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Stephen Clarkson and Rachael Gibson

Explaining Liberal Hegemony in Federal Politics

Abstract:

Apart from voting-analysis explanations of the Liberal's past electoral success, various historical explanations have been put forth. This paper assesses the respective qualities of an agency as opposed to a structural explanation of the LPC's dominance of federal politics. Wilfrid Laurier's formula (national vision and social reform, strong support in Québec, delivering to business the policies it requires) is satisfactory for understanding Liberal success during the first and second party systems. George Perlin's syndrome of interconnected factors (leadership, caucus, candidates, policy, backroom strength, rank-and-file morale) provides a more nuanced and penetrating diagnosis to explain the party's appeal to the public -- or lack thereof -- over the past forty years. We conclude by comparing the two approaches' analytical power in assessing the Liberals' prospects for returning to a position of dominance over federal politics.

It may not seem an auspicious moment to reflect on the “dominance” of the Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) when Stephen Harper is consolidating his -- albeit minority-party -- grip on the federal government and the LPC is anguishing over which of its not-so-appropriate candidates will end up leading it into electoral battle next time. But if we step back from the daily news and remember that, since 1896, the Liberals have won twenty out of the last thirty elections and have governed Canada for three out of every four years during these 110 years, their being out of power may even make it a more appropriate time for a scholarly discussion about why they were so successful in the past as a means to speculating systematically about their prospects for re-establishing their previous dominance.

Since our chronological spread covers more than a century, we may rule out some explanatory candidates from the beginning. Were we acolytes of rational choice, we would be hard pressed to find comparable data sets stretching over a century. Even had the voluminous voter-opinion data, which are now massaged by our statistically adept colleagues with such impressive subtlety,¹ been available for this whole period, psephological analyses of each campaign explaining *why* voters had supported the LPC so often would not necessarily show us *how* it is that this party had managed to make itself so appealing so consistently over so many decades.

¹ Some good recent examples include, André Blais, “Accounting for the Electoral Success of the Liberal Party in Canada,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 38:4 (December, 2005), 821-840; André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau, and Neil Nevitte, “Measuring Party Identification: Britain, Canada, and the United States,” *Political Behavior* 23:1 (March, 2001), 5-22.

Even as institutionalists focusing on electoral-system explanations, it would be hard to get much traction out of the argument that can justly be credited to Alan Cairns' seminal thesis that Canada's first-past-the-post, one-representative-per-riding system has historically favoured regionally-based and centrist parties over ideological movements.² The logical problem -- which will come up again later on in our analysis -- is that, even if the LPC profited from this electoral system, we are left to explain why the Liberals were its beneficiary rather than the Conservatives or Progressive Conservatives or some other party formation such as British-style Labourites.

Our search is for an explanation that is satisfactory retrospectively in making sense of past Liberal successes and useful prospectively in considering the Liberal Party's future. But if the analysis is really answering the more general question, "Why do certain parties succeed in federal politics?" it should be applicable to any party.

We propose two candidates, one which favours human agency and the other offering a more structural position. Analyses revolving around *agency* privilege the formula that political leaders have used to create winning conditions for their party. Those that emphasize *structure* delve deeper down into party mechanisms for their explanations. Taking a chronological approach, we start with the former as identified with Wilfrid Laurier and Mackenzie King and will move on to the latter when we come to the puzzling figure of John Diefenbaker. In the final section, we will speculate on the current prospects of the haplessly non-hegemonic Grits.

Human Agency: The Laurier formula

If we take the first party system³ to have prevailed from 1867 to 1919, the Liberal Party did not exactly dominate, holding power for merely fifteen of its fifty-two years. Nevertheless, in light of subsequent successes, historians have attributed to Wilfrid Laurier, who was the *Grit/Rouge* prime minister from 1896 to 1911, the genius of working out -- or, rather, stealing -- a formula for his extraordinary success. In the aftermath of the disastrous five years following the death of Sir John A. Macdonald in 1891, which saw four consecutive successors fail miserably at their job, the future Sir Wilfrid managed to beat the Conservatives at their own game.

