

## A perfect day for an eclipse

Chantal Hébert

In this excerpt from *French Kiss: Stephen Harper's Blind Date with Quebec*, Chantal Hébert writes about how the Conservatives' unexpected breakthrough in Quebec prevented their first government of the 21<sup>st</sup> century from being still-born. Once every generation, she writes, the political forces in Canada align for a Conservative eclipse of the Liberal sun. Such a day was January 23, 2006.

Dans cet extrait de *French Kiss: le rendez-vous de Stephen Harper avec le Québec*, Chantal Hébert soutient que la percée inattendue des conservateurs au Québec a évité à leur gouvernement minoritaire de mourir dans l'œuf. Une fois par génération, écrit-elle, les forces politiques canadiennes s'alignent de manière à permettre aux conservateurs de provoquer une éclipse du soleil libéral. Ce phénomène a eu lieu le 23 janvier 2006.

In Canada, the stars align in such a way as to let the Conservative moon block out the Liberal sun about once in a generation. If every forecast were to be believed, January 23, 2006, was going to be such a day.

For weeks, Canada's top pollsters had charted the capricious course of public opinion, and they all concurred. Change of a magnitude that few had imagined when Canada's 39<sup>th</sup> federal election had been called, back in November 2005, was in the offing. One of Canada's longest electoral campaigns was poised to deliver an unexpected prime minister, Stephen Harper, about whom little was known and much was feared. For weeks, Liberals had been warning voters about an ominous hidden Conservative agenda and a sharp turn to the right in federal politics.

With political observers calling for clear blue skies over much of the country, the Conservatives who converged on the Calgary Convention Centre to watch the election results were as certain of victory as they had been in decades.

In the past, episodes of Tory rule had usually been exciting but unset-

ling times, periods of uncertain duration ruled primarily by the law of unintended consequences.

The 1979 victory of Conservative prime minister Joe Clark had turned out to be a short-lived distraction. His minority government never reached its first-year anniversary. It was defeated on its first budget vote only six months after the election. Clark was only in office long enough to allow the Liberals to recoup and Pierre Trudeau to get a second wind. That second wind would sweep the country into an era of dramatic change, as he reshaped the Canadian constitutional landscape according to his own designs, and then retired. "French power will always exist. No Canada can exist without the support of this province," the Liberal prime minister told the Quebec wing of his party in March 1984, only a few months before his retirement.

Trudeau's declaration was a prescient one. While Canadians have not had occasion to find out whether their country can exist without Quebec,

they certainly had occasion, after he stepped down, to find that it was next to impossible for a party to make it to power without Quebec's support.

Along with Jean Marchand and Gérard Pelletier, Trudeau had come to Parliament Hill at the invitation of Lester B. Pearson in 1965. Over the decade and a half that he and his fellow recruits spent in federal politics, Quebecers had carved out an unprecedented place in the running of the affairs of the country. They did not let go of the levers of power after Trudeau's departure. In 1984, voters stunned many observers by taking Trudeau at his word and electing Brian Mulroney, another Quebec leader, albeit one from a different political party. A prime minister from Quebec prevailed in five subsequent elections.

But by January 23, 2006 — more than two decades after Brian Mulroney had first demonstrated the truth of Trudeau's prediction, and in the wake of the turbulent reign of Jean Chrétien and the aborted first mandate of Paul Martin, French power had

become a faint shadow of the proud dynasty of the 1960s. The line of prime ministers from Quebec was expected to run out on that voting day. And many Quebecers were expected to take a willing hand in bypassing two of their own to hand power over to a leader from Alberta.

All weekend, Conservative strategists had crunched their numbers. In their best-case scenario, they would break through to a majority and sail on to four years of unfettered federal power. Their worst-case scenario would leave them about a dozen seats short of the safety zone, with MPs in every province, and in a comfortable enough zone that they could show Canadians their mettle for as long as they needed to make the case for a majority next time.

Except that, over the course of the final weekend of the campaign, clouds moved in on their horizon. Not for the first time in the history of the party, did the Conservative math not add up. Urban and Ontario voters were suspicious of Harper, and the floor that Tory strategists had seen as rock bottom would break under the weight of their residual fears. Were it not for Quebecers, the first Conservative government of the 21<sup>st</sup> century would have been stillborn.

For the first time in decades, the decks were no longer stacked in favour of the Liberals. The most elementary assumptions of the sovereignty movement were found wanting. Sovereignist strategists had never imagined that Quebec voters would punish the Liberals by supporting the Conservatives rather than rallying to the Bloc Québécois. And the Canadian left seemed more dangerously divided than it had ever been. By splitting the progressive vote, the NDP and the Liberals had helped Stephen Harper elect enough MPs to form a government.

