



Canada and the Liberal Government: One Year After

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Introduction

The Liberal Party of Canada won the 2015 parliamentary elections by winning the majority of the seats. They not only defeated the Conservative Party that was in power at that time but were able to win 184 seats (of the 338) after winning just 34 seats in the 2011 elections. The win was one of the largest increase in seats by a single party in the course of two elections and perhaps one of the few times that a party was able to improve upon its third position finish in one election to forming the government in the next.

One of the factors that seemed to have worked for the Liberal party and continues to work for them is the charisma of the party leader and Prime Minister, Mr. Justin Trudeau. The motto of the party during the election was 'Real Change', with a focus on reforming the election process, immigration laws, reforms in the economic and defence policies etc. The campaign and the ideas that it promoted resonated with the people who continue to support the government in its efforts. Prime Minister Trudeau continues to enjoy considerably high approval ratings (average is 46 percent)¹ during his fifteen months in office. (He was sworn into office on 04 November 2015).

This paper is written with an aim to understanding the work that has been done by the Liberal government in the past fifteen months and possible issues likely to develop in the coming months, especially with respect to their larger neighbour to the south.

The Liberal Government: A Year After

One of the first steps of the new government was visible as the cabinet was announced. The Prime Minister took office with not only a gender balanced cabinet but one that also reflected as much as possible the diversity of Canadian society. The cabinet represented people from the Canadian

Indian community, people from the indigenous communities of Canada, and also former party leaders.

In his efforts to bridge the gaps between the aboriginal communities and the larger Canadian society, the government is building on its commitment to forge a new, nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous Peoples in Canada; the federal government launched the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls – a powerful step in the reconciliation process.² Between 1980 and 2012, nearly 1,200 Aboriginal women and girls were murdered or went missing, according to a report released last year by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. With Aboriginal peoples making up less than 5% of Canada's population of 35 million, this figure is astonishingly high.³

Another positive policy of the government has been on the subject of rights of the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) community. The government introduced an enactment that amends the Canadian Human Rights Act to add gender identity and gender expression to the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination. The act also protects people “... against hate propaganda set out in that Act to any section of the public that is distinguished by gender identity....”⁴

The government has also followed through on its promise to resettle more than 25,000 Syrian refugees between November 4, 2015 and February 29, 2016. As of 02 January 2017, 39,671 Syrian refugees have arrived in Canada since November 4, 2015.⁵ Canada has also welcomed refugees from other countries as well. These include people who have sponsored by private sponsorship programmes. The programme, overseen by the federal government, allows groups of private citizens - often with ties to faith-based organisations, cultural groups or humanitarian organisations - to directly sponsor refugees. This means providing the newcomers with basic material needs like food, clothing, and housing, as well as help adjusting to Canadian society.⁶

The government also implemented the ‘middle class tax cut’. A tax cut for Canada’s middle class, reducing the second personal income tax rate to 20.5 per cent from 22 per cent—a 7 per cent reduction. Beginning January 1, 2016, Canadians with taxable income between \$45,282 and \$90,563 saw their income tax rate fall, leaving more money on their paycheques to save, invest and grow the economy. In total, nearly 9 million Canadians are now benefitting from this tax cut. Single Canadians who benefit from this measure will see an average tax reduction of \$330 every year, and couples who benefit will see an average tax reduction of \$540 every year. To help pay for this middle class tax cut, the Government raised taxes on the wealthiest Canadians by introducing a new top income tax rate of 33 per cent for individuals with more than \$200,000 in taxable income each year. Taken together, these changes give middle class Canadians a tax break by making taxes fairer.⁷ However, while it was promised during the campaign that these tax changes would be revenue neutral, the government has admitted that this would not be possible for the moment. The tax changes would drain the treasury about \$ 1.2 billion each year for the next five years.

The government has also introduced Canada Child Benefit, which will replace the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) and the Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB). It will provide a

maximum annual benefit of \$6,400 per child under the age of six, and \$5,400 per child aged 6 through 17. This would be a tax free benefit for eligible families.⁸ The new Canada Child Benefit (CCB) is expected to push tens of thousands of Canadian children above the poverty line, and could help stimulate the economy.