In the clarity of a century's hindsight, Laurier's -- and Macdonald's -- formula can be reduced to three components: a national and social vision for the public, his electoral strategy, and what he delivered to the business community once in power.

1. Beyond the compelling rhetoric of this elegant and outstanding orator, Laurier offered more than just his famous 20th-century-will-belong-to-Canada dream. He endorsed the aggressive immigration policy of his Manitoba minister, Clifford Sifton, who attracted immigrants by the thousands from Europe to settle the prairies and so provide customers for Laurier's two new

² Alan C. Cairns, "The Electoral System and the Party System in Canada, 1921-1965," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 1:1 (March, 1968), 55-80.

³ David E. Smith, "Party Government in Canada," in *Canadian Political Party Systems: A Reader*, ed. R. Kenneth Carty (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1992), 531-62; R. Kenneth Carty, "Three Canadian Party Systems," in *Canadian Political Party Systems: A Reader*, ed. R. Kenneth Carty (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1992), 563-86.

transcontinental railways. The national vision had a social corollary appropriate to this disciple of the British Liberal, William Gladstone. Laurier's social progressivism was exemplified by his recruitment of a rising young activist, William Lyon Mackenzie King -- who had ideas about reconciling a burgeoning, but alienated proletariat with a ferocious capitalist system it was increasingly confronting -- to create and be deputy minister of a new federal department of labour.

2. "It is not enough to have good principles; we must have organization also. Principles without organization may lose, but organization without principles may often win." Laurier delivered this homily to his fellow Liberals assembled for a policy convention in 1893. He then proceeded to build his electoral coalition in English Canada with the organizational support of Liberal provincial premiers whom he brought into cabinet to serve as power brokers for their regions. If we can talk about his appropriating Sir John A.'s formula, it is also because, by 1896, Laurier had turned Québec into his party's electoral bastion. Perfecting his party's newfound strategy of pragmatism and patronage, the realignment of the LPC's support base was secured under Laurier's leadership by the next federal election in 1900, signifying the potency of national unity as a theme in Canadian politics.

3. An inspiring and attractive appeal to the voters and obtaining decisive support in Québec were the two most visibly effective components of Laurier's prescription. In a simple clientelistic system based on patronage, money was the essential element for which business was the only source. Once in power, delivering what the business community wanted was the third, if less obvious, leg of his political tripod. For most of his decade and a half as prime minister, Laurier showed he could play the game, providing what Montréal's St. James Street and Toronto's Bay Street wanted in the way of government policies. In return, the Liberal Party was rewarded with the kickbacks it expected and needed in order to finance its election campaigns. Like Macdonald, Laurier secured the support of a major financial institution, in his case the Bank of Montréal. Ironically, he proved how valid was his formula's third nostrum when he violated it by producing a policy -- free trade with the United States -- to which Ontario's capitalists objected. As the country's first major business lobby, the Canadian Manufacturers Association shifted its members' financial support to Robert Borden's Conservative Party and helped bring down the Grits' silver-tongued god in the 1911 federal election.

The agency argument privileges the political leader's personal capacities -- what we might more commonly call his political savvy. But conditions change, and the second party system, which is commonly dated from 1919 to 1957, differed significantly from the first. Capitalism had evolved from its early industrial to its more mature, monopolistic phase. Radio displaced the newspaper as the most powerful means of political communication. Having created and staffed the state's institutions, Canada's ruling parties found their members' access to government jobs shut off by the bureaucratic principle of service by merit. Reduced to brokering the regions' often conflicting interests, the Liberal and Conservative parties' relative power within the political firmament declined substantially. At the same time, they lost their duopolistic control, as radical competitors entered the fray from both the right (Social Credit) and left (the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation -- CCF).

It is a tribute to the power of the agency argument that Laurier's triple formula convincingly explains the Liberal Party's success in holding power for thirty-one of the second party system's thirty-eight years.

