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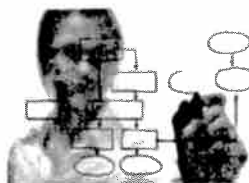
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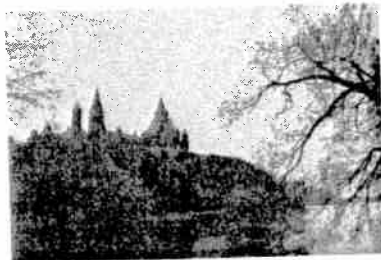
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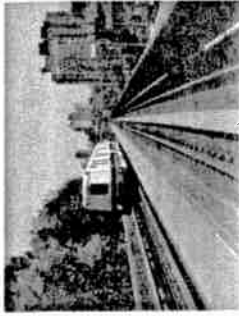
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The Conservatives

Has the government turned its back on Quebec?

by Tom Flanagan

Tom Flanagan is Professor of Political Science at the University of Calgary and a former Conservative campaign manager. He is the author of *Harper's Team: Behind the Scenes in the Conservative Rise to Power*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

For better or worse, Quebec drove the agenda of Canadian politics throughout the second half of the 20th century. Prime ministers Louis Saint-Laurent, Pierre Trudeau, Brian Mulroney, Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin were all from Quebec. Just as importantly, Quebec MPs were often pivotal in the caucus of the governing party: without its Quebec seats, the government of the day would not have been in power, or at least not with a majority government. That was true as much for the Conservative governments of Diefenbaker and Mulroney (except in the landslide years of 1958 and 1984) as for the Liberal governments of Saint-Laurent, Pearson, Trudeau, Chrétien and Martin. And ever since the Quiet Revolution, there was the threat of separation, used by Quebec provincial politicians of all parties to put an edge on their demands.

Since 1993, however, things have changed. By swinging to the Bloc Québécois and more recently to the NDP, Quebec voters have given up much of their leverage with the federal government, a trend that has only accelerated in 2008 and 2011. To form a government, Quebec seats might have been necessary to Paul Martin in 2004 and Stephen Harper in 2006, but not to Harper in 2008. And now, after the 2011 election, Harper heads a Conservative majority

government with only five Quebec seats, and the Conservatives would still have a majority even if they had no seats at all from that province. Moreover, the separatist movement is in disarray, with the electoral collapse of the BQ, internal feuding within the Parti Québécois and the appearance of new separatist parties and organizations.

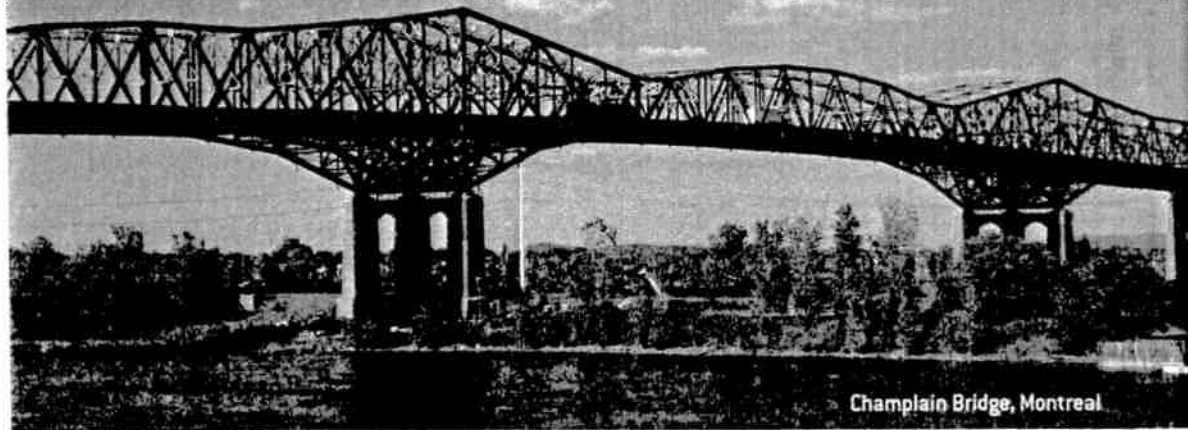
When Stephen Harper became leader of the new Conservative Party of Canada, he thought that, in order to win, it would be necessary to recover at least part of the francophone vote in Quebec that Brian Mulroney had brought over to the Progressive Conservatives in the 1980s. This was part of the "Three Sisters" theory that he first articulated at the Winds of Change conference in Calgary in 1996: a Conservative majority had to be built on the support of populists in western Canada, traditional Tories in Ontario and Atlantic Canada and francophone nationalists (but not separatists) in Quebec.

When he became Conservative leader, Harper acted consistently on the Three Sisters theory. He worked on his French, spent a lot of time in Quebec and, when he became Prime Minister, placed several Quebec-oriented policies in the window, such as fixing the "fiscal imbalance" and recognizing the Québécois as "a nation within Canada." For a while it seemed to be working, as the Conservatives won ten seats in Quebec in 2006 and were on track to win as many as 30 seats there in 2008. But then the tide went out in the middle of the campaign, and the Conservatives were lucky to hold their ten seats. And then they were reduced to five Quebec seats in 2011.

