

Minority governments may become the norm for Canadians

David Akin

Canwest News Service

Sunday, April 06, 2008

OTTAWA -- For all of its modern history, Canada has been shaped by the politics of language, by the divisions of les deux nations.

But last week's census release of the ethnocultural portrait of Canada underlined a political divide that has been hardening for nearly a decade: There are the country's three biggest cities - Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver - and then there is the rest of Canada.

For more than a decade, the Conservative party or its predecessors have not been able to elect a candidate in the cores of those cities. Meanwhile, support for its major opponent, the Liberal party, is withering and weakening in most areas of the country outside those three big cities.

Both the Conservatives and the Liberals are keen to break this decades-old structural impasse but until they figure out how to steal from the other's strengths, Canadians will get one minority government after the other.

"Unless one of the parties nibbles into the others' core area, they just can't mathematically form a majority government," said Nik Nanos, president of polling firm Nanos Research. "That explains the structural impasse that we're at."

Canada today is increasingly a non-white Canada. As Statistics Canada reported last week, the percentage of Canadians who are visible minorities has quadrupled in the last 25 years to more than 16 per cent of the country's population.

In Toronto, a Liberal bastion, visible minorities make up 43 per cent of the population.

In Greater Vancouver, where Conservative-held suburban ridings circle a non-Conservative core, visible minorities make up 42 per cent of the population.

"New Canada, which is urban Canada, is going one way, and Old Canada has been going the other way," said Peter Woolstencroft, an associate professor at the University of Waterloo who studies political geography.

The Conservatives dominate in the vast resource-rich 2,000-kilometre stretch between Winnipeg's south end and Vancouver's eastern fringes. In all of that the Liberals can claim only Ralph Goodale's lonely outpost in Regina.

"That equation is still very much stalemated. Canada's three largest cities are still tending to stick to their basic political instincts," said Steven MacKinnon, who was executive director of the Liberal Party of Canada when Paul Martin was the leader.

Quebec remains the wild card but for different reasons than it did a generation ago. The parties in decline in that province - the Liberals and Bloc Quebecois - are those still cleaving to the old-style language

politics of the 1980s. Those on the rise - the Conservatives, the NDP and the Greens - have more than just language politics to put in the policy window, be it the environment to small business development.

If the Conservatives aren't cracking Montreal, perhaps it's because they decline to get locked into that old-style debate.

"The issues that motivate voting in Montreal for generations have had virtually nothing to do with ethnicity and everything to do with language," said Geoff Norquay, who held senior positions in both Brian Mulroney's and Stephen Harper's offices. "Montreal, too, is a city of immigrants but they don't seem to be motivated by their immigrant or ethnic status so much as they are by language."

In Vancouver and in Toronto, Conservatives have been ardently appealing to the social conservatism of some ethnic communities, trying to steal support that has long gone to the Liberals. But Nanos says that ardour is misplaced.

"The recipe for the Conservatives to access these communities are not necessarily some of the social and immigration issues that they've focused on so far. It's actually entrepreneurship because new Canadians and many of these ethnic groups tend to be very entrepreneurial. In the past, when the Conservatives were able to tap into these communities it's because they had a very strong small business agenda," said Nanos.

As for the Liberals, if they are ever to rise in the West, MacKinnon says it will be from an urban base. Where there are pockets of Liberal support, they tend to be in the urban areas or Calgary, Edmonton, Regina and Winnipeg.

But while Conservatives are evangelizing in the Liberal core in those big cities, the Liberals are doing little right now to counter Conservative strength. Several independent and Liberal sources interviewed last week say they feel a general malaise about the party that leads back to perceptions that Stephane Dion is a less capable leader than his predecessors or his chief opponent.

"Their problem is not so much their understanding of the situation, it's whether Dion can speak to those Canadians. I think he has a problem with Francophones and quite frankly, I think he has a problem with the rest of Canadians," said Woolstencroft of the University of Waterloo. "My test on this, aside from the polls, is when I talk to local Liberal notables, when I mention his name, they don't want to talk, they put their eyes down. They're not at all enthused."