1. Most historians would scoff at any association between the notion of vision and Mackenzie King. The master of ambiguity and caution, he seemed the antithesis of his predecessor's capacity to articulate a thrilling national vision. Notwithstanding his reluctance to pronounce bold formulations, his sense of Canada's destiny as independent, yet supportive, of its imperial superiors was manifest both after the first Great War and in the management of the Second. As for his social vision, which was buried within the turgid pages of *Industry and Humanity*,⁴ its delayed implementation was made necessary by the CCF's surging popularity, which was threatening to displace his party during World War II. Nevertheless, on his watch Canada became an internationally significant player in the post-fascist world order and, domestically, an early practitioner of the social policies now identified as the Keynesian Welfare State.

2. Like his predecessor, King also had a talent for bringing capable ministers with regional power bases to Cabinet and making good use of their abilities and connections. His skill as a political recruiter was evidenced also by his capacity to attract progressive intellectuals to the federal civil service to draw on their nation-building ideas. Unapologetically unilingual, King was nevertheless acutely conscious of the need to maintain the Liberal Party's electoral support in Québec even in the throes of his generals' demands for conscription to maintain their forces fighting power in Europe. Far from World War I's militarily suppressed riots in Québec, King's Delphic "conscription if necessary, but not necessarily conscription" staved off violence, thus saving the Liberals both provincially and federally.

3. As far as catering to business was concerned, Reg Whitaker has literally written the book -- *The Government Party*⁵ -- which documents in exquisite detail the highly efficient kickback system fuelling the LPC's election campaigns which were generally organized by advertising executives seconded from firms that directly profited from government promotion contracts. In short, King delivered what capitalists wanted.

When Mackenzie King's chosen successor, Louis St Laurent, was defeated in 1957, the question became whether this showed that -- like Laurier beforehand -- he had misapplied the Grits' own formula. Or, on the cusp of a new political system in which television became the dominant medium of communication and capitalism had morphed into its Fordist phase, had Laurier's formula lost its explanatory power in a political field in which one small and two large national parties competed for office?

John Diefenbaker's prime ministership becomes crucial to this discussion since, on the face of it, he had wreaked Macdonald's revenge by recapturing the grand old man's winning formula.

⁴ W.L. Mackenzie King, *Industry and Humanity: A Study in the Principles Underlying Industrial Reconstruction* (Toronto: Allen, 1918).

⁵ Reginald Whitaker, *The Government Party: Organizing and Financing the Liberal Party of Canada, 1930-58* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

1. Unlike the colonialist vision of such predecessors as Arthur Meighen, he had a bold national vision expressed as Northern development that he championed as a program of “Roads to resources.” Unlike the reactionary stances of R.B. Bennett, his advocacy of a bill of rights made him the social-policy embodiment of his party’s relatively new “*Progressive Conservative*” label.

2. His crushing 1958 victory was due in large measure to Québec’s support obtained thanks to Premier Maurice Duplessis.

3. And he came to power with support from a business community that preferred Conservatives in principle.

But Diefenbaker had lost his majority in 1962 and had lost power entirely by 1963. Does this mean that he had misapplied the formula? Or does it mean that the formula itself had lost its relevance? The St Laurent and Diefenbaker defeats may suggest that, in order to understand how the Liberals reasserted their dominance in federal politics, we need a separate theory to explain the Progressive Conservatives’ loss of power. Enter the structuralist analysis.

Political Structure: The Winning Party Syndrome

It is relatively easy to defend the agency approach’s explanatory power by arguing that Diefenbaker’s paranoid behaviour undermined his visionary appeal, that he is responsible for offending Québec, and that he even managed to alienate the business community in his first years in office. But the Queen’s University political scientist, George Perlin, gave us in 1980 a more penetrating understanding of the interconnecting circle of factors that have dogged the Conservative Party since 1891 and account for its talent in losing federal elections.

In the conclusion to *The Tory Syndrome*,⁶ Perlin summarized the significance of intensive survey research on Progressive Conservative party leaders, members, and backroom operatives by arguing that a complex vicious circle perpetuated losing conditions only periodically interrupted by the Liberals’ capacity to defeat themselves. Failure, in effect, bred further failure.

