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Fault Lines

Negotiating the aftershocks of the Canadian election

In the year of the great earthquake in California, another seismic event — a political earthquake — left the citizens of Canada shaken and surprised.

Last year's federal election in that nation turned the ruling Conservative Party out on its ear. The Conservatives held onto only two seats in the 295-seat House of Commons, while the Liberal Party took over the reins of power. Political ideologues ran strong: the ultra-conservative Reform Party made a strong showing. Most shocking of all, the Bloc Quebecois party — running only in Quebec, and preaching a platform of secession for that province — gained 54 seats and became Canada's official opposition party.

A capacity crowd recently heard Lawrence LeDuc, an internationally known expert in Canadian electoral politics and a professor at the University of Toronto, dissect this political earthquake. His address, the second in an annual series at the International Institute on Delaware Avenue, was hosted by the UB Law School's Canada-U.S. Legal Studies Centre, and co-sponsored by the International Institute and the Buffalo Council on World Affairs.

The "earthquake" label, LeDuc said, is justified for this strange election: It was an event that "changes the whole landscape. An election that blows away the governing party completely — obliterates it — is an earthquake," he said.

It wasn't hard to see the Conservatives' demise coming, though. "This is the story of a government in trouble," LeDuc said. The Conservative government had ruled since 1984 — a "fairly tired government, having accomplished most of its major public-policy objectives long ago."

In addition, he noted, the Conservatives were the architects of Canadian participation in the contentious North American Free Trade
Agreement, and pushed through the hugely unpopular national Goods and Services Tax. And Brian Mulroney, he said, was "an unpopular prime minister written in capital letters and exclamation points. No one has come close to matching the discontent with Mulroney in his latter years."

Though Mulroney resigned in February 1993, his successor as prime minister, Kim Campbell, proved ineffectual as a candidate. She was "a very inexperienced politician thrust into the leadership of her party at a very difficult time. In a full summer of campaigning," LeDuc noted, "Campbell never succeeded in improving the position of the party from where it was when Mulroney resigned."

The Conservatives — Canada's "Old Blue Machine" — were all but finished.

Meanwhile, the Liberals and their candidate, veteran politician Jean Chretien, made a savvy move: They produced a document called the Red Book, a collection of position papers on the issues of the campaign. "Chretien discovered early on," LeDuc said, "that it was a wonderful prop. Whenever a journalist came along and asked, 'What are your positions?' Chretien could just wave the Red Book at him."

Canadians responded enthusiastically. When the votes were counted, the Liberals had a plurality of 41 percent, the Reform party 19 percent, the Conservatives 16 percent, Bloc Quebecois 14 percent and the leftist New Democratic Party 7 percent. (Smaller parties won more seats in the House of Commons because their votes were concentrated regionally.)

LeDuc, a specialist in analyzing electoral polling data, produced several charts to demonstrate how the Conservative vote "literally blew apart, fragmenting in several directions. You'll find about equal numbers of Conservatives going all over the political map."

The numbers also indicate, LeDuc said, that secessionist sentiment in Quebec is unlikely to go much higher than the 49 percent of Quebecois who voted for the Bloc Quebecois ticket. Only about one in four Quebecois is "strongly separatist," he said; another 15 percent are "soft sovereigntists" who would support some form of sovereignty.

In fact, he said, there's some question whether the populace as a whole realizes the implications of seceding from Canada. LeDuc quoted one poll which noted 55 percent of Quebecois think that, after sovereignty, Quebec will still have members of Parliament in Ottawa. "They don't realize," he said, "that they can't have it both ways."

Monroe Eagles, the UB political science assistant professor who introduced LeDuc at the March 18 lecture, said later that LeDuc "has been talking for years about the fragile nature of Canadian politics. It reflects the difficulties that incumbent administrations anywhere in the world are facing when it comes to being re-elected. The general message that many governments are feeling is that they're under pressure."

Though Canada's coalition-style politics is fundamentally different from the U.S. two-party system, Eagles said last year's Canadian election had some parallels with the race for the White House in 1992. He said the "degree to which Ross Perot made his presence felt" in that race paralleled the general discontent that Canadians felt with the ruling Conservatives.

"Recent years have seen Canada right on the point of breakup," Eagles said. "Whatever else you say, Canadian politics is not boring."