

Voters give tiller a healthy tug [CA] ^[1]

Author: Goar, Carol

Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 30 Jun 2004

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

The nation can finally relax and let summertime roll.

An election that could have produced an inconclusive jumble or a jarring course change pushed the ship of state in a mildly progressive direction.

A campaign that brought out the worst in both the politicians and the electorate ended with an affirmation of the country's resilience.

A vote that was expected to catapult the Bloc Québécois into the role of kingmaker left the Liberals and New Democrats with half of the seats in Parliament, depriving the separatist party of the balance of power.

This doesn't mean the next few months are going to be quiet or predictable in Ottawa. The Liberals will have to put together a minority government that can survive in an unstable Parliament. The New Democrats will have to bargain hard for cities, affordable housing, child care and electoral reform. The Bloc will have to fight for the influence Quebecers expect from a third-place party.

But voters, having delivered exactly the message they wanted at the polls, can now turn to the pleasures of beaches and barbecues.

They have given their political leaders the tools to create one of the healthiest Parliaments in years: a legislative assembly with a consensus-seeking government, a strong, credible Official Opposition and two smaller parties acting as catalysts.

The seat distribution - 135 Liberal, 99 Conservative, 54 Bloc, 19 New Democrat and 1 Independent - may be a prescription for uncertainty, but it is a welcome departure from the one-party dominance of the last decade.

The lifespan of minority governments may be short, but their legislative record is impressive. The Canadian flag, the Canada Pension Plan, the Election Expenses Act and the Medical Care Act, which laid the foundation for universal, publicly financed health care, were all passed by precariously balanced Parliaments.

By re-electing the Liberals - albeit on a short leash - voters have also signalled that there are some things they don't want changed.

They don't want a federal government that is prepared to leave the fate of Canada's cities in the hands of the provinces, as Conservative leader Stephen Harper was advocating.

They don't want to give up the prospect of a national early learning and child care program in exchange for a \$2,000 per child tax deduction.

On the other hand, there are some changes the Liberals will have to consider to stay in power. None is cause for alarm.

The Liberals might have to adjust their fiscal priorities, devoting less than the projected \$3 billion a year to debt reduction and more to affordable housing, the National Child Benefit and urban revitalization. No party is advocating a return to deficit spending. But there will be pressure from the NDP and Bloc to use Ottawa's surpluses to help those in need.

There will be many lessons for the parties, pollsters, strategists, winners, losers and commentators to ponder after one of the most splenetic and surprising campaigns in recent memory.

But voters can take a break. They shrewdly steered this election to a safe conclusion.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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