1. Leadership. The Conservative party had a tradition of selecting divisive, understandably inexperienced leaders who tended to perpetuate factionalism rather than mend internal party divisions.⁷
2. Candidates. Generally speaking, when two parties pursue similar basic goals the party which holds the most promise of winning has greater success recruiting people with first-rate credentials. Given that the political odds tended to be long, the Conservative party did not normally attract highly qualified, ambitious men and women whose motivation for entering politics was to get into cabinet and have a direct effect on policy.

⁶ George C. Perlin, *The Tory Syndrome: Leadership Politics in the Progressive Conservative Party* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1980), 190-201.

⁷ George Perlin, *The Tory Syndrome*, 199-200.

Consequently, predictable areas of parliamentary talent -- the civil service, universities, business and corporations -- were taken over by the dominant party.⁸

3. Caucus. Those Conservatives who did get elected became accustomed to their position on the opposition benches, where they developed a culture of opposition, revelling in criticizing the government in the relative certainty they would never have to implement their own ideas. Approaching all forms of debate in an attacking, destructive manner, the party appeared to lack any ideas of its own, providing the public with little incentive to switch its allegiance.⁹
4. Policy. Given the low likelihood that they would be placed in the position of having to implement their platforms, policy debates in the party became a proxy for maintaining internal factional feuds between the supporters, say, of John Diefenbaker and those of Robert Stanfield. Because they tended to be out of power, they saw bureaucrats as covert Liberals and had little experience in responding to the ideas of policy experts from the business or academic worlds.¹⁰
5. Backroom. Along with its anti-intellectualism, the party's back room tended to be weak in terms of lawyers, advertising and PR executives, and other professionals who traded their electoral smarts for the prospect of patronage to come once the party was elected.¹¹
6. Grassroots. At the same time, the rank-and-file in the riding associations across the country recruited themselves from those who were, sociologically speaking, citizens who felt disempowered and alienated.¹²
7. As a result of this vicious circle of self reinforcing factors, the Progressive Conservative party ultimately presented a cantankerous, bickering, negative -- in a word, unappealing -- face to the voter.¹³

Having explained the Progressive Conservative Party's defeat in the early 1960s, we believe that, turned on its head, Perlin's theory also provides a powerful structural explanation for Liberal Party success over the next four decades.

1. Leadership. Thanks to its many years in government and the longer tenure of its leaders, the Liberal Party renews its leadership by choosing from a pack of claimants who are generally experienced in government with credible chances for making an effective prime minister.

⁸ George Perlin, *The Tory Syndrome*, 195-9.

⁹ George Perlin, *The Tory Syndrome*, 199.

¹⁰ George Perlin, *The Tory Syndrome*, 192-3, 199.

¹¹ George Perlin, *The Tory Syndrome*, 194-6.

¹² George Perlin, *The Tory Syndrome*, 197-8.

¹³ George Perlin, *The Tory Syndrome*, 190-200.

2. Candidates. With the prospect that, if elected, they will be part of the government, the Liberal Party tends to attract the movers and shakers who would like to make a difference by affecting public policy.
3. Caucus. Because Members of Parliament sitting on the government back benches know they have some chance to be in the cabinet, be appointed parliamentary secretary to a minister, or receive some other reward for good behaviour -- such as a junket to China or an eventual judgeship or elevation to the Senate -- they develop a culture not of opposition but of unity. However much they may disagree with the prime minister and his coterie, they know that they must keep their opinions quiet for the greater good not just of the party's electoral prospects but of their own political careers.
4. Policy. Accustomed as they are to receiving policy recommendations from bureaucrats with whom they have working relationships, Liberals see policy as an instrument with which they can maintain their appeal to the public by resolving problems in need of solution. For similar reasons, they remain open to policy proposals coming from intellectuals and experts.
5. Backroom. Since patronage in the third party system is a benefit enjoyed by the party elite rather than its grassroots, the Liberal Party's back room is amply staffed by lawyers, consultants, and other professionals whose expertise bolsters the party's campaign capacity.
6. Grassroots. As confirmed by the research carried out by William Cross and Lisa Young,¹⁴ Liberal Party membership at the riding level is not just the biggest of all parties but it is the youngest in its age profile and the highest in education levels. In addition, it has the best gender balance and the highest representation of francophones.
7. As a result of this virtuous circle of interconnecting factors, the net electoral result is that the Liberal Party has tended to present a united, progressive, capable -- in a word, appealing -- face to the public.