Like many of Canada's defining struggles, this battle for the soul of the country would take place primarily on

Quebec soil. Unlike previous ones, it would not be fought exclusively between Quebec generals.

Back in the Calgary hall where Conservatives had gathered on election night 2006, Ontario was clearly the party-pooper.

The evening had got off to a fine start. The Quebec Tory breakthrough that had seemed so improbable at the beginning of the campaign had materialized early. In short order, the party had claimed seats in ridings as diverse as Pontiac in federalist Outaouais, Louis-Saint-Laurent in the provincial capital of Quebec City, Beauce in the entrepreneurial heartland of Quebec

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and Jonquière–Alma in the nationalist bedrock of the Saguenay.

Six more Quebec seats were to come, for a total of 10, many of them won with the kind of big majorities that usually attend landslide victories. In Beauce, Maxime Bernier, whose father, Gilles, had once presided over Brian Mulroney's Quebec caucus, had won 67 percent of the vote. In Jonquière–Alma, Jean-Pierre Blackburn, the Tory MP who had tearfully taken down the Canadian flag from his backyard pole on the day the Meech Lake Accord died in June 1990, was sent back to the federal capital after a 13-year absence, by 52 percent of the vot-

ers of his nationalist riding. During the interval, Blackburn had paid a steep price for turning down the overtures of the Bloc Québécois and sticking with Mulroney. He had gone down with the Tory ship in 1993, and had then been defeated for mayor of Jonquière in the autumn of the 1995 referendum, a particularly poor time to be a federalist running in any sort of election contest in the Saguenay.

The magnitude of the breakthrough was not lost on the people in that hall in Calgary; every time a Quebec Tory was declared elected by one of the television networks, the results were drowned out by loud cheers. That same night, Ontario would elect four times as many Tories as Quebec, but it was the Quebec turnaround that caused the biggest sensation.

Memories are often conveniently short in politics, and to some extent this was a night of selective amnesia for the Conservative movement. In the late 1980s, in Alberta halls such as these, many of these same people had applauded the birth of the Reform Party. Back then, they had invested the break-away conservative party with their fervent hope that it would free the Canadian right from the tyranny of Quebec influence. In 1984, Conservative prime minister Brian Mulroney had come to power on the basis of a strong Quebec–Alberta coalition. But by 1993, the coalition had imploded under the stress of a series of constitutional failures that pitted Quebec nationalists against the right wing of the federal Progressive Conservative Party.

But the conservative movement's relationship with Quebec was coming full circle in more ways than that. In the 1997 federal election campaign, the Reform Party had run English-only ads to implore Canadian voters to terminate the Quebec federal leadership dynasty by rejecting the parties led by Jean Chrétien and Jean Charest.

The ads backfired and were quickly off the air. In the furor that ensued, few would have dared predict that nine years later francophone Quebecers would take matters into their own hands, one-quarter of them putting the X on their ballots next to the names of candidates led by a co-founder of the Reform Party. A Harper government would not suffer a lack of representation from Quebec — a concern that Joe Clark had had to contend with over the short life of his 1979 minority regime, with only two Quebec members of his caucus — but it would have to worry about having the bodies required to survive its first week of Parliament.

On the weekend before the election, when Conservative strategists had looked hard at their prospects and come up with their best-guess estimates, their Quebec numbers had been dead-on. They had expected to win between nine and fourteen seats in the province. Their final result was ten ridings. The Prairies and Alberta also had

had not come through for the party. Nor had British Columbia, where the final score was 5 seats short of best-guess Tory scenarios. But the bad-news story of the evening was Ontario. There, the Conservative score of 40 seats amounted to less than half of the province's 106 ridings, well short of the hopes of Conservative strategists.

Ontario was where Prime Minister Paul Martin's team had decided to make its last stand in the dying days of the campaign, and the returns showed that the red Ontario line had largely held. Fifty-four MPs, more than half the caucus that the Liberals would take into the Opposition, were from that province.

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Overall, by the end of the evening, the Conservative score was well below the rock bottom that Tory strategists had forecast for themselves just prior to voting day. It was barely within the limits of a workable minority government. As the evening wore on, the Conservative lead became so thin that pundits turned their attention to the possibility that Paul Martin might actually refuse the verdict of the election, and invite the NDP to join his party in government.

Between the two of them, the Liberals and the New Democrats had more seats than the Conservatives, although they too would be short of a majority if they were called upon to govern. In such a scenario, the Bloc Québécois would have to decide whether to support a fragile rookie Conservative government, or allow a coalition that was ideologically closer to its left-of-centre philosophy to try its hand at governing.

