Big Tent Politics

The Liberal Party's Long Mastery of Canada's Public Life

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1

An Unnatural Party

> Canadian politics is a tilting-ground for impassioned rivalries.
>
> – ANDRÉ SIEGFRIED

> The condition of the parties is the best possible evidence of the nature of any regime.
>
> – E.E. SCHATTSCHNEIDER

Canada's national politics is neither natural nor easy. Yet for a long century one party dominated the country's public life. The Liberal Party's electoral victories came so regularly, and looked so easy, that it came to be known simply as the country's "natural governing party." That any one party could dominate a country's democratic politics so long, and so regularly, is surely surprising as vigorous competition and periodic electoral turnovers would seem to be the very essence of a healthy democracy. That the Liberals could do this while firmly planted in the centre is equally surprising for, in modern politics, the centre is supposed to be squeezed out of existence by the clash of right and left. So how did the Liberal Party do it? What sort of organization allowed it to dominate the country's politics for generations? And will it continue to thrive or has the Liberal Party finally come to the end of its run?

Its long run of electoral victories surely marks the Liberal Party of Canada as one of the most successful political institutions in the democratic world. Even more remarkably, the party managed this extraordinary

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record in a country that was itself always in a state of constant change. Sitting so long at the heart of the unique political experiment that is Canada meant that the Liberal Party had to continually find ways to respond and adapt to the changes in the country that it was driving. Understanding the Liberal Party in all its varying guises starts with recognizing the essence of the Canadian political community that constituted the seedbed within which it operated and that provided the distinctive raison d'être that animated its organization and its practices.

The Political Community

It is important to remember that Canada's very creation, its continuing existence, and its changing character have all been the result of deliberate decisions made by party politicians. No obvious simple geographic reality, no common linguistic or religious homogeneity, no common revolutionary experience or unique historical moment animated it or gave it life. Canada was created when a coalition of party politicians deemed it to be in their interest to do so, and it has been continuously grown, reshaped, and defended by its politicians. Political parties may have regularly fought electoral contests for popular support, but they have also been responsible for building the country over which they have fought. In a country that, for much of its history, has had no obvious sense of common national feeling, and in which there was no natural majority to support a common public agenda, its political parties were one of the "few genuinely national forces" nurturing its existence.[1] This put them at the very centre of Canada's development and political life.

The country the Liberals governed at the end of the nineteenth century was quite different from the one they presided over a hundred years later, as the maps in Figure 1.1 dramatically reveal. Over the twentieth century the Liberals transformed Canada's very shape and form, expanding existing provinces and adding new ones, establishing territorial governments in the north, and contributing to winning referenda that would introduce a new province while defeating those that threatened to break up the country. It was a Liberal Party government that, in 1898, created the Yukon Territory in the north and then replicated this feat with the establishment of Nunavut a century later in 1999. It was a Liberal Party government that carved the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan out of the rapidly growing Prairie

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FIGURE 1.1 Canada, 1896 and 2000

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west in 1905. It was a Liberal government that negotiated the 1949 entry of Newfoundland and Labrador into the federation after two post–Second World War referenda in which Newfoundlanders chose to tie their future to Canada's as a tenth province. And it was a national Liberal government that defended the country's integrity by helping to defeat two Quebec referenda, one in 1980 and one in 1995, that contemplated the province's independence. Each of these deliberate and vigorously contested political events powerfully moulded the institutional arrangements that governed Canadian politics, altering the organizational bases and social networks in which national parties existed and operated.

For democratic politicians dependent on mobilizing enough electoral backing to support their ambitions and plans, the nature and character of the society, and the issues that can be articulated to divide or unite it, inevitably shape the kinds of party organizations and styles of politics they are able to establish and sustain. Canada's shifting and expanding institutional framework reflected the fundamental political reality with which the country's party politicians were faced – a constantly changing and dramatically growing population.

