

IGNATIEFF STEPS DOWN AFTER LEADING LIBERALS TO POLL DISASTER

Canadian election sees Conservatives retain power with absolute majority

By Rupert Cornwell - Wednesday, 4 May 2011

Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff resigned yesterday after his party's disastrous showing in Canada's general election, in which the Conservatives under Prime Minister Stephen Harper retained power – this time with a long-coveted absolute majority in the Ottawa parliament.

The departure of Mr Ignatieff could be the first step in a major shake-up of Canadian politics. The election produced a stunning realignment of the centre-left, as the upstart New Democratic Party tripled its strength, to take over as the main opposition party.

The Liberals, once almost regarded as Canada's natural party of government, led by such titans as Lester Pearson, Pierre Trudeau and Jean Chrétien, saw their representation plummet from 77 seats to 34.



Conservative leader and Prime Minister Stephen Harper celebrates his victory

It was the party's first ever third-place finish, and some analysts predict the humiliation may force it into some form of merger with the New Democratic Party, led by Jack Layton, a persuasive speaker with a cheerful, folksy message who has staked out positions to the left of the Liberals.

In a scarcely less remarkable development, the Bloc Québécois, champion of sovereignty for French-speaking Canada, was all but extinguished in Monday's vote. Its representation plunged from 47 seats to just four, meaning it no longer even qualifies as a parliamentary group.

Overall, the outcome is a massive victory for Mr Harper, an unabashed conservative who has been forced to rely on opposition support in the two previous elections in 2006 and 2008, as he has attempted to overcome his country's traditionally centre-left instincts.

This time though, the Conservatives captured 40 per cent of the total vote, compared to 31 per cent for the NDP and a worst-ever 19 per cent by the Liberals. With his party winning 167 of the 308 parliamentary seats, Mr Harper, 52, has an unequivocal mandate and the chance to be a genuinely transformative leader in a country where change tends to occur at glacial pace. Addressing a victory rally in Calgary, the Prime Minister professed himself "humbled by the decisive endorsement of so many Canadians".

Since 2006, Mr Harper has nudged Canada in a more free market direction, lowering some taxes and boosting military spending. A strong supporter of Israel, he has raised Canada's profile in the Afghan war, and in Nato's current campaign in Libya. Now he can look forward to a full four-year term to press his goal of breaking the entrenched power of the Liberals for good.

In winning the sought-after absolute majority at the third attempt, Mr Harper was rewarded for bringing Canada relatively unscathed through the 2008 financial crash and subsequent recession. He can also thank the unexpected surge of the NDP, which both ate into Bloc Québécois support, and split the left-leaning vote. As a result, the Conservatives were able to capture a rich harvest of seats even in the most populous province of Ontario, the Liberals' traditional stronghold.

But his triumph undoubtedly also owed something to a relentless advertising campaign targeted at Mr Ignatieff. From the outset, it portrayed the former university professor, journalist and public intellectual – who spent decades in the UK and the US before returning to Canada in 2005 – as an out-of-touch elitist and opportunist.

"Michael Ignatieff. Just visiting, "one spot ran."Back in Canada, but for how long?" asked another. The Liberal leader never managed to counter the claims. At his press conference, he accepted responsibility, but accused the Conservatives of conducting an "unscrupulous campaign of personal attack".

The focus now will be on Mr Harper, who leads his country when its politics have rarely offered as clear a choice between left and right. But he will have to be careful. Canada shies away from extremes, and under a more effective leader the Liberals may recover.

The Twitter vigilantes

Canadian Twitter users defied an official ban on posting election results before all the polls closed, running the risk of a hefty fine if the government enforces the law.

The 73-year-old Elections Act bans reporting early results in order to prevent voters in the east from influencing choices in the west. Polls close in Newfoundland two-and-a-half hours ahead of central Canada and much of the west, and three hours ahead of British Columbia.

But even before polling stations closed in western Canada, results from eastern provinces were leaking out on Twitter. A band of online vigilantes had planned to gather tweets and share election results before all polls closed. But that group backed down, fearing fines of up to \$25,000 (£16,000).