

Election 2006: Canada changes government

The Liberals' 2004 stumble

The 2004 Canadian election produced the Liberal Party's fourth-worst showing since Confederation, with Paul Martin's team forming a minority government 20 seats short of a parliamentary majority. A major factor had been the so-called 'sponsorship' scandal, a program established to raise the federal government's profile in Quebec by providing funding for sports and cultural events, but where advertising companies with close Liberal Party ties were paid \$100 million in return for little or no work.¹ Prior to the 2004 election, Martin had sought to dampen this issue by establishing the Gomery Commission of Inquiry, but with little success.

A minority government limps along

After the 2004 election Canada experienced a remarkable amount of political instability :

- during February, Martin and former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien testified before the Gomery inquiry, claiming non-involvement in the sponsorship scandal
- by mid-February the Government had suffered its first legislative defeat in the Parliament
- in late March the Conservative Party (CPC) Opposition was threatening to vote against the budget
- evidence given before the Gomery inquiry in April heard of tens of millions of dollars being wasted in government contracts under the sponsorship program
- at this time Martin promised an election within 30 days of the planned release in early 2006 of the Gomery inquiry report
- on 17 May prominent Conservative, Belinda Stronach, left the CPC to join the Liberals and was immediately given a ministerial position
- on 20 May the Speaker enabled Martin to survive by being the first Speaker to break a tie in a confidence vote
- aided by the New Democratic Party (NDP), whose support was conditional on changes to the budget, the Government survived 16 divisions in the Commons on 15 June, any of which could have forced an election
- on 1 November the first Gomery report detailed the Government's participation in sponsorship activity, though it cleared Martin of any wrong-doing²

- in early November NDP leader, Jack Layton, stated that his party would no longer support the Government in no-confidence motions. This appeared to make certain an early election
- on 12 November the Conservatives, the Bloc Québécois (BQ) and the NDP told Martin to call an election in January 2006 or else face a no-confidence motion
- on 24 November CPC leader Stephen Harper officially tabled a motion: 'That this House has lost confidence in the Government'. Four days later the Government was defeated, 171–133 votes, and
- an election was called for 23 January 2006.

Thus ended seventeen months of political turmoil that will be remembered more for 'caustic political jousting than classic policy achievement'.³ Only the governments of 1925–6, 1957–8, 1962–3 and 1979–80 survived for a shorter time than did the second Martin Government. The 'deficit-slayer' of the Chrétien years was now seen to be the 'hesitant PM' who lasted barely 24 months.⁴

The campaign

The Liberals held 133 of the 308 House of Commons seats, the Conservatives held 98, the BQ held 53 and the NDP held 18. With 180 seats located in Ontario and Quebec, a party needs a large number of seats from these provinces if it is to have any chance of forming a majority government. With opinion polls showing a decline in the Liberal vote, the outcome of the election seemed to depend on the electoral health of the CPC—which held none of the Quebec seats and only 24 of the 106 seats in Ontario.

The 56-day campaign was notable for the unofficial truce of about seven days over the Christmas-New Year period.

Liberal Party

Observers puzzled over the fact that the Liberals ceded much early policy ground to their opponents. Believing that policy discussion prior to Christmas would be lost in the holiday season,⁵ the party did little more than emphasise its record on the economy, insist that it was 'time to move on' from the sponsorship affair, and remind Canadians of the dangers to the country of a Stephen Harper-led CPC government. With early polls still indicating voter uncertainty about Harper, Martin

continued to describe him as a right-wing extremist who would threaten many valuable social programs.⁶

After the New Year, the Liberals spoke more about policy, but still seemed more concerned to react to their opponents than to lay out their vision for the next Parliament. The Prime Minister did make some promises: to cut taxes, to invest more in health care and education, and to stay out of debt. Harper had antagonised many in the 2004 election by expressing his opposition to same-sex marriage. Martin attempted to stir up this issue by promising that his Government's 'first act' after re-election would be to remove the 'notwithstanding' clause from the Charter of Rights and Freedoms which permits the national or any provincial legislature to adopt legislation to override fundamental rights of Canadians. Such a move by the Liberals would block any possible CPC move against Canadians' civil rights.⁷

Four notable events during the campaign probably hurt the Liberals. On 30 November Chrétien filed a court challenge to the Gomery findings, alleging bias.⁸ In mid-December the Liberal Director of Communications was forced to apologise after implying that many parents would not do what was best for their children, when he said they would spend the \$25 a week promised in the CPC child-care policy on 'beer and popcorn'.⁹ On Boxing Day a shooting in central Toronto saw a teenage girl killed and six people wounded. Law and order was thus thrust into the campaign, to the Conservatives' benefit. Two days later came the news that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police had begun a criminal investigation into stock market activity surrounding a possible leak of the Finance Minister's decision not to tax income trusts. Such an announcement coming during an election campaign was unprecedented.¹⁰

Conservative Party

In the 2004 campaign the CPC had struggled to gain voter confidence. It had internal tensions lingering from the Progressive Conservative – Alliance amalgamation of 2003–04, its policies were portrayed as dangerous for Canada's future, and Harper was unable to shake off the image of an unsmiling, angry leader of a party whose leading members seemed to put little store in presenting a united front.

