

What voters want

Are Canadians looking for the Tories to shrink government—or keep it the way it is?



Pierre LEMIEUX

Public choice economics, which is the analysis of politics with the tools of economic theory, is consistent with two different interpretations of the Jan. 23 election.

The first, optimistic, interpretation is that a large proportion of Canadians have had enough of being taxed, regulated, controlled, criminalized, infantilized. Even if confusedly, many electors have awakened to the disappearance of their traditional liberties, and realized their country will soon look like the Village in Patrick McGoochan's fabulous TV series, *The Prisoner*. Electors have expressed their instinctive, unformulated revolt by voting for political entrepreneurs who have sensed a smouldering demand for change.

In Quebec, the Conservative party's slogan was "Changeons pour vrai" (let's change for real). One fourth of Quebecers voted for the Conservatives, seriously encroaching on the all-powerful Bloc Québécois, reducing the Liberal party to third-party rank, and producing a mini-landslide that still has the political class puzzled. This mini-landslide had silently started in Beauce early in the campaign, and spread to other rural areas, producing surprises up to election night.

In Beauce, where the Liberals had ruled, libertarian-minded Maxime Bernier obtained a crushing majority of 67 per cent for the Conservatives. Perhaps even more suggestive of popular revolt is nearby Portneuf-Jacques-Cartier, where populist-libertarian independent candidate André Arthur won 40 per cent of the vote against 25 per cent for the incumbent Bloc Québécois MP. Arthur achieved this unexpected success virtually without campaigning, with an official slogan that said "faites-vous plaisir" (please yourself), his typical politically incorrect style, and his reference to established politicians as "decaying carcass."

The second, pessimistic, interpretation rests on the median-voter theorem. This result of public choice theory states that, if voters view the issues as one-dimensional—on a simple left-right spectrum, for example—and the distribution of their preferences is single-peaked (like a bell curve, even if skewed to the left or to the right), then

the party closer to the median voter (the most typical, blandest voter), will get the most votes. As the main goal of self-interested politicians is to get elected (because of all the perks, power, and a little glory), they will all congregate as close as possible to the extreme centre of the political spectrum.

The median-voter theorem would explain why the Conservatives, who entered the race with proposals already very close to those of the Liberals, spent most of the campaign making their platform more indistinguishable or more fuzzy, from forcing producers and consumers to put corn in their gasoline, to trying to look favourable to the public health monopoly and gun control. On their side, the Liberal party and the NDP tried hard to show that the Conservatives were not the extreme centrists they desperately claimed to be.

The pessimistic interpretation is reinforced by another strand of public choice analysis, which shows how the incentives of the bureaucrats and the politicians automatically feed the growth of Leviathan, the monster state. Every party is led to add its own layer of new state powers over and above the sedimentation built up by the forerunners. The police state is built as by an invisible hand. The dumbest proposal may be the Conservative one of arming customs cops, with the benediction of the NDP; only missing is the idea of making it a crime, like in France, to laugh at, or insult, them—but wait another 10 years.

There were exceptions, such as the Tories promising—in such prudent words!—to entrench property rights in the Constitution or to end some firearm controls, or the NDP favouring the legalization of marijuana, even if this plan was safely hidden from their official program. But exceptions they were.

Which one of the two interpretations is the correct one? We will have to wait and see what the Conservative government will do and, more importantly, how the electorate will go in the next election. Whether the minority government will survive by marshalling the support of the more statist or the more libertarian elements in the new Parliament, will also be interesting to watch.

Let's hope the first interpretation is the correct one, and let's work with our Conservative friends to help extend the silent revolt. However, from a detached observer's viewpoint, the extreme centrist ditch is a safer bet. **W**

Electors may have been expressing an instinctive revolt at being regulated, taxed, controlled, criminalized and infantilized