

Brief history of political parties in Canada

As May 22, the date of the federal general election draws near, candidates are campaigning hard, holding meetings, debating issues and trying to win support from voters, some of whom are still uncommitted to any party. Recent polls indicate very little difference in the estimated popularity of Canada's main parties, the Liberals and the Progressive Conservatives, with sometimes as little as one percentage point separating them.

In a paper entitled Political Parties in Canada, Professor Robert Jackson, who chairs the Political Science Department of Ottawa's Carleton University, outlines their history. As the tension in Canada mounts with the fast-approaching race to the House of Commons, Canada Weekly will publish in this issue and the next one, excerpts from Dr. Jackson's material on the four parties – the two mentioned above, followed by the New Democratic Party and the Social Credit Party.

The paper states views which are Dr. Jackson's own.

Progressive Conservative Party

The oldest Canadian party, the Progressive Conservative, can be traced back to 1854 when John A. Macdonald brought together a working alliance called the Liberal-Conservative, which included eastern commercial interests, Conservative French Canadians, and Ontario Tories. Their objective was to bring about Confederation and then implement a national policy which entailed encouraging national unity and development of the country by promoting a national railway, industry and commerce. Maintenance of the British connection and establishment of relatively high tariffs were fundamental to their political stance.

French Canadians were traditionally cautious of the Conservatives because of the party's strong British orientation. The execution in 1885 of Louis Riel – the rebel French-speaking leader of the Métis of Western Canada – and later the imposition of military conscription on reluctant French Canadians in 1917, drastically reduced the party's popularity in French Quebec. Robert Borden, who had become Conservative Prime Minister in 1911 before the war, continued after the 1917 election as head of a Union government, a coalition of Conservatives and English-speaking Liberals.

Neither Arthur Meighen nor his successor, R.B. Bennett, was able as Conservative party leader to make new inroads in Quebec. In the 1920s, the party structure rapidly became over-centralized in Ontario. Westerners, who lacked a strong party tradition, formed the temporarily successful Progressive Party with a labour-farm oriented platform, and undermined Conservative strength in the prairies. In

power again during the worst of the depression years, 1930-1935, the Conservatives were assured of further unpopularity and loss of support.

In 1942, the Conservatives tried to consolidate their forces by choosing John Bracken, the Progressive premier of Manitoba, as their leader and renamed their party the Progressive Conservatives. However, party fortunes did not improve until 1957 when they formed a minority government under a new leader from the West, John G. Diefenbaker. This upset victory preceded a landslide in 1958. In that election the party captured not only the western and Ontario vote, but also 50 seats in Quebec. However, the victory was ephemeral, and in the 1963 election the Conservatives were defeated.

In 1967, Robert Stanfield replaced John Diefenbaker, but conflict over the leadership created factions within the party and disrupted the organization at the local level. Mr. Stanfield was unable to gain strength in the province of Quebec. In 1972, the Conservatives won 18 per cent of the popular vote in Quebec but only two of its 74 seats. They lost again in 1974, following a campaign for wage and price controls, which paradoxically were instituted by their Liberal opponents the next year. Joe Clark, a 36-year-old Albertan, replaced Robert Stanfield following a leadership convention in 1976.

The loss of French Canadian support has been the single most important factor in the decline of Conservative strength in the twentieth century. Quebec, the second most populous province in Canada and the only one that is predominantly French and Catholic, traditionally votes

as a bloc, so that it is virtually impossible for a party to form a majority government without its support. Since 1891, the Conservative Party has won a majority of the Quebec seats in a federal election only once, in 1958. The Conservative challenge today is to build a significant electoral base in Quebec and restore the party's national representation or to capture the great majority of the seats in the other nine provinces.

The Liberal Party

The Liberal Party as a national force was much slower to develop than the Conservative. The opposition to John A. Macdonald's first government consisted of Clear Grits from Ontario, le Parti Rouge from Quebec, and anti-Confederation Nova Scotia MPs. They were generally considered to be more egalitarian and proletarian than the Conservatives, and were said to believe in solving major inequalities through governmental action. There was no real unity in the group until Wilfrid Laurier became leader in 1887. During his 15-year tenure (1896-1911) he transformed these early Liberals into a national party and entrenched the Liberal Party in Quebec.

The Liberal coalition was temporarily destroyed following the "conspiration crisis" and the election of the Union Government in 1917, but in 1921 William Lyon Mackenzie King became leader and proceeded to rebuild the Liberal Party into a strong organization which dominated Canadian government for most of the present century. King himself retains the record for number of years in power; he was Prime Minister for 21 years, five months (1921-1930, 1935-1948). Under his leadership, the Liberals made efforts to accommodate agrarian protest from the West by forming an alliance with the Progressives, but this alliance collapsed when the Progressives joined the Conservatives. The Liberals under Louis St. Laurent (who was defeated by John Diefenbaker in 1957), and his successor Lester Pearson (party leader from 1957-1968, Prime Minister from 1963-1968), continued more or less successfully to accommodate Quebec aspirations.

In 1968, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, a 48-year-old relative newcomer to federal politics, assumed leadership of the Liberal Party. He has since led the party to three electoral victories. In the 1974 election Quebec remained the party stronghold. The main Liberal weaknesses were in