In 1900, there were over 5 million people in Canada; by 2000, that number had grown to over 30 million. That growth rate was greater than that in Australia, another immigrant-receiving former British colony; almost twice that of the neighbouring United States; and seven or eight times that of its two mother countries. More immediately relevant to Canada's working politicians is, of course, the electorate – the matter of who actually has a vote. That, too, changed enormously. In 1900, over a million men, about one-quarter of the population, were entitled to vote in the general election that November. One hundred years later, with almost three-quarters of the population on the voters list, the size of the electorate had grown to over 21 million. Some of that change reflected shifts in who was allowed to vote – the electorate effectively doubled in 1921 when (near) adult suffrage gave women the vote, and it bumped again in 1972 when the voting age was lowered – but the important story for the parties was simply the huge increase in the underlying population. That simple reality produced an organizational challenge of enormous magnitude. Canadian political parties had to continuously absorb, politicize, and mobilize far larger numbers of new voters than did those in any other established

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democracy. During the second half of the century, the Canadian electorate expanded by over 200 percent compared to just 49 percent in France and 34 percent in the United Kingdom. As a consequence, successful Canadian parties could not simply expect to maintain themselves in a steady state, regularly reharvesting a well-established base of supporters at election time. With the electorate growing by an average of over three-quarters of a million voters, from election to election, decade after decade, the country's national political parties were necessarily forced to continually rebuild their constituencies of supporters.

But a rapidly growing electorate was just one aspect of a Canadian party's challenges. Unlike the electorates of most established democracies, Canada's was continually being substantially reshaped and reorganized. While the country's deepest political divisions, those between English- and French-speakers and between Protestants and Roman Catholics, long drove much of the national political agenda, their shape was slowly redefined over the century. Quebec, the one province in which francophones constituted a majority, saw its share of the population fall from over 30 to 24 percent, while the political power of religion to spark conflict slowly gave way to the imperatives of a secular, multicultural society. In their place, language issues came to occupy pride of place on the national agenda, sharpening Quebec's sense of political distinctiveness. But Quebec's place in the country's shifting political kaleidoscope was only one part of a regional story that Liberal Party strategist John Duffy calls "the key to understanding Canada's electoral politics."[2]

As the twentieth century opened, Canada's political world was dominated by the two big central provinces of Ontario and Quebec: together, they constituted over 70 percent of the population. By the end of the century, their combined share had dropped to just over 60 percent. While Atlantic Canada's share of the population went into a long slow decline, falling to just 8 percent, the Prairies grew, filling up quickly in the years after the turn of the century. By 1911, Saskatchewan emerged as the country's third largest province but then lost its place in the postwar decades as population changes saw the other two provinces in the region surpass it. On the west coast, British Columbia began as a very small player but, four times larger by the year 2000, it became a distinctive and politically significant region in its own right. This regionally uneven growth saw the country's political

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centre of gravity slowly shift towards the west. This ever-changing relationship in terms of the political strength of regional interests required the parties to continually rebalance their internal organizational relationships and their external appeals. This was never easy, and three times – in 1921, 1958, and 1993 – western voters forced the issue by attacking and reshaping the regional basis of national party organization and competition.

These quite fundamental shifts in the regional structure of the population were compounded by equally striking changes in the character of the electorate. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Canada was an overwhelmingly rural, church-going society: almost two-thirds of Canadians lived in communities of fewer than one thousand people. It wasn't until near mid-century that a majority could be described as urban dwellers (if living in places with more than a thousand people could really be described as urban), and then, by century's end, the country was dominated by its large cities. At the same time, shifting immigration patterns continued to shuffle demographic maps. In the early years of the century, immigrants from Eastern Europe had flowed into western Canada; after the Second World War, southern Europeans were attracted to the growing urban centres; and then, in the closing decades of the century, immigrants from Asia dominated in-migration, producing another dramatic change in the ethnic composition of the large metropolitan areas. The Canada of homogeneous rural villages and small towns had given way to a secular, urban industrial nation whose cities were among the most multicultural plural communities on the planet. That long transformation ensured that the political demands being made on its elected politicians and their party organizations were in constant flux.

