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Michael W. Higgins

A Secure Border

IN CANADA, RELIGION & POLITICS DON'T MIX

As the United States was nearing the end of one of the most engaging and fraught national election campaigns in recent history, we Canadians conducted a national election of our own on October 14. There were few surprises and even less excitement over the contest. As expected, the Conservative Party, the Tories, were sent back to govern the nation. The good news for the Tories was that they increased their numbers in Parliament; the bad news is that even with an additional 19 members (bringing their total to 142) the party still has to lead a minority government. The Liberals, the Grits, fell to a new low with 76; the social democrats, the New Democratic Party, impressively increased their representation from 29 to 37; the Green Party managed to engage the country's interest but not enough to elect even one MP; and the separatists, the Bloc Quebecois, defied expectations and not only survived but managed to muster a safe complement of 50 members to threaten national unity on another day.

The parties warred over the economy, funding for the arts, troop deployment in Afghanistan, the environment, and why we are not Americans. The one thing they did not fight about, at least explicitly, is religion. That would have been very un-Canadian.

This is not to say that religion didn't show its contentious side occasionally during the six-week election period (Canadians like to keep their political campaigns brief), only that it never made it to the national agenda. Canadians are fanatical about keeping the spheres of religion and politics separate. Although there is no constitutional separation of church and state, the two realms interpenetrate at their peril.

Canadian politicians are not as faith-averse as some of their European counterparts, but they are collectively nervous about introducing religious issues in the political arena. They tend to get burned when they do, and they remember their history, a history of sometimes violent religious conflicts. Once it was commonplace for Catholics to be exhorted by politics-meddling priests, scheming bishops, and fiery apologists for the Ultramontane perspective to vote for the "right" candidate. Their Protestant adversaries were equally fervent. Of course, the heady days of Protestant-Catholic conflict that characterized nineteenth-century Canadian politics, and the seismic changes ushered in by the mid-twentieth-century secularization of clerical (and strongly Jansenist) Quebec, are over. But politicians are still jittery when it comes to invoking God, making the sign of the cross in public, and alluding to the transcendent in anything but the most innocuous terms.

Consequently, a generally welcome feature of the Canadian sensibility is that leaders of the five major political parties are careful not to wear their religion on their sleeves. For



Divided government

voters, journalists, commentators, and citizens with a mild interest in the religious leanings of a potential prime minister, it is close to impossible to get information on a candidate's creedal or spiritual perspectives. It is not that politicians are particularly irreligious—indeed, the reelected Prime Minister Stephen Harper has a professed intellectual attachment to religion—it is rather that they are uniformly uncomfortable talking about questions of faith. And that seems strange when you consider that the current speaker of the Senate holds two doctoral degrees from pontifical universities, that several MPs are Protestant ministers, that the annual prayer breakfast on Parliament Hill is a sold-out event, that a large percentage of federal politicians identify their call to public service as an expression of their Christian vocation, and that avowedly Catholic politicians are not subject to the same kind of censorious scrutiny experienced by some of their U.S. coreligionists.

Still, religion, and Catholicism specifically, surfaced at various points during the election, around the editorial table, or in caucus. For instance, Gilles Duceppe, leader of the Bloc Quebecois, made much of the Opus Dei affiliation of the Quebec Conservative candidate for St. Bruno-St. Hubert, Nicole Charbonneau Barron, going so far as to call into question her capacity to represent modern Quebecers. Duceppe noted that "these people are certainly sharing a kind of ideology that doesn't correspond at all to modern times in Quebec." It doesn't get much more categorical than that. The shadow of the ancien régime is with us still, implied an outraged Duceppe.

Also in Quebec, but this time in the very ranks of the Bloc Quebecois itself, Fr. Raymond Gravel, an impassioned cleric with a troubled personal history and a penchant for provocative utterances, was required by the Vatican to choose either parliament or the priesthood. He chose the latter.

Not the route taken by the charismatic President Fernando Lugo of Paraguay, who recently resigned as a bishop to lead his country.

What is more surprising is how Gravel could have bypassed the canonical restrictions against clerics holding elected office in a democracy like Canada for so long. Certainly, New Democratic Party priest-parliamentarians Bob Ogle of Saskatchewan and Andy Hogan of Nova Scotia served many years as politicians before John Paul II insisted that priests abstain from holding political office. Ogle and Hogan complied with the pontiff's orders, but none too happily.

While Gravel did manage to forestall demands from the chancery for his retirement from politics, he was less successful in avoiding watchdogs like LifeSite News and national organizations like Campaign Life. His record of supporting same-sex marriage and other controversial issues at variance with Catholic teaching was consistent and transparent. In light of this, it took a surprisingly long time for the nunciature to pressure Gravel's ordinary and the assembly of Quebec bishops.

Efforts by lobbying groups to reduce the complexities of voting to a single issue were resisted by the Canadian episcopate when they published a federal election guide. The guide underscores the centrality of protecting life and the sacredness of the human person, the preferential option for the poor, the Catholic view on the environment, and the recognition that

“tolerating something that is wrong does not make it right. In a complex world, accomplishing good with courage and determination often means taking a roundabout route. Doing good sometimes involves having the patience of a martyr.” This rather elliptical phrasing surely refers to the complicated Canadian political reality regarding abortion, which has prolife citizens fighting in a legal vacuum. As the result of national exhaustion, political timidity, and myopic leadership, Canada doesn't have a law either clearly establishing a right to abortion or outlawing the procedure. The result is essentially abortion on demand. In seeking reelection, Prime Minister Harper had no intention of opening up a debate on the question. Since the only party likely to introduce abortion legislation would be Harper's Conservatives, his silence has angered many of his prolife supporters.

In the end, many Catholics have heeded the sage advice of Jesuit economist William Ryan, acting director of the Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice, when he observed in Toronto's *Catholic Register*, “The fact is you have to decide what can be done. If we ask for society to be perfect, then we're outside politics. So we have to live with the imperfect and try to make it better.” Quintessentially Canadian: measured, unexciting, and gradualist. ■

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