During 2005–06 the party attempted to improve its electability. The party put out *Stand Up for Canada*, a set of policies praised as being as 'focused, internally consistent, easy to understand and designed to appeal to a wide swathe of Canadian society'.¹¹ The issue of abortion, for instance, was put in 'the deep freeze'.¹²

With the campaign under way, the party used the pre-Christmas period to gradually introduce a range of policies that were generally well-received. Harper listed five main priorities for a CPC government: tax reduction featuring a two-stage, two per cent reduction in the GST, a crackdown

on crime, a reduction in waiting times for health services, the directing of child-care money to parents, and, in particular, the improvement of political accountability. Harper in fact promised that his government's first legislative act would be to introduce a federal accountability act to increase the powers of the Auditor General, to eliminate corporate and union donations to federal political parties, and to ban ministers and their aides from becoming lobbyists for at least five years after leaving government.¹³ Harper addressed the same-sex marriage issue early, by promising to restore the traditional definition of marriage, but only if Parliament supported the idea in what he called a 'genuine' free vote, promising: 'I will not whip our Cabinet', as he claimed Martin had done in regard to the Bill that legalised same-sex weddings.¹⁴

The Conservatives also sought to dampen voter misgivings about Harper with a campaign in which his family featured prominently, that was designed to reshape their leader's image from 'avatar of the right to middle-class dad'.¹⁵ Harper claimed he was in no hurry to achieve reform, describing himself as 'basically a cautious person', who believed it 'better to light one candle than promise a million lightbulbs'.¹⁶ He also attempted to allay voter uncertainty by pointing to some of the checks on the power of a CPC government:

The reality is that we will have, for some time to come, a Liberal Senate, Liberal civil service ... and courts that have been appointed by the Liberals.¹⁷

In mid-December Harper drew praise from the Liberal Premier of Quebec when he stressed the importance of provincial autonomy and promised to correct the 'fiscal deficit' between Ottawa and the provinces. He even promised to allow Quebec to participate in international institutions such as UNESCO. Polls suggested that the speech had a dramatic effect on Conservative support in Quebec.¹⁸

An analysis of opinion poll findings suggests that the CPC's efforts made little impression prior to January, but began to produce a voter shift thereafter. During December the Liberal vote was never lower than 31 per cent, and its lead was usually comfortable, with the Conservatives usually below 30 per cent. From the beginning of January this was reversed—the Conservatives jumped to the high 30s, while the Liberals slipped below 30 per cent until polling day. Polls also indicated a growing acceptance of a CPC victory—the 47 per cent in late November who said it was time for a change had climbed to 66 per cent prior to polling day.¹⁹ For one observer this was due largely to the CPC successfully portraying itself as:

... the folks down the block, hockey dads, hockey moms, moderate small-c conservatives, middle class, slightly bland, definitely not scary.²⁰

The Bloc Québécois

The BQ contests only Quebec ridings. Apart from earning ridicule early in the campaign for his claim that Quebec

national teams should be able to play in international tournaments for ice hockey and soccer, leader Gilles Duceppe made few new policy announcements.²¹ The BQ lamented the ‘ill effects’ of globalisation and the failure of some countries to sign the Kyoto accord on greenhouse gases. Its platform spoke of pushing the next federal government to fully implement the Kyoto accord, ‘without Quebec having to pay for Alberta’s oil industry or Ontario’s auto industry’.²² Duceppe said little about Quebec independence, though on one occasion he predicted his party would gain the highly-symbolic vote of 50 per cent plus 1 in Quebec—something he later denied having said.²³

New Democratic Party

After failing to win many Liberal voters in 2004, Jack Layton tried again but with an unusual (and controversial) pitch. He predicted that after the Liberals lost power they would be off to ‘the repair shop’, rather than thinking of their voters. Accordingly, he asked Liberal voters to ‘lend’ the NDP their votes, ‘Vote for us just this once ... so there’s a strong voice ... standing up for priorities progressive people believe in’.²⁴

Election night coverage controversy

Canada has six time zones. It has been claimed in recent elections that reporting eastern province votes early on election night could affect voting behaviour in the west where polling stations were still open. In 2000, Elections Canada had put a bar on national coverage until 8 p.m. Eastern Time, a bar that was defied by some media outlets. Prior to the 2004 election a court struck down the ban, thus allowing all media organizations to publish results as soon as they became available. In May 2005 an appeal court rejected the lower court’s decision and upheld the ban. Elections Canada responded by staggering the time of closing the polls across Canada.

