A HARPER MAJORITY WILL LEAD TO QUEBEC SEPARATION

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Razmik Panossian, Toronto Star, 26 April 2011

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The fault line of the new "two solitudes" does not run on linguistic or cultural lines but through a deep ideological canyon. Both in terms of style and beliefs, Harper's vision of Canada is profoundly foreign to most Quebecers, and indeed to most Ontarians. Traditional political values of compromise and consensus-building, coupled with fairly broad and liberal ideological positions, are no longer the norm in Ottawa. It is naive to assume that Harper will mellow with power. On the contrary, his iron fist will be emboldened with a majority.

Sometime during the next two years, Quebec will go to the polls. While it is very early to ponder any possible outcome, indications are that a fourth mandate for Premier Jean Charest is very unlikely. His popularity is at an all-time low, at 13 per cent according to one poll in March. Even if Charest exits the stage and the Liberals in Quebec head into the provincial election with a new leader, the separatist Parti Québécois under the undisputed leadership of Pauline Marois is poised to take power. A referendum on sovereignty will soon follow.

And this time the "yes" vote will win the day.

Canada will be a very different place politically after a couple of years of Conservative majority rule. I do not have a crystal ball, but I suspect that the arts will be starved of federal funding. The CBC/Radio Canada will be targeted, possibly substantial parts of it privatized. Unions will be under

attack. Civil society organizations espousing centrist or leftist views will be gutted through unexplained funding "rearrangements" or cutbacks. Instead, funding will go to conservative groups and evangelical churches. Canada's human rights promotion activities abroad will be restricted to a narrow set of rights in line with the Conservative view of the world — promoting religious freedoms instead of women's rights for instance. An even more militaristic foreign policy will emerge.

Respected watchdogs such the parliamentary budget officer and the auditor general will be significantly weakened, their independence undermined.

All of these are anathema to mainstream Quebec political values.

A province where the prevalent political culture is left of centre, where the union tradition is alive and well, where there is a widespread belief that the state should foster arts and culture, where there is a vibrant secular civil society, and where disdain persists for military intervention in world affairs, will not be sympathetic to Harper's new Canada.

Democratically elected governments have every right to change the policies of a country. However, the vision and governing style of the Conservatives will provide much fodder to separatist politicians as they mobilize the population. Ideological factors will reinforce the identity cleavage at the heart of Quebec's separatist movement, bringing additional votes in favour of sovereignty. Gilles Duceppe's "Canada Coalition" remark is just the beginning. He is sowing the seeds.

The strong majority Conservative government that Harper wants might very well end up being the last of the country as we know it, having to negotiate its breakup. On May 2, Canadians do have a choice. It is between the present Canada or a Canada as reshaped by the Conservatives — in all likelihood, sans la belle province.

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