

Full Circle

J.W.J. Bowden

Pivot or Pirouette? The 1993 Canadian General Election. Tom Flanagan. UBC Press, 2022.

Tom Flanagan's *Pivot or Pirouette?* is the first in a new series on "Turning Point Elections" edited by Gerald Baier and R. Kenneth Carty and published by the University of British Columbia Press. The professor emeritus at the University of Calgary is singularly suited to discuss this seismic election in which the Reform Party in the West, and the Bloc Québécois, captured the two key pillars of Brian Mulroney's electoral coalition and reduced the old Progressive Conservative Party to two MPs.

Flanagan has carved out an unusual niche for himself as a poli sci prof who has put his studies into practice (or *vice versa*) first as the Director of Policy for Preston Manning's Reform Party in the early 1990s and later as Stephen Harper's campaign manager and chief of staff from 2002 to 2006. In other words, he contributed both to reducing the old Progressive Conservative Party in 1993 and to supplanting it with the new Conservative Party in 2003.

Flanagan in 1995 wrote *Waiting for the Wave: The Reform Party and Preston Manning* about the election of 1993 and its aftermath. *Pivot or Pirouette* allows him to revisit the consequences of that momentous election with nearly 30 years of hindsight and a clearer view of what that election wrought on Canadian politics.

THE FIRST CHAPTER, "Grand Coalition," recounts how Mulroney persuaded disaffected Quebec nationalists to join forces with the PC party's Western base in 1984 and 1988 by offering a mixture of constitutional and free-market economic reforms. Both the Western and Quebec pillars supported free trade with the United States in 1988. "The Collapse of

the Coalition" then reviews how this shotgun marriage started to break down after Manitoba and Newfoundland & Labrador rejected the *Meech Lake Accord* in 1990, Canada entered another recession, and voters rejected the *Charlottetown Accord* in Oct. 1992. In "The Contestants," Flanagan provides short biographies on the men and women who led the Progressive Conservatives, Liberals, New Democrats, Reform, and the Bloc in the election of 1993, while "The Contest" outlines key events of the election campaign itself between Sep. 9 and Oct. 25, 1993. Flanagan briefly summarizes how the echoes of 1993 reverberated down to the 2010s in "Aftermath."

Finally, he argues based on Rational Choice Theory and Median Voter Theory in "The Punctuated Equilibrium of Canadian Politics" that Canadian political parties compete for the median voter but that usually only new political parties like Reform and the Bloc substantively shift the centre of political gravity and can change where the median voter lies, which forces older parties to adapt.

These substantive chapters come in at 156 pages. Flanagan also includes appendices on the "list of key players" and a "timeline of key events" from 1980 to 2022, further reinforcing 1993 as the hinge on which the last four decades turns.

1992 Referendum

FLANAGAN REGARDS THE referendum on the *Charlottetown Accord* in 1992 as a prelude or dress rehearsal for the general election; all provinces which rejected the *Accord*, except Nova Scotia, also voted against the three main parties in 1993. The referendum occurred when a general election would normally have happened and subsequently pushed the 34th Parliament very close to its maximum life of five years. What we typically call "the *Charlottetown Accord*" refers to the *Consensus Report on the Constitution* struck in Charlottetown on Aug. 28, 1992, essentially a statement of intent. The Mulroney government did not release a proper draft legal text (even then, not final) until Oct. 9, 1992, a mere two weeks before polling day.

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Canadians rejected the *Consensus Report* and the consensus of the Progressive Conservative, Liberal, and New Democratic parties and most business associations and trades unions on Oct. 26, 1992 in what some observers both then and now contemptuously dismiss as an uninformed outburst of populism. According to this condescending refrain, Canadians did not understand the issues and merely used the referendum to vent their frustrations. This argument that a vote against the *Accord* merely served as a vote against Mulroney by proxy never made sense, considering that 45% of Canadians voted in favour of the *Charlottetown Accord* in 1992 and 43% of Canadians had supported Mulroney's Progressive Conservatives in the 1988 election. Furthermore, Flanagan shows that even the politicians themselves did not understand the vagaries of their own creation, since the federal Department of Justice had never finalized its official text! The Mulroney government over-compensated for the perceived shortcomings of the executive federalism that went into Patriation and the *Meech Lake Accord* by asking Canadians to vote on an unfinished and ambiguous statement of intent; a majority of Canadians — and a majority of Quebecers — said no. The Bloc and Reform emerged to prominence by offering clear populist platforms that helped galvanize votes against the *Charlottetown Accord*.