During the campaign, Prime Minister Trudeau had vowed to end the “discriminatory ban” preventing men who have sex with men from donating blood. Instead of ending the ban, however, the waiting period was decreased to one year from five years. Health Minister Ms. Jane Philpott said in the spring that the government still has the “desire” and “commitment” to decrease the deferral period even more. Health Canada will invest \$3 million toward researching how waiting times can be based on behaviours rather than sexual orientation.⁹

Canada has also in the past year signed the Paris Climate Change Agreement. The non-binding accord aims to keep global warming below 2°C this century. Canada’s Environment and Climate Change Minister Ms. Catherine McKenna also announced a national carbon pricing plan for 2018 that forces provinces and territories to adopt a carbon tax or cap-and-trade system with a minimum price per tonne of \$10 to start, rising to \$50 per tonne by 2022 — or the federal government will come up with one for them. However, critics of the carbon tax plan state that, the federal government has brought forward no evidence to support the claim that the carbon tax, will reduce the demand for high emission products. They feel that it might have the opposite effect on the economy. They also feel that Canada has no plans in place to meet the international target as proposed in the Paris Agreement.

One of the major campaign pledges was that the government would be presenting a deficit budget, meaning that the government would not reduce its spending on government programmes. It will run deficits of C\$29 billion over the next two years with no forecast to balance the books over the next five years. About C\$50 billion of the accumulative deficits are due to new measures and the rest reflect the impact of a worsening economic outlook.¹⁰ While the government has been able to keep this promise, economist point out that the increase in social spending would increase the deficit amount but the government has no plans on when it will introduce a balance budget. They point that the government is projecting a deficit based on current programmes for the year 2020-21, a year after the current mandate end, effectively meaning that the new government would have to plan a return to a balanced budget.¹¹

The Liberal government has also implemented its campaign pledge and withdrawn the Canadian Air Force from airstrike operations in Iraq and Syria in February 2016.¹² In announcing a new policy to address the ongoing crises in Iraq and Syria and the impact they are having on the surrounding region, Prime Minister Trudeau stated that, “Canada has always been prepared to fight when it’s in Canada’s interest to do so, and we have a well-equipped and talented military when called upon to do so. In this case, we have a particular interest in helping local forces to fight ISIL and stabilize the region. This is a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach that has had extensive consultation with our allies and civil society stakeholders. Our approach covers three key areas: security, development and diplomacy.”¹³ He further elaborated, “...contribute more than \$1.6 billion over the next three years towards our new approach to security, stabilization, humanitarian and development assistance in Iraq and Syria and to address impacts

on Jordan, Lebanon and the region. This will cost more than the previous policy it replaces.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, the opposition has stated that the government and the military has ended the airstrikes but expanded on the mission in which Canadian soldiers continue to be in Iraq. They state that the government’s response that it is to protect the soldiers is against the pledge of transparency the government had taken. The issue came to be debated in the parliament after the government stated that Canadian forces were on ground supportive of efforts to free the city of Mosul. However, the government has refused to elaborate on the number of soldiers and the operations they are conducting. The Government of Canada had announced in February 2016 “its renewed and enhanced whole-of-government approach to the fight against Daesh. The mission was extended until March 31, 2017.”¹⁵ This critics state, leave the door open for forces to be re-engaged in the fight, especially as Canada continue to be a partner in the coalition against ISIL.¹⁶

On July 31, 2016, the Department of National Defence (DND) concluded an unprecedented public consultation in support of the development of a new defence policy for Canada. Between April and July 2016, DND engaged Canadians, industry, allies, partners, parliamentarians, and key stakeholders to discuss three fundamental areas: i) The main challenges to Canada’s security, ii) The role of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) in addressing current threats and challenges and, iii) The resources and capabilities needed to carry out the CAF mandate. Defending Canada and protecting Canadians is the Government’s most fundamental responsibility.¹⁷ A public consultation document was launched which highlighted the questions that the public needed to answer. Four reports have been made that summarize the comments received from the Canadian public, defence stakeholders, industry, indigenous groups and leaders, and experts on gender-based issues during the consultation process. They are:

- a) Public Consultation Roundtable Report¹⁸
- b) Public Consultation Online Report¹⁹
- c) Gender Based Analysis Plus Roundtable Discussion Report²⁰, and
- d) Indigenous Discussion Report²¹

The new defence policy, with inputs from these consultations, is expected to be announced in 2017. Nonetheless, in the past one year, the defence minister, Mr. Harjit Sajjan has faced criticism for not outlining Canada’s commitments to the campaign against ISIL in Syria and contribution of troops to the United Nations Peacekeeping Forces. He also faced criticism for the delays in procurement of equipment for the defence forces. It was also felt that there was little clarity when Canada announced its commitment to deploy troops as part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) mission in Europe.