Comparing the agency with the structural explanations, several points need to be made a priori before we proceed to examine their relative merits in explaining the Liberal Party's successes over the last forty years. For one thing, the agency approach contains many structural elements (for example, winning the support of Québec requires organizational strength), just as the structural approach presumes considerable competence on the agency side (winning conditions need to be exploited by capable leadership). For another, the structural approach does not deny the agency approach's perceptions: a winning party syndrome requires solid support in Québec. Thirdly, the structural approach is more comprehensive providing a greater number of factors in a more nuanced relationship.

Two questions remain for us to consider. Is the structural approach any less trivial than its agency competitor, simply a more elaborate way of saying that success breeds success? And can

¹⁴ William Cross, *Political Parties*, Canadian Democratic Audit (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 20-27.

it predict possible outcomes better than the agency approach? We will address these questions in turn.

The Liberal Party in the Third Party System

If the “Tory syndrome” explains how Lester Pearson came to power in 1963 and held it 1965, the “winning party syndrome” works nicely to support the LPC’s continuing success through the 1970s. The party’s defeat in 1979 is explained less effectively by Joe Clark’s admittedly well run campaign than by a mix of agency and structure. Pierre Trudeau’s personal alienation not just of the business community but of many groups in the public combined to demobilize his own rank-and-file and even isolate his back room.

Interesting negative corroboration for the structural explanation comes from the six-month period the party was in opposition, when factionalism was roiling in the ranks. It was only the sudden and unexpected defeat of the government in December, 1979 which brought Trudeau and his circle back to the Prime Minister’s Office when they revived the virtuous cycle of success.

Following the 1984 succession, we can see how John Turner’s defeat was caused by another mix of agency (poor leadership providing little in the way of national or social vision and also alienating the party’s Québec base) and structure (an outbreak of a fratricidal vendetta against John Turner by Jean Chrétien, who had lost the 1984 leadership campaign). At the same time, Joe Clark, whom Brian Mulroney had betrayed and displaced, stopped a perpetuation of self-destructive feuding within the Progressive Conservative party by ordering his followers to support the new leader.

For his first years as prime minister following his shattering destruction of the Progressive Conservatives in the 1993 election, Chrétien seemed to have reactivated the winning party syndrome by co-opting his rivals. Paul Martin, who had been the party’s platform co-chairman, was made minister of finance. Sheila Copps became deputy prime minister. With the opposition hopelessly split among four parties, Liberal hegemony was unchallengeable and party unity palpable. The rivals knew perfectly well that their future as eventual prime minister depended on the same kind of party unity that they needed to offer Chrétien.

To understand how the party slipped back into fratricide, we need again to mix agency with structural factors. The prime minister’s hostility towards Paul Martin aggravated the Martin supporters’ impatience. The Martinites’ efforts to organize against the leader provoked his retaliation.

That the party had developed a losing syndrome only became fully apparent after Martin finally succeeded in ousting Chrétien in 2003 but turned out not to be capable of restoring party unity. On the contrary, the Martinites aggravated internal feuding not just in the back room but at the base of the party, alienating their own supporters, providing much evidence of division for the media to transmit to the public, and undermining their own appeal by offering policies without vision.

During his first six months in office, Martin and his entourage appeared to be shifting their party from a winning to a losing syndrome. The vendetta with Chrétien that they had perpetuated in their long campaign to oust the prime minister had been exacerbated by the tough, possibly illegal tactics they had used against the rival candidates for the party's succession. While factionalism is endemic to leadership campaigns, it is good politics for the winner to make overtures to his rivals in order to reap the benefits of their abilities and recruit their campaign teams' talent. Unusually, the Martin group behaved in the PMO as if they had just defeated their ideological enemies. References to Chrétien were erased from the government's web site and his supporters were dispatched to the sidelines and even fired without due process. Martin's leadership rivals were made unwelcome. Perpetuating intra-party factionalism also produced bad media coverage, caused long-time LPC activists to sit out the spring election, and dissuaded many sitting MPs to refrain from running again. In the short-term, Martin's incapacity to heal the party's wounds contributed to his near loss in 2004. With the exception of British Columbia, he was unable to recruit the star candidates from the business community and the West that he had promised.