For the country's political parties, as they sought to marshal the popular support necessary to win power, the political dynamic of this ever-changing society was refracted through the rules and practices of the electoral system. While male suffrage had been established by the beginning of the twentieth century, it was not until after the First World War that women had the vote in national elections, and it was decades later that others – First Nations and various ethnic communities – were finally granted full political citizenship and allowed to vote.[3] With a constituency-based, first-past-the-post electoral system that was driven by the logic and imperatives of geography, it mattered much where these voters were located. Canada's

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constituency maps, which were revised every decade after new census figures appeared, inevitably twisted the political equations that governed the party's electoral campaigns for they never treated all regions equally.

Representation by population may be the avowed principle, but it has never been the actual practice governing the organization of Canadian elections. Over the twentieth century, British Columbia has generally been underrepresented in the House of Commons, just as Atlantic Canada has been overrepresented. Taken together, the Prairies were underrepresented for the early decades, and, although that changed after the Second World War, the shifting population sizes of the region's provinces meant that some continued to be underrepresented while others came to be overrepresented. Ontario's political dominance as the largest province was initially exaggerated by its overrepresentation in the House of Commons, but that advantage steadily deteriorated, and, by the end of the century, it was regularly underrepresented, with 10 percent fewer seats than representation by population would require. In a country in which the distinctive and often conflicting interests of the regions were the immediate stuff of electoral competition, parties had to be sensitive to how these changing constituency distributions translated voter support into parliamentary seats.

Of course, it was the parties in Parliament that determined the rules about who could vote, how elections were to be conducted, and what the electoral maps looked like. And self-interest was never very far from their calculations. In theory, this might have worked to the governing Liberals' advantage, but their problem was that the country was constantly changing beneath their feet, usually at a pace that they could not match. There was nothing either natural or easy about the electoral dynamic all this change engendered or about the patterns of party politics and governance that it fostered.

Neither Natural nor Easy

The suggestion that there was something "unnatural" about Canadian political parties was first made by a young French scholar, André Siegfried, over a hundred years ago. Siegfried had passed through Canada on a world tour around the turn of the century and was back again in time to observe the 1904 general election. Still under thirty years old, he had already published a major book entitled *Democracy in New Zealand,* but he was

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especially interested in Canada's democratic experiment for he saw in it an attempt to reconcile a traditional elitist British model of government with the vitality and openness of North American society. He describes this in *The Race Question in Canada*, a book he published in 1906 and that remains, to this day, one of the most thoughtful and perceptive accounts of Canadian political reality ever written.[4] By "race" he means the two linguistic communities whose relationship was the central political problem of the new country's party politicians. It was this relationship that produced unnatural parties.

Political parties had emerged in the nineteenth century with the development of representative democracies. They were the instruments by which collections of citizens could act together, choosing governments and holding them to account in general elections. But in order for parties to be effective they had to stand for something – distinctive ideas, recognizable interests – so that electoral competition between them would offer voters meaningful choices. Thus, in most democratic societies, parties usually appeared to reflect the prevailing lines of social and economic division: labour parties, Catholic parties, bourgeois parties, farmers' parties, linguistic parties, regional parties all ordered political debate and structured electoral competition. By doing so they gave political expression to the natural conflicts of their societies. To Siegfried's surprise, Canadian parties rejected any such "natural form" and so, because they offered no clear alternatives on either the means or the ends of public life, he concluded that they were "entirely harmless" as effective democratic instruments.

Siegfried regarded Canada's parties as "unwholesome caricatures" of what a democratic party ought to be. He argued that they had developed their unnatural form because the country's politicians recognized that, as a country, Canada was so inherently fragile that its continuing political existence was at stake. The "violent oppositions" that existed between French and English, Protestant and Catholic, centre and periphery all threatened to pull the country apart, and so national party politicians actively worked to prevent the formation of parties that would represent their individual and distinctive claims. For Canadian politicians there could be no appeal to natural constituencies for fear such parties would threaten the stability and very existence of the country (as the emergence of the Parti Québécois and the Bloc Québécois seventy years later would

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prove). Instead, Canadian parties were induced to reject appeals to definitive principles, or specific interests, and were reduced to seeking electoral support wherever, and from whomever, it might be found. The result was an unnatural form of electoral competition in which parties were forced to exist as "big tents" – shapeless, heterogeneous coalitions based on continual and shifting compromise.

