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**The Election this Week -- Dispatch from the Campaign Trail**

## ***In Their Own Way, Canadians Elected Exactly the Government They Wanted***

**Ottawa** – In the end, Canadians did punish the Liberals. In the end, Conservatives returned to power in Ottawa after more than a dozen years in the political wilderness. But despite such expected occurrences, the results of the 39<sup>th</sup> national general election left many political observers surprised.

And to anyone who now believes the country is locked into another intractable minority Parliament, one with an inexperienced party at the helm, some experts suggested last week that the surprises might not be over.

"This election will restart a debate of how this federation should work," Manon Cornellier, a reporter for *Le Devoir*, said at the Public Policy Forum's final election breakfast of the 2005-06 campaign.

"I would expect this government to be much more disciplined (than its predecessor)," said Jim Travers, a columnist for the *Toronto Star*, adding the Conservatives might begin their first term in office since 1993 by surprising political observers with their cabinet choices.

Travers, Cornellier and the rest of the panel assembled by the Forum to look at the election results, agreed there are plenty of hurdles in the path of the new government and incoming Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Perhaps it was the events of the election campaign however – and particularly the events of the campaign's final days – that made the panelists sound cautious in their predictions.

There were several aspects of the election results that were startling, the panelists said.

The breakthrough of the Conservatives in Quebec – the party took 10 seats in that province – exceeded expectations that through the last half of the campaign had the party on the verge of claiming only two or three.

The results showed there is a significant number of Quebecers who will choose a federalist option other than that presented by the Liberal party, Cornellier said.

The federal Liberals' relationship with Quebec, largely shaped in the 1970s and '80s by former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau was one in which Ottawa was clearly in command.

It was a relationship that had clearly worn thin, Cornellier suggested, and one aided by the fallout from the federal sponsorship scandal that opened the door for Harper and the Conservatives in the recent campaign to 'steal' – Cornellier herself used the word before catching herself and choosing more moderate language – votes that had drifted in the last decade to the sovereigntist Bloc Quebecois.

"If the choice is between Trudeau federalism and sovereignty, some will support sovereignty," she said. "But if they have another option, open to their demands, Quebecers are ready to listen."

In fact, the strength of the Conservative vote sent a clear message to the Bloc that it cannot equate support for itself with support for Quebec sovereignty, Cornellier added, a claim echoed by L. Ian MacDonald, a columnist for The Gazette and editor of Policy Options magazine.

The latest Conservative campaign succeeded, MacDonald said, on the basis of luck and circumstance – a perfectly timed photo op featuring Harper and his wife in front of a sunlit Chateau Frontenac in Quebec City became one of the election's most captivating images for Quebecers – but also on the basis of shrewdness. In a December address that many saw as pivotal, Harper urged conservatives who had fled the party during years of division and disorganization to return. Harper effectively restored the party's national brand, MacDonald added, at a time when the Liberals, already weighed by the sluggishness that can accompany so many years in power, ran "a terrible campaign."

Indeed, it was if the previously immature Conservatives had suddenly grown wiser and the Liberals, long seen as poised and unflappable, had turned foolish.

Travers likened the team of advisers surrounding Prime Minister Paul Martin to a group suffering from "muscular frat boy syndrome," for their outrageous attempts to criticize the Conservative platform and paint Harper as scary to voters.

It was a testament to the strength of the Liberals' own party brand that even such bungling couldn't damage the party's reputation enough to reduce the government to an opposition rump of 75-80 members, Travers and MacDonald said.

Liberal voter resilience in the face of a tired and often inept campaign became the election's other big surprise to some observers.

Had the Conservatives succeeded in burying the Liberals completely, the Liberal leadership, a prize that became available after Martin signalled on election night that he would resign, might not have attracted top calibre talent, Travers said. Instead, a last-minute resurgence in the campaign "created a powerful dynamic for the rebirth of the Liberal party," he added.

That resurgence was due to last-minute appeals to voters by both Martin and New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton. The two hammered Harper on social issues, raising questions about the Conservatives' commitment to Canada's social safety and suggesting social programs would succumb to cuts brought on by the Conservative right.

It was in the last week of the campaign, said pollster Nik Nanos, president of SES Research, that Conservative numbers started to sag as a more effective Liberal campaign began to give uncertain voters cold feet about voting for Harper.

Nanos, as it turned out, was the least surprised member of the Forum panel to see the election results.

In his last round of polling before election night, Nanos had predicted the popular vote for all major parties to within a decimal point of the actual tally.

Given the dismay pollsters felt when their pre-election numbers in 2004 veered far from the actual results, Nanos had good reason to smile last week as the packed room at the National Press Club gave him a resounding ovation for his work.

With "The Election this Week" breakfast series now behind it, the Public Policy Forum would like to thank the following organizations for their support throughout this series:

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