Flanagan argues that Canadians rejected the *Charlottetown Accord* because it appealed to everyone and therefore to no one. This hodgepodge combined various competing or unrelated constituencies — Western conservatives, Quebec nationalists, proponents of indigenous self-government, and social democrats — through a series of reforms and inducements. Surprisingly, Flanagan did not analyse this failure expressly in terms of Rational Choice and Median Voter Theory; however, those frameworks would suggest that Canadians rejected the *Charlottetown Accord* because it did not contain a coherent narrative and existed simultaneously on at least three political axes or on a different plane altogether from the median voter.

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FLANAGAN DEVOTES MUCH attention to Kim Campbell, her campaign, and her eventual defeat — reasonably so, given that her implosion defines the election. Campbell inherited almost a decade of baggage from Mulroney, who resigned the leadership and premiership far too late in June 1993 to allow Campbell to differentiate herself from him. Campbell never even had the chance to face the House of Commons as Prime Minister and square off against Jean Chrétien in Question Period. But Flanagan argues convincingly that Campbell nevertheless failed to master political fortune and navigate turbulent waters. First, she tried to differentiate herself from Mulroney, yet stayed in his cabinet throughout the 1993 leadership election and thus continued to bear collective ministerial responsibility for everything that the Mulroney government undertook. Flanagan quotes Campbell's own autobiography, where she admits that she should have resigned from Mulroney's cabinet. Secondly, Campbell came across as frivolous and undisciplined in contrast to Chrétien and Manning, each undergirded by firm platforms, and Lucien Bouchard, whose magnetic oratory and clarity of purpose made him a formidable opponent in Quebec. (The New Democrats became a non-entity early in the campaign and did not win enough seats to retain official party status in the House of Commons).

The election of 1993 revived the tradition of party platforms, which had fallen out of favour under Trudeau and Mulroney in the 1970s and 1980s. Reform first developed its *Blue Book* in 1988 and updated it for 1993, in addition to introducing a plan to eliminate the deficit in three years in the spring of 1993. The Liberals took stock of their defeats and started developing their platform *Creating Opportunity: The Liberal Plan for Canada* in 1991. The Liberals also introduced the innovation of costing out their platform, which has become a staple of political platforms in Canada ever since. Chrétien seized the initiative and released the Liberals' platform on Sep. 12, 1993, and on Sep. 20, 1993, Manning re-released the Reform Party's policy to eliminate the deficit within three years, earn-

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ing the endorsement of the *Globe and Mail*. The Progressive Conservatives originally did not intend to release a formal platform at all, which only compounded Campbell's faults. In what appeared as an act of desperation, the Progressive Conservatives reversed their original decision and published their platform, *The Taxpayers' Agenda*, on Sep. 25, 1993, several days after their campaign had irretrievably collapsed.

The election of 1993 should prove once and for all that campaigns matter and that parties can persuade millions to change their vote. While Mulroney's coalition had begun to break down, both Reform and the Bloc had lost support after the referendum, and Campbell could still have led her party to a plurality of seats or held the Liberals to a plurality if she had run a competent campaign. The writ ran from Sep. 9 to Oct. 25, 1993, and polling data show the Liberals and Conservatives locked in a dead heat with each garnering between 30% and 35% of the electorate from Sep. 9 to 20, 1993. But Campbell committed a succession of blunders beginning on Sep. 23, 1993 which doomed the P.C. Party to the most infamous and thorough defeat in Canadian electoral history a month later. When the *Globe and Mail* reported that a Campbell government would eliminate the deficit in five years primarily by cutting social spending, Campbell responded with one of her most flippant retorts: "The issues are much too complex to try and generate some kind of blueprint in the forty-seven days that's available in an election campaign. This is not the time, I don't think, to get involved in a debate on very, very serious issues." She seemed to show contempt for the electorate by denying them the chance to make an informed decision at their only chance to do so.

Campbell performed poorly in the English-

language leaders' debate on Oct. 3, 1993. But the advertising release on Oct. 15, 1993, created by John Tory (later Mayor of Toronto, but then Campbell's 39-year-old campaign manager), which appeared to mock Chrétien's partial facial paralysis, truly sealed the Progressive Conservatives' fate. Campbell claimed that she had not seen the ads beforehand, pulled them off the air, and apologized for them — all of which made the Progressive Conservatives look both petty and weak. The attack ad which

backfired gave Chrétien the chance to deliver the speech which won the Liberals a majority:

Last night the Conservative party reached a new low. They tried to make fun of the way I look. God gave me a physical defect. I have accepted that since I [was] a kid. It is true, I speak on one side of my mouth. I am not a Tory; I don't speak on *both* sides of my mouth.