This very unnaturalness of national parties in Canada makes the Liberal Party's record of electoral dominance all the more remarkable for, in the absence of a coherent and disciplined base of support, it ought to have been particularly susceptible to the ephemeral winds of public opinion. With the electorate constantly growing, and its regional shape continually changing, the party's victories were neither easy nor inevitable. The Liberals had to be regularly redefining and remobilizing new networks of activists and supporters. On three occasions in the twentieth century the party suffered massive defeats, which, in other democracies, would have overwhelmed and crushed a normal political party. Yet, each time the Liberals managed to reinvent themselves. In the populist aftermath of the First World War, again in response to the immigration waves of the prosperous 1950s, and then again after the collapse of its long-standing Quebec electoral bastions, the Liberals successfully reorganized another sprawling support base and reclaimed their position as the country's dominant political machine.

Building, and having to rebuild, a successful party organization was especially difficult for, in the absence of obvious natural partisan bases, elections were exceptionally competitive and fiercely fought. Siegfried recognizes this when he notes that, in the early twentieth century, there were "few countries in the world in which elections – whatever the questions at issue – arouse more fury and enthusiasm than in Canada; there can be none in which political contests are entered on with greater gusto." This exaggerated competitiveness flowed from the parties' lack of a dependable natural constituency and because elections had to be fought on two levels: (1) nationally, where the party leader and platform were the focal point, and (2) in each separate constituency, where the local concerns of diverse and parochial communities preoccupied the voters. A party's primary organizational challenge was to find a way to integrate these two, often quite divergent and contradictory, dimensions of competition.

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If political parties operate as electoral shock absorbers that balance and reconcile the political impulses of local communities with the policy imperatives of the wider national society, this task was especially challenging in Canada. As Siegfried astutely observed, the parties were buffeted by contradictory forces. The country's British institutions reflected their development in a closed and hierarchical Old World social order, but its North American political life articulated the dynamism of an open, changing New World society. Unlike most other democracies, Canada was a country in which the forces of culture trumped the claims of class, the appeals of community overrode the demands of society, and the imperatives of geography overwhelmed the lessons of history. This forced parties to act as both highly disciplined agents of powerful governing forces controlled by their leaders and as democratic organizations capable of genuinely representing the insistent and populist claims of a volatile electorate. If this, too, was in many ways unnatural and never easy, it was also sometimes impossible – and that could lead to catastrophic electoral defeat.

The remarkable thing about the Liberal Party is that it found a way to overcome the institutional, social, and political obstacles that were an inherent part of Canada's political landscape. It did so regularly, year after year, and then, when it eventually – perhaps even inevitably – failed, it soon found a way to restore its fortunes and to do it again. This is the great puzzle of the Liberal Party: How could such an unnatural party, within such an unnatural context, become and long remain Canada's natural governing party?

The Liberals

The Liberal Party, led by Wilfrid Laurier, came to power in the general election of 1896.[5] This election proved to be the great turning point in Canadian political history: it marked the end of a quarter-century of Conservative Party dominance, which stretched back to the country's establishment at Confederation in 1867.[6] The Tories' founding leader, Sir John A. Macdonald, was dead, and his successors had squabbled, leaving the Conservatives badly divided. The Conservatives' successful coalition of English and French/Protestant and Catholic was broken, and the Liberals were quick to move into the space the Conservative Party had long occupied.

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But the Liberal victory was no sure or easy thing: the Conservatives actually won many more votes than did the Liberals that year, and the latter needed the electoral system to give them a large majority of the seats in Quebec in order to win. Laurier's appeal as the first French-speaking party leader was critical. Despite the Catholic clergy's suspicion of his liberal views, his fellow Quebecers rallied around him, and the foundations for a long Liberal Party century were laid.

One of the most famous of all Canadian quotes is surely Laurier's contention that the twentieth century would belong to Canada, or, to use his actual words, that Canada "shall fill the twentieth century." And he was right. The country entered the century as a still loosely connected collection of seven small, rural provinces bound together by rough patronage politics. It ended it as one of the most successful urban, industrial, multicultural societies in the world, rated at the very top of the United Nations' Human Development Index. And that allowed Jean Chrétien, one of Laurier's great successors as leader of the Liberal Party and prime minister at the end of the twentieth century, to crow that Canada really had become Number One.