This was pie-in-the-sky punditry. A denial of the Harper victory could only have had legs — albeit shaky ones — if the Conservatives had failed to capture seats in Quebec. A case could then have been made that a Liberal-NDP mix offered Canada more national representation. And even then, the ploy would have amounted to robbing Western Canada of a rare shot at having one of its own as prime minister, a manoeuvre that would have put great strains on Canadian unity, and that the NDP and the Liberals

would have had to spend years trying to live down. In any event, the debate as to which of the parties could most legitimately claim to form a government that was national in scope was largely moot, since the Conservatives had pulled ahead of the other federalist parties in Quebec's popular vote.

Once all the votes were counted, only one in five Quebecers had stuck

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no big surprises in store for them. The results there did not exceed expectations, but they were on track with the party's forecast.

In Atlantic Canada, New Brunswick premier Bernard Lord's and former federal Tory leader Peter MacKay's Conservative coattails proved to be the length of a miniskirt. Delivering only 9 seats out of 32 ridings, Atlantic Canada

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with Martin. Because that number included the rock-solid Liberal fortresses of anglophone Montreal, it camouflaged a rout of historic proportions in francophone Quebec. On January 23, 2006, Quebec was second only to Alberta in its rejection of the federal Liberal Party.

**B**ut for the Conservatives, the Quebec results were the bright spot in a picture that was much darker than expected. As the evening wore on, the festive mood in the hall in Calgary gave way to a feeling of uncertainty. The dream of a Conservative government seemed to be turning into the nightmare of an unmanageable minority.

The mood was also going downhill in the suite where the Conservative leader and his advisers were watching the returns. It looked as though Stephen Harper had secured the bare bones of Brian Mulroney's hard-to-handle Quebec-Alberta coalition, along with Joe Clark's short numbers.

By the time the Conservative leader finally emerged to claim his victory and speak to his supporters — past midnight in Atlantic and Central Canada — Paul Martin had not only conceded the election but announced that he would not lead his team in a rematch. To all intents and purposes, he was abdicating before the Chrétien side of the Liberal clan had time to sharpen its knives and come to seek vengeance for the 2002 coup that Martin had led against his predecessor in one of the final episodes of their enduring rivalry.

That took care of any convoluted scenario that could have seen the Liberals clinging to power. Yes, Pierre Trudeau had risen from the ashes of a similar defeat in 1980. But Paul Martin was no Pierre Trudeau. Indeed, Martin soon confirmed that he would not even lead the party in opposition until his successor was chosen.

In the first few days after the election, a number of Liberal ministers banded together in a bid to convince Martin to reconsider that decision. They urged him to hang around at least long enough to see if the Conservative government could survive. But they failed to sway him. Curiously, David Emerson — who

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would defect from the Liberals and be sworn into Stephen Harper's Cabinet a few weeks later — was one of those who made a call to the defeated prime minister to ask him to lead the Liberals in opposition. Who knows? If Martin's answer had been different, Emerson might still be a Liberal member of Parliament.

In the end, Stephen Harper got a shot at putting together a government after all, and he could expect to run it for at least as long as the Liberals were leaderless. Still, Harper was less than jubilant. Upon winning a minority government eighteen months before, Paul Martin had greeted the results with the glee of a man on death row who has just been handed an unexpected pardon. It was as if Martin had not really noticed that his party had been reduced to a minority.

With the ghost of Joe Clark hovering over his shoulder, Harper seemed all too conscious of his precarious position as he greeted his supporters. Some left the hall after the speech, fearing that they might once again have produced a government that would only serve as a warm-up act for the next Liberal leader. Victory was officially

Stephen Harper's, but there was not much of it in the air of the Calgary Convention Centre in the late hours of that election day.

Harper has not publicly divulged the thoughts that came to his mind as he watched his hopes for a solid government founder in Ontario that night, but over the following weeks and

months it became clear that he had drawn two tentative conclusions from the experience. The first was that he would have no rest until he came back to this same hall to preside over the election of a majority Conservative government. The second was that his party would look to the less travelled road of Quebec as an alternative route to the treacherous Ontario path to get there.

For the first non-Quebec federal leader to be elected to office in more than a quarter of a century, this was a bold choice. A Quebec political itinerary would involve travelling without much of a road map, in mostly hostile Bloc and Liberal territory, and possibly under a cloud of suspicion in the rest of Canada. But the Bloc was temporarily without a compass. And when it came to figuring out the lay of the land in francophone Quebec, Stephen Harper was already ahead of many of those who would aspire to replace Paul Martin.

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