Chrétien saw the economy as the central issue of the campaign and recognized that Canadians had grown fed up with three decades of never-ending wrangling over constitutional reform. The Liberals won a majority, and Mulroney's former coalition of Western populists and Quebec nationalists abandoned the P.C. Party in favour of Reform and the Bloc. Indeed, the Liberals had become by default the only party capable of forming a coherent government with support across Canada. In 1993, 52% of those who voted Reform and 53% of those who voted for the Bloc had voted for the Progressive Conservatives in 1988; in other words, the Progressive Conservatives retained only about 22% of their support from 1988 into 1993.

Pirouette, not pivot

FLANAGAN IS AN ADHERENT of Rational Choice Theory. One of its subsets, coalition theory, explains how Mulroney succeeded in 1984 and 1988 and how Reform and the Bloc destroyed his party in 1993, while another

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branch, the median voter model, explains how Reform and the Bloc altered Canadian politics thereafter. Flanagan describes 1993 as a “realigning election” in which broad swathes of the electorate “switched their allegiance” and then maintained those new allegiances in several subsequent “maintaining elections.” Flanagan considers whether the election of 1993 truly amounts to a pivot or turning point, which means “taking off in a new direction, making a 90-degree turn.” He now takes a different tack and answers the question in the title of the book, *Pivot or Pirouette?* firmly in favour of the latter:

Yet with the advantage of three decades of hindsight, the turning point now seems more like a pirouette, a 360-degree revolution, after which Canadian politics is back on the same track that it had followed for many decades.

The election punctuated the previous equilibrium of Canadian politics and created an aberrational and transitional party system, marked by a regional fragmentation and a divided political right, which lasted for ten years. This finally gave way to another more lasting and stable party system and new equilibrium in Dec. 2003 when the Conservative Party reconstituted itself and soon after reduced the Liberals to a minority in the election in June 2004. This configuration still exists today.

However, this 360-degree revolution has conserved one lasting change from 1993, as Flanagan acknowledges: Quebec has by and large rejected both the Liberals and the Conservatives. The province has to some extent opted out of the party system that applies elsewhere in Canada by overlaying a nationalist axis onto the left-right axis. Quebec has never fully reconciled itself to the other federal political parties since the failure of the *Meech Lake Accord* in June 1990, which spurred Bouchard to break with Mulroney and establish the Bloc. That new party soon drew support from nationalists and secessionists across the left-right spectrum. If anything, Quebec’s partial unilateral withdrawal from the federal parties since 1990 vindicates Brian Mulroney’s argument that securing

Quebec’s place in Confederation hinged upon the *Meech Lake Accord*. Since 1993, Quebecers have withheld their support from all Liberal and Conservative governments except in the election of 2015.

From 1896 to 1980, the Liberals only ever won parliamentary majorities in the House of Commons when they also won a majority of Quebec’s seats; however, the Conservatives could win overall majorities without winning a majority in Quebec. The Conservatives (including the old Liberal-Conservatives) won both overall majorities and a majority of Quebec’s seats in 1867, 1872, 1878, 1882, and 1887. But in 1891 (the first free trade election), Macdonald led the Conservatives to one last overall majority but without a majority in Quebec. Borden won majorities in 1911 (the second free trade election) and 1917 without majorities in Quebec, as did R.B. Bennett in 1930, though these depended also on strong support in the Maritimes. Diefenbaker in 1958 and Mulroney in 1984 won the biggest-ever majorities overall and in Quebec.

BETWEEN 1993 AND 2021, Canadians elected five majority parliaments (1993, 1997, 2000, 2011, and 2015), and only in 2015 did the victorious majority party also win a majority of seats in Quebec and even then, 40/78 is a bare majority. Starting with the election of 1993, the Liberals’ path to a parliamentary majority no longer necessarily runs through Quebec as it did in the first 125 years of Confederation. From 1993 to 2000, Chrétien’s Liberals secured their overall parliamentary majorities through Ontario, where vote-splitting on the Right between Reform/Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives in three successive elections allowed the Liberals to win all but one to three seats in Ontario. The Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservatives re-merged in Dec. 2003, and the new Conservative Party of Canada ended vote-splitting in the election of 2004 and held the Liberals to a minority. The Conservatives won an overall parliamentary majority in 2011 with only 5 out of 75 of Quebec’s seats because they took enough seats in the West and Ontario combined. In 2015, the Liberals won an overall majority after winning only a

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bare majority of 40 of 78 seats in Quebec. (See Table on this page.)

Now that Quebec has largely abandoned both the Liberals and the Conservatives, Quebec has also made minority parliaments significantly more likely and even the norm in the 21st century. Of the seven general elections to date (2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2019, 2021) five have returned minority parliaments. Yves-François Blanchet, the leader of the Bloc, even boasted during an interview with Radio-Canada on Aug. 29, 2021 that the Bloc should hold the balance of power in a minority parliament to extract gains for Quebec: “As Canadians have the chance to choose the government that they want, Quebecers have anew the option of preventing this from being a majority government. [...] Whoever will be in government, as long as it is a minority government, we will continue to make gains for Quebec.”