If one of the great stories of the twentieth century is that of Canada, the basic outline of what was accomplished is, in many ways, not particularly exceptional. All across the democratizing and industrializing world there emerged a set of comprehensive welfare states supported by active government management of the economy. The details varied considerably from country to country, but recognizably similar patterns emerged whether their democratic national politics were vigorously adversarial (as in Britain and Australia), deliberately consociational (as in the Netherlands and Switzerland), or one-party dominated (as in Sweden and Canada). What is particularly distinctive about the politics of Canada's twentieth century is not so much *what* was done as *how* it was done. It turns out that the story of Canada's twentieth century is the story of the Liberal Party and its quite remarkable dominance of the country's political life.

To start, it is important to be clear about the pattern of Liberal electoral success and the extent of the party's dominance. Thus, in the next chapter, I ask just how dominant it really was, and just how tight its grip was on the country's politics. The answers both confirm and question the popular and all too easy characterizations of the Liberal Party as Canada's national

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party. And comparisons with similar parties in other established democracies give us pause to reflect on whether the Liberal Party's record is quite so exceptional as is often assumed.

Knowing that the Liberals' record shifted over the century, and that on occasion the party suffered massive defeats, leads to a recognition that several times the party had to rebuild its organization and to remobilize a support base in the electorate. Chapter 3 explores these party reinventions and makes it clear that the result was a series of different Liberal incarnations. Successive versions of the party saw important differences in its size, scope, and make-up: in effect, the century saw four different Liberal eras with four different Liberal parties. Each successive party became smaller and narrower, its parliamentary wing less representative of the country, so that by century's end the Liberal Party's claim to being the nation's natural governing party became increasingly difficult to sustain.

If none of the Liberal Party's continuing dominance of Canadian politics came naturally or easily, this takes us back to Siegfried's basic question regarding what kind of party it is. Chapter 4 recognizes two critical dimensions of the question. First, there is the existential problem of *purpose:* What does the party stand for? What is its political mission? Who does it represent? Who constitutes its political constituency? The second dimension concerns the realities of organizational *practice:* How can a party whose base is neither regular nor easily definable connect a diverse and dispersed electorate to a disciplined parliamentary caucus? How are centre and grassroots connected? And how can those linkages be managed and continually restructured in a dramatically changing society? The Liberals' response to these challenges was to create the model for Canadian political success – a brokerage party structured by a franchise-style organizational network incorporating a fundamental organizational bargain between its local supporters and its national leaders. This model has now come under considerable stress, and disagreements over it are the source of an internal discord that threatens to break the party.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore the internal dynamics of the party as it operated in the last few decades of the twentieth century. Chapter 5 focuses on the grassroots face of the party and the organizational practices of Liberal activists in hundreds of constituencies across the country. It reveals the uneven and often unbalanced character of the party on the ground and its

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capacity to mobilize support as a significant part of every Liberal election campaign effort. However, it also reveals that the very openness and flexibility that are the defining characteristics and political advantages of the party's franchise-style organization make it difficult to identify just who constitutes the party and where decision-making authority and accountability lie. In Chapter 6, the focus shifts to the other essential face of the party, its leadership. The Liberals' brokerage model gives a special place to the leadership but, in so doing, makes it the focus of ongoing internal conflict. Like the party itself, the organization and character of leadership competition has evolved over time, both reflecting and shaping Liberal politics.

Has the Liberals' long mastery of Canadian politics finally come to an end? Chapter 7 brings us full circle and forces us to ask whether the century of Siegfried's unnatural politics, Canada's infatuation with brokerage politics, has ended. If so, what might the future of Canadian electoral politics look like without the Liberals playing their traditional role? In previous brief, successful Conservative Party episodes, there have been hints of alternate approaches to organizing the country's politics, but these have yet to provide sustainable substitutes. The first decade of the new century has forced the Liberals to once again ask: Is the party up to the task of reinventing itself and managing national politics? If and how it answers this question will determine whether any of the twenty-first century will belong to Liberals and their conception of Canada.

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