A major campaign commitment was to bring about electoral reforms in the parliamentary elections. The Canadian electoral system at the federal level is First-Past-the-Post (FPTP). FPTP is a plurality system. Under FPTP, an elector casts a single vote for a candidate to represent the electoral district in which the voter resides. The winning candidate must win the most votes – though not necessarily a majority.²² The Liberal party had stated that the present voting system is not a representation of the people’s choice. A special committee on electoral reforms was appointed under the parliament to identify and conduct a study of viable alternate voting systems

to replace the first-past-the-post system, as well as to examine mandatory voting and online voting.²³ The committee presented its report titled '*Strengthening Democracy In Canada: Principles, Process And Public Engagement For Electoral Reform*'²⁴ to the Parliament in December 2016. MyDemocracy.ca was a public engagement and consultation initiative commissioned by the Government of Canada in an effort to foster a more inclusive national dialogue on electoral reform. Among the many findings of the interaction, one was that the Canadians are generally satisfied with Canada's democracy, though satisfaction does not necessarily preclude a desire for reforming the electoral system. A majority of Canadians (67%) report being somewhat or very satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada.²⁵ Critics state that the government is backing away from its electoral reform agenda, now that it has formed the government. They point to the supplemental comments made by some Liberal Members of Parliament, that the 2019 deadline for electoral reforms was hasty and Canadians needed more time to adopt to a new electoral system. The government has dismissed the opposition and has stated that they continue to be committed to the reform process and stated that there was a lack of consensus among the political parties on the issue. The choices between presidential ballot, proportional representation and other options it was not clear which system should be adopted. The government has stated that it will take its time on the reform process so as not to harm the interests of Canada or Canadians.

On the issue of the controversial aspects of the Bill C-51 or Anti Terrorism Bill, the party was supportive of it during the campaign. However, they had made it clear that they "...will repeal the problematic elements of Bill C-51, and introduce new legislation that better balances (Canada's)... collective security with (its)... rights and freedoms." The government launched public consultation platform in September 2016 inviting Canadians to participate in a constructive dialogue on our national security framework.²⁶ The changes to the bill are yet to be made. However, the government through Bill C-22 has introduced 'An Act to establish the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians and to make consequential amendments to certain Acts'. The current status of the bill is the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security is '*reporting the bill*'²⁷ with amendments.²⁸

Conclusion

During the election campaign, Prime Minister Trudeau's team racked up 219 promises that seemingly offered something for everyone. So far, 34 of these promises have been fulfilled and 64 are in progress.²⁹ Nonetheless, the conservative opposition that was divided by the federal election results has rebuilt itself and would be posing a challenge to the government in the coming year. The Prime Minister is also facing questions from the ethics commission on a recent vacation he took which was spent on the private farms of a spiritual leader.

The government also faces a new US administration that is talking about changes in some key agreements with Canada and other nations. The recent meeting of Prime Minister Trudeau and President Donald Trump was keenly followed as the two leaders represent differing views on issues such as climate change, North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), immigration etc, yet are bound by a close relationship. In his joint press conference, Prime Minister Trudeau stated, "Maintaining strong economic ties is vital to our mutual success, and we're going to

