P.M.

Hilton Downtown, London

300 King Street

London, Ontario

**Hugh Segal
President
Institute for Research on Public Policy**

My purpose here, in London, is to make the case for a return to a genuinely competitive democracy in Canada. I am making that case because we are on the way to a one-party democracy in Canada, and, for our collective future as citizens and taxpayers, this is not a good thing.

There is no aspect of my present activities that is in any way partisan. I left partisan life aside in 1998. But I continue to believe that not only is partisanship a good thing but also vital to our democratic way of life.

Political parties organize our democratic activities, find and nominate candidates for our legislatures and parliaments and offer competing policy options from which Canadians can choose. Partisanship is at the core of our democratic freedoms.

A country as sophisticated and pluralist as Canada has the right to expect competent partisanship. Political parties are not private clubs. They are essentially licensed by the Chief Electoral Officer on behalf of Parliament and heavily subsidized by taxpayers, and are, in

effect a public trust. Their job is to do the organizing, policy and human resource development necessary and lawful to maximize their chance of electing a parliamentary majority. In our first past the post system - where seats are won by the candidate with the largest number of votes in every riding, (as opposed to a majority of votes cast) if there are not two largely equally matched national parties, the system is dysfunctional.

And, over our history, the relative competence of the Liberal Party of Canada at all of the above skill sets,

has led to their domination of federal governments since 1891. The relative incompetence of Conservatives, largely underlined by their frequent fragmentation over the years - federally and provincially, has resulted in the relative infrequency of federal Conservative Governments. The advent of Reconstruction in 1931 under former Tory Minister H. H. Stevens in BC, which reduced the Tory vote sufficiently to elect Mackenzie King, the end of the Quebec Conservatives and their replacement by Maurice Duplessis' Union Nationale, the advent by W.A.C Bennet of BC's Socreds, Mr. Aberhardt's

Socreds in Alberta, Bob Thompson's National Socreds in the West federally, in the 1950's and 60's and Real Caouette's Creditistes in Quebec, all join Preston Manning's early Reform Party in the late 1980's, and Lucien Bouchard's bloc Quebecois in the early 1990's as the harsh reality of conservative history of fragmentation. Leaders of the Conservatives like RB Bennet, Joe Clark, and Kim Campbell were not adept at managing these tensions. Leaders like John A. MacDonald, John Diefenbaker and Brian Mulroney did much better. Liberal leaders like Mackenzie King, Pierre

Trudeau, and Jean Chretien not only profited from this fragmentation, but gained long periods in government in some measure as a result.

It is not the job of the Liberal party to assist its partisan opponents. Prime Minister Chretien has been extremely competent in the selection of election dates, the quality of his political instincts and the success of his campaigns. I have no reason to believe that Mr. Martin will be any less so.

A fragmented and therefore incompetent opposition has contributed to Liberal success.

In 1997, Jean Charest brought the Conservatives back from the brink of extinction by winning 20 seats in Parliament and increasing the popular vote from the low of 1993. In 2000, Stockwell Day brought the Alliance/Reform to its highest popular vote and seat total ever, with a two seat mini breakthrough in Ontario. In 2000, the Conservatives, attained their lowest percentage of popular vote in recorded history in Canada.

I do not have a public view on how Canadians should vote in the next federal election. A strong case certainly can be made by objective observers that Mr. Martin did yeoman's work as our Finance Minister and, is one of the best prepared potential Prime Ministers in Canada's history. Recent polls had his support as high as 69% of Canadian voters when arrayed, in a speculative question, against a loosely defined united party of the centre-right.

Of one thing we can be all quite sure. When Canadians are confronted by one party, already in government, with the clear responsibility to re-elect a national government, versus a series of small parties - the Alliance, limited to a third of the total seats in the House, largely in the Prairies and BC, the Tories limited to a small beachhead in the smaller proportion of seats found in Atlantic Canada, the NDP marginalized to smaller seat prospects still, and the Bloc limited to even less seats in Quebec, one need not be a dyed in the wool Liberal, simply a Canadian wanting a national government

with a workable majority to prefer the Liberals , and not take seriously the other smaller parties. In an IRPP paper written by Dr. Richard Johnson of UBC, on the state of elections and political parties at the millennium, as part of the IRPP's Strengthening Canadian Democracy series, he makes it clear that under our present first past the post system only Liberals can form a national government in the context of one large and four small regional parties.

In other words, although Professor Johnson did not use this term, we are,

based on our system and the present context, facing a one party democracy.

It is in that context that those of us who care about the range of quality of policy ideas from which Canadians have the chance to choose, and who believe that democratic risk is vital to genuine freedom in our society, should, whatever our political preferences, rejoice at the agreement reached in principle by Peter McKay and Stephen Harper. A coherent National party able to offer a coherent national platform, with the capacity to form a government some day, means a broader

range of policy debate and genuine policy choices. The tyranny of "there is no alternative" is what truly competitive democracy stands against.

This is not about adding PC and Alliance vote totals to win ridings - that may happen in some places and not work at all in others. It is about Canadians knowing, that should they ever wish to change their national government, there is at least one national and competent party able to turn their votes into a national government. The absence of that option removes all democratic risk from the

government of the day. The absence of democratic risk can dilute accountability, sensitivity to the public and often diminishes creativity and customer service. And, the longer that democratic risk is absent, the less legitimate our democratic system becomes.