Prime Minister Martin's something-for-everybody, focus-group inspired approach -- heralded by his victory speech to the party convention and followed by a near endless pre-campaign of specific promises throughout the winter of 2004 -- caused him to make so many commitments to individual constituencies that no sense of vision was discernible. His seemingly desperate desire to gain approval from everyone led him both to cultivate the Bush administration as a means to improving relations with Washington and to sound more anti-American than any prime minister since John Diefenbaker by expressing his campaign's focus on health-care funding as a way to differentiate Canada from the United States. As he announced in one of the party's first televised campaign ads, "Look, you can have a country like Canada or you can have a country like the U.S."

Failed agency with its effects on the party's internal structural problems would have led to defeat in 2004, had the media not swung the election to Martin in the last few weeks.¹⁵ Managing to turn the media against them again while Stephen Harper's new Conservative Party performed without significant mistake assured that, even though the LPC was in power, its syndrome had turned negative.

But perhaps sobered by the reprieve given him by the electorate, Martin, at first, seemed to settle nicely into the job of governing. A year and a half later, the public could see some of the promises bearing fruit, although it was not certain that this record would be enough to save Martin.

For all his ineptitude in the negotiation, announcement, and delivery of his policies, Paul Martin nevertheless managed to re-position his party on the political spectrum. On a stage where two of the three opposition parties -- the NDP and the Bloc Québécois -- leaned to the left while the CPC occupied the right-wing, Martin finally seemed to reconnect with his Liberal forefathers' ability to control the political middle ground.

¹⁵ Stephen Clarkson, *The Big Red Machine: How the Liberal Party Dominates Canadian Politics* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 253-256.

The LPC's exceptional capacity to dominate the centre, leaning left or right as circumstances require, provides us with some insight into both *why* and *how* the party has managed to maintain itself in a near unbeatable position for so many years. Mackenzie King had first learned how to co-opt partisan rivals by attracting Progressives into his government in the 1920s. During World War II, he had again shifted left, adopting social policies to ward off a serious threat from the surging and socialist Cooperative Commonwealth Federation. With Preston Manning breathing fire and brimstone in the mid-1990s as his Reform Party tried to break into Ontario from its stronghold in the West, Finance Minister Martin had shifted far to the right. Following his neoconservative slashing of government programs which not only slew the deficit but reduced the more formidable government debt, leadership candidate Martin had moved back to the centre. In a precarious, minority government situation, Martin shored up his support in the House by making a deal with Jack Layton. In return for sweetening budget commitments to social spending -- a \$4.6-billion pledge that included affordable housing, increased transfers to the provinces for tuition reduction, the environment, foreign aid, and a pension protection fund for workers -- the Liberals gained the new Democrats' support on the CPC's no-confidence motion of May 17, 2005.

But perhaps the most powerful evidence that the Liberals under Martin had started to master the game of party politics was the successful enticement of Belinda Stronach. Not only did bringing such a high profile figure into the cabinet make the difference between survival and defeat over the non-confidence motion of May 17, 2005, her media-hyped star quality also made the devastating point that Stephen Harper's alienating character had perpetuated the party's losing syndrome. In short, Martin's Liberals seemed, for a time, to have recovered their political smarts and revive, at least, certain elements of their winning party syndrome.

In the longer-term, evidence of factionalism seemed to diminish. The PMO's control over patronage appointments gave it the sticks and carrots with which to restore party discipline. Policy advice poured in from think tanks and the academy and Martin made a significant gesture towards the rank and file by responding to its women and its nationalists in his decision not to appease President George Bush on National Missile Defense. According to the structural argument, the experience Martin and his entourage had acquired in 2004 should have been an asset in preventing the CPC from stealing the next election.

Despite these seemingly hopeful signs, a key component identified in the agency approach remained parlous -- Martin's position in Québec.