The only reason why this same trend did not assert itself in the elections of 1993, 1997, and 2000 is because Quebec’s unilateral withdrawal from the Liberals and Conservatives

coincided with the broader collapse of the old Progressive Conservative Party outside of Quebec and the resulting vote-splitting with the Reform Party in the other nine provinces, especially pronounced in Ontario and Manitoba. The first election in which a re-unified Conservative Party fielded candidates, Canadians returned a minority parliament because the Liberals could no longer count on vote-splitting under single-member plurality to sweep Ontario’s 100-odd seats. In 1993, if Mulroney’s coalition had not collapsed entirely with both Reform and the Bloc but only partially with the Bloc, then Canadians would almost certainly have elected a minority parliament because the old P.C.’s and Reform each won about 20% of the popular vote in Ontario.

Minority parliaments have become the norm and will continue as such until one of three conditions pertains: either Quebecers abandon the Bloc and reintegrate into the Liberal and Conservative parties; or Quebec secedes from Canada and takes its 78 seats out of contention altogether; or the Conser-

General Elections 1993 to 2021

Governing Party’s Total Seats vs. Seats Won in Quebec

Year	Party Forming Government	Seats Won in Total	Seats Won in Quebec
1993	Liberal Majority	177/295	19/75
1997	Liberal Majority	155/301	26/75
2000	Liberal Majority	172/301	36/75
2004	Liberal Minority	135/308	21/75
2006	Conservative Minority	124/308	10/75
2008	Conservative Minority	143/308	10/75
2011	Conservative Majority	166/308	5/75
2015	Liberal Majority	184/338	40/78
2019	Liberal Minority	157/338	35/78
2021	Liberal Minority	160/338	35/78

vatives can replicate their minimal winning coalition from 2011 where big majorities in the West and Ontario plus a smattering of seats in Quebec and the Atlantic give them a parliamentary majority. This third scenario would correspond to what Darrell Bricker and John Ivison posited in 2013: that the Conservatives *could* take the mantle of “natural governing party” if they could forge a consistent coalition between the West and Ontario and win massively enough in the latter that they could win without Quebec seats.

That configuration, seen only in 2011, repudiated Mulroney’s unstable coalition of Western populists and Quebec nationalists and continued an enduring feature since 1993. The scenario also becomes more probable and feasible as Quebec’s percentage of the population, and thus its share of seats in the House of Commons, continues to decline upon each decennial electoral readjustment. Parliament’s newest Representation Formula from 2011 increased the total number of MPs from 308 to 338 in one fell swoop, but Quebec’s contingent increased only from 75 to 78. The Representation Formula from 2011 would originally have decreased Quebec’s representation from 78 to 77 in the new calculation from Oct. 2021, but Parliament amended the formula once more in June 2022 to guarantee Quebec its 78 MPs.

Neither of the first two possibilities seems likely for the time being because the constitutional failures which brought about the Bloc in 1990 still exist, and Quebec remains unreconciled with the *Constitution Act, 1982*. Secessionism has also stalled since the narrow victory of the “No” side in the second referendum in 1995 and has since 2018 sweepingly given way to autonomist nationalism under François Legault’s centre-right premiership. And even if none of these three conditions comes about, that is not to say that we will *never* see majority parliaments — we elected two consecutively in 2011 and 2015 — but merely that the current state of politics, and especially the persistence of the Bloc and sovereignist nationalism in Quebec, make minority parliaments more likely than if the Bloc had actually faded away after 1995. Only time will tell. ✕

Clinging to the Wreckage

Gavin McCormick

In Defense of Civilization. Michael Bonner. Sutherland House, 2023.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, it was common wisdom in the English-speaking world that Civilization — in the sense of all that is noblest, best, and most impressive in human culture — had been saved but only just. Two shattering wars left a sense of how fragile, insecure, and vulnerable is humanity’s grip on, well, *being humane*, even *sane*. But civilization had somehow survived, even if continued efforts were manifestly needed to keep it going. That sensibility is embodied clearly in Sir Kenneth Clark’s famous BBC television series, which made its appearance in 1969. For Clark, “Civilisation” is a far-reaching concept, which encompasses art, philosophy, religion, literature, music, architecture — but also moral achievements, such as the abolition of slavery and the rise of humanitarianism. The wars form an important background to the series, for viewers as for Clark himself. His was a generation that had seen devastation on an unthinkable scale: against that backdrop, to make a positive statement in favour of the cultural achievements that make life worth living and that are worth preserving for the future was almost uncontroversial.

To speak today of “civilisation” (the “s” is British usage) in the same terms as Lord Clark is no longer straightforward. Unabashed celebration of the heights of hu-

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