continue to work closely together over the coming years so that Canadian and American families can get ahead.... we reiterated that our nations are committed to collaborating on energy infrastructure projects that will create jobs while respecting the environment.”³⁰ Prime Minister Trudeau also stated that while security and immigration need to work together, Canada would improve on both aspects while remaining true to the values it holds. It may be pointed out here that when the US administration announced the ban on travel of people from seven countries and refugees from Syria indefinitely, Prime Minister Trudeau had tweeted that Canada would welcome all refugees. On NAFTA, Prime Minister Trudeau stated that changes to the agreement are “...a real concern for many Canadians because we know that our economy is very dependent on our bonds, our relationship with the United States. Goods and services do cross the border each way every single day, and this means a lot of millions of jobs for Canadians, and good jobs for Canadians. So we are always focusing on these jobs, but there are also good jobs, millions of jobs, in the United States that depend on those relationships between our two countries. So when we sit down as we did today, and as our teams will be doing in the weeks and months to come, we will be talking about how we can continue to create good jobs for our citizens on both sides of the border.”³¹ President Trump said he agreed with his counterpart hundred percent. The United States and Canada have a very outstanding trade relationship. However, the United States will be ‘tweaking’ the agreement to do certain things that are going to benefit both countries.³² The joint statement³³ stressed on the areas of cooperation between the two nations which included energy security and the environment. It also mentions the Keystone XL pipeline, a project that was halted by the President Barack Obama’s administration for the damaging impact of the pipeline on the ecosystem of Sandhills region in Nebraska. It was also argued that the pipeline would not create jobs in America or lower the price of petrol. Instead focus of the previous administration was on developing renewable energy sources. The joint statement released by the White House stated that the two governments would, built the world’s largest energy trading relationship. They share the goals of energy security, a robust and secure energy grid, and a strong and resilient energy infrastructure that contributes to energy efficiency in both countries. They would collaborate closely on energy innovation, particularly in the clean energy sphere. As the process continues for the Keystone XL pipeline, they remain committed to moving forward on energy infrastructure projects that will create jobs while respecting the environment.³⁴

While the two heads of government have differing approaches to some key issues, Prime Minister Trudeau and President Trump have been able to focus on the need to continue effort to foster a good working relationship.

The revamping of Canada’s international agenda has been ubiquitously observable in the country’s most recent global endeavours. The shift that is perhaps the most acutely discernable is the reaffirmation of Canada’s commitment to multilateralism.³⁵ The government has laid a lot of stress on multilateral organisations. Canada has stressed on the role of the United Nations (UN). It is engaged in diplomatic efforts to gain a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2020. The government has stated that it will revitalise Canada’s historical role within the UN. Canada’s failed bid for a seat at the UNSC in 2010 was largely seen to be a result of the policies followed by the previous government. In his speech to the UN General Assembly in 2016 the Prime Minister stated, “(The world)...need(s) to focus on what brings us together, not what

divides us. For Canada, that means re-engaging in global affairs through institutions like the United Nations. It doesn't serve our interests—or the world's—to pretend we're not deeply affected by what happens beyond our borders.” He further elaborated by stating that, “(as part of Canada's)... commitment to implementing that agreement (the Paris Agreement on Climate Change), we announced that Canada would invest \$2.65 billion over five years to fund clean, low-carbon growth in developing countries. In order to help promote peace and security in areas affected by instability, we reaffirmed our support for NATO and committed ourselves to expanding Canada's role in United Nations peacekeeping operations. And we hosted the Fifth Global Fund Replenishment Conference, where we increased our contribution by 20% by giving more than \$800 million to the Global Fund. And we also encouraged our partners to increase their contributions, making it possible to raise \$13 billion in support of ending AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria by 2030...”³⁶ Canada has also set up a Peace and Stabilization Operations Program (PSOPs) in 2016 with a budget of \$450 million over three years. Through PSOPs Canada works with allies and partners to help stop violence, provide security and create space for dialogue and conflict resolution.³⁷

The government is also trying to leverage its economic power to bring more attention to the country. The stress is on fortifying relationships with key partners and building upon Canada's international credibility. During the Prime Minister's visit to Japan in 2016, the focus was clearly economic as was the stress when he met with leaders during the Group of Seven summit in Japan (2016). It would seem that the focus of the government is to engage with Asian economies while strengthening European ties. Canada has also signed a free trade agreement with the European Union. While the agreement still has to be accepted by State parliaments, Members of the European Parliament have backed the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) by 408-254 votes held on 15 February 2017, meaning large parts of the EU-Canada deal, notably tariff reduction, will enter into force. The deal is being viewed as important for Canada to reduce its reliance on the US markets.

The Liberal government has another three years before Canada elects a new government. It remains to be seen whether, it will be able to achieve major changes, such as changes to the anti-terrorism bill, electoral reforms etc, it had promised during the campaign. For the moment, Prime Minister Trudeau and his government have time and the people's mandate to bringing about 'Real Change'.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.*

End Notes

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