It was John Turner, not Martin, who began the process of losing the Grits' grip on Québec by his embarrassingly misguided campaign in the 1984 election. Brian Mulroney effectively sealed the fate of both his own party and that of his rival in his home province. Once his pact between Québec sovereigntists and Alberta blew up in his party's face, leading to its complete rout in the 1993 election and catapulting the newly minted sovereigntist Bloc Québécois into the Official Opposition spot at the same time, French Québec was lost to the Liberals. Jean Chrétien might have appeared to be another favourite son, but he was reviled by most of his own people.

Paul Martin was more popular in Québec when he was finance minister than was Chrétien, being used in the Liberal Party's French language campaign advertising in an effort to overcome the

prime minister's unpopularity in his own province. But Prime Minister Martin exploded his own chances to make major inroads into Bloc support by both his short-term and his longer-run handling of Adscam. Rather than downplaying the auditor general's final report on the improprieties in the Chrétien government's pro-Canada promotion campaigns, Martin turned the incident into an immediate political disaster. Making a display of his personal rage in the media and vowing that a new public inquiry would get to the root of the already-identified problems, he identified his own regime with the issue, further alienated the Chrétien wing of his party, which was implicitly blamed for the scandal, and insulted Quebeckers who felt tarred with the brush of political corruption by a largely anglophone PMO.

Not only did Adscam cost Martin his majority in the 2004 federal election, a year later, daily juicy revelations of corruption in the wings of the Québec Liberal Party at the Gomery Inquiry hearings caused electoral support for Les Rouges to sink even lower. Martin, in other words, had not only failed to recapture his party's historical position in Québec, he had deepened its estrangement and firmed up the sovereigntist Bloc Québécois' support.

The loss of their Québec Fortress has resulted in the electoral system working less positively for the Liberals than it did in the past. Now that the West is under the firm control of the CPC and Québec francophones solidly behind the Bloc, the electoral system works against the Liberals in both these areas. Without Ontario, where the system generates far more seats than its share of the province's vote, maintaining even a minority lead would be impossible.

But the Liberals have weathered monumental shifts in the party system before. After the first Great War, for example, two new movement parties did not dislodge the old ones and after World War II, consensus among the parties over the welfare state allowed the Liberals to remain straddling the centre. Following the electoral cataclysm of 1993, which left the opposition split among four parties, the Liberals remained unscathed, maintaining their leader-centred, autocratic organization intact.

Now that the Liberals face a transformed party system in which the Alliance takeover of the Progressive Conservatives has returned the party system to a two-old plus two-new party format, it would appear that the LPC's chances of regaining its previous hegemony have been reduced as the new Conservatives offer the voters a viable alternative-government-in-waiting that had not existed during the Chrétien years. Whether the new Conservative party will be able to entice the old PCs back to the fold remains to be seen, however. If Perlin's thesis holds, tempering the fractious relations between members of the former Alliance and former Conservatives will be a formidable obstacle for the party's leader, and now Prime Minister, Stephen Harper.

Evaluating the Explanations for Predicting Possible Outcomes

Political scientists are not known for their acuity in making predictions. Nevertheless, it should be a fair test of an explanation of past events to see how much light it sheds on analyzing a present situation's evolutionary prospects particularly as, in this case, we have moved into a fourth party system.¹⁶

¹⁶ R. Kenneth Carty, William Cross, and Lisa Young, *Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 218-228.

Agency

It makes eminent sense to discuss the Liberal Party's prospects for returning to dominance in terms of the national and social vision it manages to construct while it is in opposition. It is also obvious that, without regaining substantial support in Québec, its chances of returning to power are limited. Now that business donations to political parties have been severely reduced, it is less clear that maintaining business support is crucial to electoral success, although a close connection of all the private-sector media to business interests ensures that the party will still require business' approval and would certainly suffer from its active hostility.

Structure

Perlin's taxonomy of factors provides us with a more sophisticated diagnostic kit.

