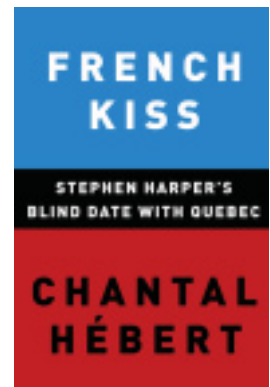


## A compelling explanation of Harper's Quebec breakthrough

Chantal Hébert. *French Kiss: Stephen Harper's Blind Date with Quebec*. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2007.

Review by Graham Fox



Since the unexpected election of 10 Conservative MPs from Quebec on January 23, 2006, many have tried to explain how Stephen Harper succeeded in achieving the breakthrough so few would have predicted one short month before.

None has provided as compelling an explanation for Harper's surprise victories in francophone Quebec as has Chantal Hébert. With the insight we have to come to expect from Hébert the columnist, Hébert the author goes back three decades to chronicle how francophone Quebec came to agree to a "blind date" with the Harper Tories in the last election.

In *French Kiss: Stephen Harper's Blind Date with Quebec*, Hébert explains how the sudden fragmentation of the Mulroney coalition and the gradual hollowing out of the Liberal presence in francophone Quebec created the opportunity for Harper's surge and the emergence of the new Alberta-Quebec coalition. She describes the slow erosion of the importance of federal matters and institutions to Quebecers and their ironic revaluation by the presence of the very group sent to Ottawa to convince Quebecers to abandon them —

the Bloc Québécois. And she speculates on the long-term potential of Harper's beachhead, and the opportunities for the right and the left to turn Harper's blind date into a lasting relationship.

*French Kiss* is much more than the collected wisdom of Hébert's columns

**Mario Dumont's success adds further weight to Hébert's thesis that we — both in Canada and in Quebec — be on the cusp of a realignment of the issues on which voters cast their ballots. Before we had the results of the Quebec vote, Hébert was arguing that language and the institutional Canada-Quebec relationship debate will no longer necessarily dictate electoral choice, and that other issues, such as the environment, government assistance to people and families, and Canada's role in the world, may in fact have greater impact on voter choice in the future.**

from the last few years. Always a perceptive observer of Canadian and Quebec politics, Hébert is rarely as prescriptive in her columns as she allows herself to be in the latter chapters of this book. In addition to her analysis of the electoral dynamics at play in January 2006 and

the events that created them, readers get a rare glimpse into what Hébert thinks *should* occur in the future to reinvigorate federal institutions, particularly the House of Commons.

*French Kiss* is much more than a book on Canada-Quebec relations. That Hébert can take readers seamlessly through the dynamics of the patriation of the Constitution, the crushing impact of Meech and Charlottetown and the 1995 referendum is of no surprise. Where the book does surprise, however, is in how it quickly becomes a book on the need to reform Canadian federal institutions and the resilience of the ties that bind this country together.

The relevance of Hébert's thesis was made more acute as a result of the most recent Quebec provincial election. Many of the same francophone voters who broke ranks with the established electoral script in January 2006 to vote for Harper continued their experiment by making the Action démocratique du Québec the official opposition in the National Assembly.

Mario Dumont's success adds further weight to Hébert's thesis that we

may — both in Canada and in Quebec — be on the cusp of a realignment of the issues on which voters cast their ballots. Before we had the results of the Quebec vote, Hébert was arguing that language and the institutional Canada-Quebec relationship debate will no longer necessarily dictate electoral choice, and that other issues, such as the environment, government assistance to people and families, and Canada's role in the world, may in fact have greater impact on voter choice in the future.

This argument has only been made stronger by the ADQ's meteoric rise and the PQ's relegation to third-party status. Like Harper's before him, Dumont's 41-seat/31 percent showing seemed to come out of nowhere, as election night pundits tried to explain to viewers why it was that no one had

been able to see the electoral tsunami coming (or, at a minimum, accurately measure the height of the wave). If nothing else, the Dumont and Harper victories had this in common: they are both the product of the breakdown in the dominant electoral patterns created in the last three decades, and they both have the potential to rewrite the play-book on wooing francophone Quebec.

Hébert's most lasting contribution, however, does not come in her insightful analysis of Quebec politics at the federal and provincial level. It is her eloquent argument for a rethinking of the role of MPs (which she clearly believes will have to start with MPs themselves) and reinvigorating Parliament as a locus of public debate and the seat of democracy. The author gives the clear impression that it is these reforms, more than overtures to

Quebecers' desire for autonomy, that might well strengthen the commitment of voters to the Canadian experiment — both in Quebec and right across Canada. Beyond the "transactional" strategies destined to create short-term electoral pacts with francophone voters in Quebec, Hébert makes an excellent case for a more thoughtful consideration of how we build long-term commitment to the collective through real debate, a competitive democracy and meaningful electoral choice.

That is a lesson we can and indeed should apply from sea to sea to sea.

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