Messers McKay and Harper are not, as some who should know better have suggested, consigning either party to the slag heap of political history. They both have become, like Sir John A. MacDonald, John Diefenbaker, and Brian Mulroney for the Tories, and, Sir

Wilfred Laurier and Mackenzie King for the Liberals, grand consolidators.

Canada's history, in terms of elections and outcomes federally, can be defined by the cycle of consolidation and fragmentation among Conservative supporters. When the fragmentation cycle is in place, Liberals win, efficiently and consistently. When consolidation takes place, Conservatives are either competitive, as they were under Mr. Stanfield or Mr. Clark - or victorious, when a more effective consolidator takes charge - with specific

consolidation skills in Quebec, as was the case with Brian Mulroney.

Any objective examination of the founding principles agreed to by Messrs. Davis, Mazankowsky, and Hearn from the Tories, and Speaker, Reid, and St. Germaine of the Alliance indicates they are moderate and inclusive. Specific policies and programs are left for the members of the new Conservative Party to debate and sort out as in normal in any political party. As to the public policy context of the proposed Conservative Party of Canada, that is for its membership to debate

and sort out. When I was an active partisan, I was deemed by many to be a Red Tory - which in my mind meant I opposed excess on the Right and the Left, was modestly decentralist and sought always the best possible policy relationship between economic performance and growth on the one hand and social progress and fairness on the other. Were I still an active partisan, there is nothing in the agreement between the Alliance and Progressive Conservatives that would trouble me. My partisanship was about freedom and order - and the equilibrium necessary between both to sustain

either; it was about tradition and history - Canada as a constitutional monarchy, parliamentary government, strong national defence and respect for the constitutional role of the provinces, and the importance of protecting Quebec's francophone character. That being said and partisanship now being a matter of history and not my present or likely future - let me offer two observations:

This new political party - like all Canadian parties are open to those who wish to join. It has been said before that politics is about showing up. I

am aware of no constraint keeping Canadians from the two parties, other parties and from the vast majority of our fellow Canadians who do not hold and have never held any party card from participating. And, in the end, policy directions are chosen by those who show up. Which, in a democracy makes profound sense. While narrow ideologues have long lists of people whom they would not like in "their" parties - we might well remember that parties do not belong to any one person, private salon debating society or family cults; political parties belong to their respective memberships

--and any Canadian can join - which is why the broad based political party is a huge part of the core foundation of our democracy. Each party is there to create real democratic risks for the other, and has a public trust to do so.

We have not had this democratic risk since after the 1993 general election. And, since 1993 we have had a steady decline in voter turnout - hitting its low point in 2000 at 62% of those on the voters' list showing up to vote. The non voters were the larger single group of voters on election day -

larger than those who voted Liberal,
larger than those who voted for the
Alliance and Tories combined. (if we
counted voters the way the US does, our
turnout was really 57%)

Now, when a government wins an
election with 44% of 57% - we have a
government that reflects around 25% of
eligible voters. And, if the lack of
any alternative continues, the very
lack of that alternative will keep
voters away. Among young Canadians and
new Canadians, the non-voting numbers
are ominously large and apparently
growing.

So, let me suggest in an utterly non partisan way what Mr. McKay and Mr. Harper have done, is put the country ahead of their personal political interests.

Some may choose to view this as a consolidation of the "right" . Canadian parties are historically non-ideological - more about regional representation though one or the other political party, than any narrow ideological preference. The actual content of most party platforms is a mix of proposals on the right, left,

and in the centre. Canadians tend to assess the overall balance, the competence in implies, along with available leadership and candidates when voting.

What McKay and Harper have done is propose to their membership a party that would be large enough to be effective and competent enough to produce a genuinely competitive democracy for Canada and Canadians. They are encouraging their memberships to bury the hatchet - not because disagreements in the past were not deep and compelling, but because they now

matter less that the right all Canadians have to a competitive democracy where voters count and elections matter. There will be naysayers and that's democracy. Mr. McKay is a strong, bright and courageous young man. As is Mr. Harper. I doubt that they will be deterred.

If all this fails of course, we are back the to the one party democracy model - when one large party faces small ineffective opposition parties unable to provide a coherent alternative.

How low does voter turnout have to get before we understand that the legitimacy of Parliament, and government itself is threatened when voters refuse to turn up?

How comfortable will Canadians feel when governments that are elected by so few, in a context of no real choices, have to make truly tough and divisive decisions.

So, while in the short term, a new Conservative Party of Canada, or the failure to consolidate such a party may not have any real effect on the outcome of the 2004 federal election, in the medium and longer term, there will be important consequences if the process established by Harper and McKay succeeds - and also, should that process fails.

To those who are opposed to this step ahead within the present Conservative Party, let me offer this reflection for their consideration. How do you attract bright, able, young

and established community, business, farming, volunteer and professional leaders to seek office, if a party has no prospect ever, not now, not in five years, not in a decade, of forming a government? Why would someone give up good work and strong roots to serve one's country through a party that was structurally incapable of forming a government - or even a competent opposition? One needs good people to form policy, attract support, and build leadership potential. And to do that, one needs a party that has the competence, depth, reach, and skills to

be an able opposition and credible potential government.

Should the forces and voices of nostalgia overtake the forces of the future - and the status quo be preserved, all Canada will be democratically less robust in terms of real choice and alternatives.

Should the one party state be set aside by the emergence of a competitive democracy with real choices, all Canadians' democratic options will be constructively enriched. And, I submit respectfully, that freedom,

parliamentary government, policy
choices and our rights as citizens will
be deeply enhanced when competitive
democracy is real.

Thank you all very much.

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