The result

The election ended twelve years of Liberal government:

Party	Seats	Vote (%)
CPC	124 (+25)	36.3 (+6.7)
Liberal	103 (-32)	30.2 (-6.5)
BQ	51 (-3)	10.5 (-1.9)
NDP	29 (+10)	17.5 (+1.8)
Green	—	4.5 (+0.2)
Other	1	1.0 (-0.3)

Source: Elections Canada

The 46-year-old Stephen Harper is Canada’s 22nd Prime Minister. The new government is the tenth minority government elected since 1925, the average duration of which has been one year, five months and 22 days.²⁵ It seems unlikely that the new government will run full term.

Paul Martin immediately announced his resignation as Liberal leader, pending the election of his replacement; he had been Prime Minister since 12 December 2003.

The main aspects of this result include:

- the CPC was 31 seats short of a majority
- the CPC won more seats than the Liberals due to the party increasing its total seats in Ontario and Quebec by 26—its best effort in Ontario since 1988
- the results suggested an increased divide between town and country, for the CPC failed to win a seat in the three major cities of Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver
- in the West the CPC won 48 of the 56 Prairie seats, including every seat in Alberta, but lost ground in British Columbia, the only province where this occurred
- after apparently trailing the CPC by as much as 13 points during January, the Liberals gained a last-minute swing, enabling them to minimise their losses
- the Liberals are relatively well-placed to restore their stocks by the next election because of their dominance in Ontario, where they won 54 seats, and their continued good health in the Atlantic provinces with 20 of 29 seats—their choice of leader is therefore crucial
- the BQ vote fell 6.8 per cent in Quebec to 42.1 per cent, and
- the NDP gained 10 seats, possibly helped by the ‘vote-lending’ plea by its leader.

Among the changes in House of Commons members:

- Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Anne McLellan, lost her Edmonton riding
- Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Andy Mitchell, was defeated in his rural Ontario riding
- after defeating Olivia Chow, wife of the NDP leader, in the previous election, Minister of State (Families and Caregivers) Tony Ianno, lost his Toronto riding to Chow, and
- noted expert on Middle Eastern and Balkan affairs, and novelist, Professor Michael Ignatieff, resigned his University of Toronto and Harvard chairs to successfully contest an Ontario riding for the Liberals.

In retrospect

While lamenting the probability of another period of unstable government, and reminding its readers that it had believed a Liberal victory would have been best for Canada, the *Toronto Star* could still pinpoint ‘10 things to celebrate’ from the election result.²⁶ In ‘no particular order’ these were:

1. in gaining a Prime Minister from Alberta, 'the West is finally in', hopefully ending its feeling of exclusion
2. by winning seats in Quebec the CPC could once again be called 'a truly national party'
3. the fall in the vote for the BQ suggested that the majority of Quebecers 'still prefer the federalist option'
4. the Conservatives have a mandate to deliver the 'clean government' demanded by Canadians, but subject to 'a healthy check' from the other parties
5. the 'progressive federalist' parties have the numbers to thwart policies that do not reflect Stephen Harper's promise to take a 'middle-road approach' to social issues
6. the Liberals were not devastated, leaving them 'well poised to regroup, refocus, clean house and rebuild'
7. Harper and Martin were praised for their 'dignified' post-election speeches that 'reached out to all regions and sought to build bridges to voters who did not support them'
8. the turnout was almost four per cent higher than the record low of 60.5 per cent in 2004
9. Parliament would be strengthened by the addition of 'fresh new faces' such as Ignatieff and Chow
10. the NDP's campaign was praised and its future strong voice in Parliament keenly anticipated.

In short, the newspaper believed that Canadians of all federalist persuasions had gained something: 'The election that few voters initially wanted ... ultimately delivered a little something for almost everyone'. It remains to be seen whether the members of the House of Commons and their parties are able to capitalise on the voters' decision, or whether their egos and their desire for power will soon re-establish politics-as-usual. The performance of the new Prime Minister and the new Liberal leader will be closely watched.

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