

THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN CANADA ON OCTOBER 14

Norbert Wagner

On October 14, Canada elected its next parliament or, to be more precise, the 308-seat House of Commons in which prime minister Stephen Harper of the Conservative Party had been leading a minority government until then. Next to the ruling party, the elections were contested by the key opposition force, the Liberal Party of Canada led by Stéphane Dion, the New Democratic Party of Canada with Jack Layton at the helm, the Bloc Québécois headed by Gilles Duceppe, and the Green Party of Canada chaired by Elizabeth May.

The specific issues that dominated the campaign, in which the chairmen of all the other parties claimed Mr Harper had failed, were matters of economic, health, and environmental policy. With regard to the economic situation, the prime minister was censured for pursuing a 'fraudulent' policy of deregulation which had exposed the country to the global financial crisis almost as much as the USA itself. In addition, he was said to have no concept that might show the nation a way out of the crisis. Furthermore, critics argued that the current problems on the labour market had similarly been caused by him and his laissez-faire policy, which was the reason why the country had one of the lowest growth rates within the G8 group. The Conservative Party hits back by claiming that the excessive cost of the liberals' economic policy would automatically cause a gigantic deficit in the national budget.

In environmental policy, Mr Harper was blamed for Canada's withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol. The charge was that the government's plans to cut emissions by 45 to 65 percent by 2050 were more than inadequate. By contrast, the NDP proposed reducing emissions by 80 percent in the same period.

Although Canada's voters appear hardly exercised by the Afghan question, the government was nevertheless held responsible for committing the country in the first place as well as for the subsequent death of numerous Canadian soldiers in the course of the Afghan mission.

In the end, Stephen Harper and his party emerged victorious, although the absolute majority they had wished for failed to materialize. The campaign in Canada was overshadowed by the contest in its neighbouring country, the US, as well as by the crisis on the international financial markets. Aware of the unpopularity of President Bush among the Canadians, Mr Harper was anxious to avoid being put in the same drawer as his American colleague in office. Taking advantage of the turbulences on the financial markets, the devaluation of the Canadian against the US dollar, and the growing threat to jobs in the domestic automobile industry as well as elsewhere, he presented

himself as the one and only politician capable of leading the country out of its misery.

Preliminary results indicate that the Conservative Party garnered 37.6 percent of the vote, thus acquiring some 20 seats in parliament in addition to its former share of 124. 155 seats would have given it the absolute majority. The big loser was the liberal party which, having reached no more than 26.3 percent of the vote, lost 27 of the 103 seats which it held previously. Having won 50 seats, the Bloc Québécois was able to hang on to its previous position.

In the view of Mr Harper and the ruling party, their victory confirms their conservative course in economic, domestic, and foreign policy. The liberals, on the other hand, received a drubbing for the manner in which their chairman, Mr Dion, conducted his campaign, his occasionally overbearing attitude, and perhaps also for his strong French accent. Nor is it likely that the Canadians were enthusiastic about the liberals' proposal to introduce a carbon tax.

If at all, the influence of foreign-policy issues such as the Hindu Kush mission on the outcome of the elections was slight. This may have been because Prime Minister Harper was anxious enough about the potential effects of his commitment in Afghanistan on his chances of being re-elected to announce that a total of 2,500 Canadian soldiers would be withdrawn from the region by 2011.

IN: *Auslandsinformationen* 10/2008, ISSN 0177-7521, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., Berlin, p.105-107