1. Leadership. The fact that such experienced potential claimants to the Liberal succession as Frank McKenna backed away from the race is an ominous sign, but this has been offset in part by the number of eager candidates who have flocked to the starting gate.
2. Caucus. That one of the ambitious within the party caucus was willing to abandon ship for the cabinet position to which he had become accustomed -- *pace* David Emerson -- is another disquieting omen for the Grits' prospects. Acquiring their own turncoat, Belinda Stronach, has proven less of an asset to the party than expected as her recent public admonition of the party's elite and undemocratic leadership campaign process suggests.
3. Candidates. Whether new recruits for nominations turn out to be of impressive quality will depend on the party's electoral chances, but the party's prospects will depend on the quality of its candidates. This factor is the least easy to predict since it is the most dependent on all the others.
4. Policy. The party's policy renewal project, which is being run by Tom Axworthy with some thirty committees mandated to make forward-looking proposals for Liberals to debate, builds on the LPC's strength as a party that is open to ideas. The media's obvious fascination with the leadership race -- nourished in part by the Harper government's deliberate production of little news -- will probably help refurbish its image as an organization in touch with new ideas. Whether the party's policy positions will be determined independently of the leadership selection process is unclear. However it is constructed, the platform's national and social visions and its attractiveness in Québec will clearly affect the party's prospects, as the agency argument maintains.
5. Backroom. Thanks to Paul Martin's untypical demonstration of good political judgment by announcing his resignation on election night, January 23, 2006, the end of the Martinites' iron control of the party's organization may bring two decades of factionalism in the backroom to an end. If it does not, the Liberal Party will continue to suffer from the debilitating effects of fratricide, substantially reducing its chances for resurgence.
6. Grassroots. One effect of many months of campaigning by ten leadership candidates with restrictive budgets will necessarily be a significant increase in the numbers of Canadian citizens who are recruited to join local Liberal riding associations in order to select delegates for the

convention. The swollen numbers of the party's rank-and-file could bring it great electoral strength, presuming that a culture of unity has successfully displaced the culture of vendetta.

The impact of these interconnected factors on the party's appeal will be determined in part by how the media -- a factor absent from the arguments -- interpret these issues day by day.

Conclusion

The agency argument, which stresses only three factors which can be traced to Wilfrid Laurier's successful displacement of the Conservative Party, points to some basic prerequisites for political success. While emphasizing the role of what Niccoló Machiavelli would call the party leader's *Virtù*, it underplays structural factors. The syndrome approach adapted from George Perlin's pioneering work focuses more on structural factors that would be closer to Machiavelli's notion of *Fortuna*. More comprehensive in its scope and open to the contingency of changing conditions, it provides more traction when analyzing a party's future prospects. Both approaches discussed here ignore the autonomous, and sometimes decisive, intervening role played by the media.

An additional factor which has been difficult to assess systematically is the role of change in the political culture in determining a party's electoral fortunes. While the dramatic transformative effects of globalization have touched every aspect of social, cultural, and economic life, the LPC has resisted internal change and has reaped electoral rewards by doing so. Instead of reflecting societal demands for a more substantive, participatory democracy, the Liberal Party became even more authoritative and leader-centred under Chrétien and Martin than at any time since the late 1950s. Campaign organization, leadership selection and style have tended to reveal continuity from one party system to the next, rather than change. That this lack of responsiveness to a changing global and social environment has brought electoral success for so many years is puzzling. It might be that the three pillars which constitute the LPC's historical formula are sufficiently basic that they apply despite far-reaching change. Projecting an appealing national and social vision to the public should, for example, matter as much today as in Laurier's time. But in a country that has become increasingly more urban and more multicultural, the continued significance of Québec as the most vital component for success in the agency approach may gradually diminish. On the structural side, parties that attract more experienced and innovative candidates should continue to have a better chance of communicating an appealing vision to an increasingly sophisticated and well-educated electorate, regardless of its ultimate implementation.

Because of their long history of electoral success, the Liberals appear to be at an advantage in terms of the criteria outlined in Perlin's thesis. It is unclear how much time needs to lapse before the effects of recurrent minority governments and possibly more frequent alternations of government reduce the benefits associated with the party's winning syndrome.

stephen.clarkson@utoronto.ca
rachaelgibson88@yahoo.ca