

# More than politics, this is a national crisis

By JAMES LAXER

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The leaders of all three opposition parties insist that what Canadians face is a crisis of the Liberal Party, not a national crisis. Formally, they are right. The sordid spectacle at the Gomery inquiry has exposed deep corruption at the heart of the regime of former prime minister Jean Chrétien.

The problem is that the imminent demise of the Liberal Party and government will trigger a fundamental national crisis that has been implicit in the structure of Canadian politics since 1993. Since the federal election of that year, Canadian political parties have been divided into two essential groups. First, there are the parties of what we can call the "Canadian system," the Liberals and the NDP. These parties broadly support the present division of powers between Ottawa and the provinces and, with some important disagreements, the present role of government with respect to social programs, higher education and the environment. They even agree, more than they like to admit, on foreign policy. Then, there are the parties of radical decentralization, the Conservatives (much more the descendant of the Reform Party and the Canadian Alliance than of the old Progressive Conservatives) and the Bloc Québécois.

An immediate federal election, with Canadians fixated on the sponsorship scandal, is almost certain to put the federal government and Canadian politics squarely in the hands of the two parties of radical decentralization.

Despite his effort to moderate its image, Stephen Harper and his party are committed to a dramatic reduction of the role of Ottawa in Confederation. Their pledge to implement massive tax cuts and a major increase in defence spending can only be managed through a steep reduction of federal spending on health care, social transfers, higher education and culture. The Conservatives would certainly allow the provinces to open the door to a much larger role for the private sector in the delivery of health care. They would halt any move toward a publicly operated national child-care system. They would end Canada's commitment to the Kyoto accord. They would sign on to George W. Bush's missile-defence initiative and would take Canada down the road to continental integration on immigration and refugee policy. They would support the conversion of NAFTA into a customs union and would favour an energy and resources deal that would designate Canadian resources as continental resources. Fully aware that Canadians don't favour this agenda, Stephen Harper is seizing the opportunity presented by the Liberal Party's scandal to attain power.

For his part, Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe is the Jekyll and Hyde of Canadian politics. Most days Mr. Duceppe is a Doctor Jekyll who wants a clean political system and progressive policies for the country. That is until a crisis arises that will provide him with winning conditions in his crusade to lead Quebec out of Confederation. The demise

of the Liberals will take Mr. Duceppe a long way toward his goal. After sweeping almost all Quebec ridings in a federal election, Mr. Duceppe can replace the unpopular Bernard Landry as Parti Québécois leader. From there, his sights would be set on wresting power in the next Quebec election from the even more unpopular Jean Charest. In the persona of Mr. Hyde, Mr. Duceppe would then launch a sovereignty referendum while Mr. Harper, his current collaborator in sacking the Liberals, is prime minister. While many Quebeckers would resist the siren call of separation, Mr. Duceppe's case would be greatly strengthened by the presence in Ottawa of a neo-conservative government with whom Quebeckers would have little sympathy.

Meanwhile, the parties of what I called the "Canadian system" are in disarray.

The Liberals are suffering the death of a thousand cuts, cuts being inflicted as much by Liberals themselves as by their adversaries. It falls to Paul Martin, a decent and honest, though not particularly progressive, political leader to staunch the wounds and save the great party of the Canadian centre. Whether he can turn the situation to his favour in the present mood of national disgust will depend on how clear he can be in presenting an agenda for the long-term renewal of the role Ottawa plays in the lives of Canadians. At best, it's a long shot.

Jack Layton, in the current imbroglio, is a deer caught in the headlights. The NDP is torn between the desire to join with the other two opposition parties in milking the scandal and a desire to force concessions from Mr. Martin to turn the minority parliament in a more progressive direction. The long-term NDP dream has always been to replace the Liberals so that New Democrats can become one of the country's two viable governing parties, along with the Conservatives. While the scandal provides New Democrats with the hope that they can win over disgusted Liberal voters, it also threatens to bring to office a leader who rejects everything the NDP holds dear. Mr. Layton says repeatedly that Canadians should vote for what they want rather than against what they fear. He wants Canadians to focus on the benefits of electing more New Democrats and not to worry about the threat posed by the parties of radical decentralization.

Canadians have every right to be disgusted by the spectacle that has emerged from the Gomery inquiry. They would be very shortsighted, however, to believe that this crisis is only about a corrupt governing party that has been in power for too long. Those who want to sustain the "Canadian system" need to find their voices, and their political imagination, before it is too late.

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