In the meantime, however, the Conservatives had begun to cultivate a valuable new source of votes: new Canadians concentrated in major metropolitan areas, above all in and around Toronto. With Jason Kenney leading the charge, this effort paid off in a clutch of new seats in 2011, far more than enough to compensate for losses in Quebec. It is not that the Conservatives rejected Quebec to appeal to ethnic voters; there was no clash between the two groups. Rather, when Quebec rejected the Conservatives, they now had somewhere else to go to build the majority they were seeking. The Conservatives do not dominate the ethnic vote: the Liberals and NDP still get large parts of it. But the Conservatives have improved their share to the point that they are competitive in many ridings that were previously out of reach.

It's all rather curious. From 1867 onward, the conventional wisdom of political science was that Quebec voters had a nose for power, almost always ending up on the side of the governing party, whether Liberal or Conservative. But starting in 1993, Quebec voters tended to prefer the BQ, which had no chance of governing, and now the NDP, which has little chance. Such behaviour might make sense as a prelude to separation, but separatism seems to be growing weaker rather than stronger within the province. I'll leave

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it to others to psychoanalyze Quebec voters and predict what they may do in the future, but I will make some comments about how these developments may affect the course of federal politics.

The Conservative government is now freer, if it wishes, to ignore demands from Quebec without fear of a politically costly backlash. It has shown this by proceeding with its plan to give more House of Commons seats to the fast-growing provinces of Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia. This will not reduce Quebec's total of 75 seats but will lessen Quebec's relative weight in the House of Commons. Despite cries of protest from Quebec's NDP MPs and from provincial politicians, the government is moving ahead on this file. The government has also ignored demands, resonant in Quebec, to require that all judges of the Supreme Court of Canada be bilingual before appointment, and it is moving ahead to abolish the long-gun registry, even though that has always been a popular institution in Quebec, having been established as a response to the "Montreal Massacre" of 1989.

This should not be interpreted as a wholesale abandonment of Quebec's interests. Shortly after the 2011 election, Prime Minister Harper hired former PC MP André Bachand as his Quebec adviser. He recently fulfilled a Conservative campaign promise by announcing that the federal government will pay Quebec \$2.2 billion as retroactive compensation for the province's 1992 adoption of the HST. The government also announced that it will, over a ten-year period, build a new Champlain Bridge over the St. Lawrence River (the Champlain Bridge is wholly owned by the Federal Bridge Corporation Ltd.).

If the Conservative government had wanted to turn against Quebec, it could easily have done so on these two issues. After all, why should Canada pay compensation almost 20 years later for a decision that the government of Quebec made voluntarily, in its own interests, in 1992? And why should the federal government own and build expensive bridges in Quebec when it does not do so in other provinces? (FBCL owns the Champlain, Jacques Cartier and Mercier bridges in Montreal, the Seaway International Bridge between

Ontario and New York state at Cornwall and the Sault Ste. Marie International Bridge between Ontario and Michigan. The fact that the Cornwall and Sault Ste. Marie bridges are international make them more logical candidates for federal ownership.)

The Prime Minister, it appears, wants to leave room for future attempts to rebuild support in Quebec. This makes political sense from two points of view. First, as Joe Clark learned in 1979, it is difficult to govern the country without some Quebec MPs who can serve in the cabinet. The present number of five is already too small to furnish an adequate choice, so the Conservatives would like to get back up to at least the ten that they had before the 2011 election. Also, nothing is fixed in politics. The Conservatives won a majority government in the last election with the new support of ethnic voters, particularly in the Greater Toronto Area. The party will try as hard as it possibly can to keep those new supporters in the fold, but it makes perfect political sense to try to keep options open in Quebec in the face of an uncertain future.

There is also a deeper issue involved, as expressed by Reform Party founder Preston Manning at a recent dinner held in Edmonton to honour Ted Byfield and his now-defunct newsmagazine, *Alberta Report*. Manning spoke about how for many years the interests of western Canada were ignored by both Liberal and Conservative governments. Pierre Trudeau's National Energy Program devastated the Alberta oil patch in the name of keeping prices low for eastern consumers. Brian Mulroney decided "in the national interest" to give the CF-18 service contract to a

Montreal consortium rather than a Winnipeg firm, even though the adjudication committee considered the Winnipeg bid both cheaper and technically more advanced.

Fortunately, said Manning, the days of the west's oppression are over. Evoking Reform's old slogan, "The west wants in," Manning emphasized that the west is not only in but has a dominant voice in the federal government. But he went on to caution the hundreds of Conservative activists in attendance about how wrong it would be to seek political revenge for the years of systematic exploitation that the west suffered. People in the west, he said, understand better than anyone what it means to be "out," and should strive to ensure that no other region of Canada suffers the same fate again. It was inspiring to hear not only Manning's words but also the loud applause that they evoked.

Prime Minister Harper was not there that night; he was represented by "Minister of Nationalities" Jason Kenney. But I'm sure Harper's view of the situation is the same as Preston Manning's. A country as regionalized as Canada can only be held together by evenhanded treatment of all regions. There are bound to be future arguments about the treatment of Quebec, as there always have been, but do not look for Harper to make any dramatic turn away from Quebec because of a couple of disappointing election results.

On the other hand, there is no going back to the way it was. Quebecers will have to understand that evenhanded treatment does not mean holding the country hostage. The time when Quebec voters could drive the political agenda of the federal government is over.