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New fathers for confederation?

Harper and Duceppe stand on the threshold of a new kind of Canada

If there's a path between where Stephen Harper finds himself now and where he hopes to have his leadership in a year or so, then it's a path that winds its way directly through Quebec City – possibly the deepest, darkest wood on the Canadian political landscape.

Harper has two main policy initiatives that are at once the source of great pride and great resentment in Quebec. In the first place he has promised to deal with the fiscal imbalance, a centerpiece of separatist disenchantment for decades now. In the second place he was elected on a promise to decentralize and debureaucratize the Liberals' national approach to daycare – an initiative that was born, raised, and is generally loved in Quebec.

Harper is approaching both these issues from the standpoint of a government that sees the decentralization of power as one of its primary *raison d'être*s. It is this basic philosophy that will likely help he and Gilles Duceppe become the strangely comfortable bedfellows that destiny has decided they will be.

National forms of identity and association now attached to names like 'Liberal', 'Conservative', 'NDP' et al. will become more and more meaningless, and instead the new federal regional parties would begin to iron out the compromises of policy and governance that will become the new Canada.

The Bloc has long cried out for more taxation and administrative powers from big bad Ottawa, only to be faced with a new PM who now quite happily agrees with them.

At this point the only bump in Harper's road to fiscal redressment is where he'll find the money. The Conservatives forgot about government downsizing in their winning platform, and there are few remaining sources for this kind of cash available to them – which is probably why Harper has said the Conservatives won't deal with the issue in their first budget.

The daycare issue, however, and specifically the dependence that will have been nurtured in the provinces on the cash that was promised to support it, could force the issue of fiscal imbalance onto the agenda somewhat sooner than Harper had hoped for. This is definitely a wait and see scenario, but the implications of how it plays out could prove more influential on the purpose and scope of our nation than anything since confederation.

Perhaps one of the most underestimated and important aspects of this entire dynamic is a single provincial politician – Jean Charest. Lest we forget, it was Charest's organization that 'assisted' the Conservative ground game in Quebec in the last election, leading to the sizeable Tory seat-gain in the province. Lest we also forget, Charest was once the leader of the Conservatives, and if the smiles after his recent visit to 24 Sussex are any indication he will be approaching negotiations with his old party from a much more co-operative standpoint than might otherwise have been the case.

This unlikely convergence of philosophies and personalities, of Bloc separatists, Quebec federalists and Ottawa reformists, could possibly create the groundwork for a series of political solutions that will have deep and long-lasting effects on the federation we call Canada.

Imagine for instance that some of the Bloc's most basic and important demands are met by the Harper government. Poignantly aware of its own awkward and impermanent

standing on the federal scene, there's a good chance the Bloc would choose to bask in the victory glow of a more powerful and independent Quebec, use the moment to abandon its historically untenable goal of separation, and instead transform itself into a legitimate and permanent regional party representing the new Quebec in a newly-decentralized Canada.

The other provinces, now also more powerful and having their own self-interest to consider, would likely follow the Bloc/Quebec lead and the emergence of numerous regional parties in federal politics would become inevitable. National forms of identity and association now attached to names like 'Liberal', 'Conservative', 'NDP' et al. will become more and more meaningless, and instead the new federal regional parties would begin to iron out the compromises of policy and governance that will become the new Canada.

All of this is hypothetical at this stage of course, but the signs and the stars of our political scene, for now, seem aligned. ■