

## Hard to keep track of who is in what party

### Politicians quick

### to change addresses

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[JAMES TRAVERS](#)

Hey, here's a dirty little secret: When it comes to politics, Canadians are unusually promiscuous.

That's the most intriguing explanation for what's happening Monday here in the capital. With the usual pomp, a man who was around at the conception of the Reform party, wooed Tories and dumped the Alliance will become a Conservative prime minister.

When it comes to metamorphosing, Stephen Harper is highly evolved. But among politicians, he's hardly unique.

Look almost anywhere from coast to coast and find someone who isn't who they used to be. High on the shortening list of Paul Martin successors are three — Bob Rae, Belinda Stronach and Scott Brison — who once contested and, in the former Ontario NDP premier's case, won the leadership of other parties. And in Quebec and British Columbia, there are provincial Liberal governments that cover the spectrum from pinkish Tory red to inky conservative blue.

Even Ontario isn't immune. In the great order of things, Dalton McGuinty stands to the political left of Mike Harris and not too far from Bill Davis, but yards right of Pierre Trudeau.

So, what's happening? Has the body politic become a wild partisan swinger that can't find happiness in a lasting relationship? Or has it become more conservative without finding the courage to admit the move?

Well, no. Pollster and analyst Frank Graves has charted political trends and behaviour for more than three decades and sees an electorate defaulting to its core characteristics.

Along with being less ideological than our continental cousins, voters north of the 49th parallel are also a lot less attached to political parties. None-of-the-above is the preferred response when Canadians are asked if they are small-l liberal or small-c conservative, and they don't believe any party has a singular lock on solutions to complex public-policy problems.

As Graves points out, the absence here of blind faith and profound loyalty has been exacerbated by the raw nastiness of theatrical politics. Voters, he says, are "sick of political parties" and are looking for more than a familiar brand name.

Among the many implications is this: Footloose politicians can move around on the political spectrum without lingering long anywhere or lugging much baggage.

Harper is set to visit Governor General Michaëlle Jean partly because he softened his and his party's neo-conservative image by edging toward the consensual middle. What's almost as revealing is that in the last election, the highest-profile defectors weren't punished for what once was treason.

After previously winning as Conservatives, Stronach and Brison withstood the rising Harper tide and

both are comfortable enough in Liberals colours to muse about contesting the leadership.

Rae, a Liberal by family ties if not by former affiliation, suddenly seems no more out of place there than investment banker Paul Summerville was contesting St. Paul's riding for the NDP, a party once dismissively labelled the socialist horde.

Summerville lost but not because he was a misfit. If Rae, Stronach and Brison run for the leadership and lose, it won't be because they are in the wrong party.

Rae's challenge is to convince Liberals that Ontario, the province that holds their fate, has forgotten his performance as premier and will, instead, remember him now as the statesmen his supporters say he has become. Along with learning French, Stronach must prove she has the depth to be a prime minister while dispelling the whispers that father Frank is buying her a party for a toy. A recognized strength in a weak Martin cabinet, Brison will test if Liberals have the courage to choose, as he neatly phrases it, not a gay politician but a politician who happens to be gay.

In the immediate post-Martin period, it's far from obvious just who Liberals will decide to follow. But the path ahead is much clearer for the winning candidate, the party and, for that matter, all mainstream parties.

"Being Liberal leader only means you are someone who can find centre-moderate solutions to political problems," Graves says.

If parties can't count on unwavering partisan commitment to attract voters who are unusually and, perhaps, uniquely disconnected from political ideology, then they will have to find other ways to win. In the current context, that demands ethics that are beyond reproach, agility to move easily within a loosely defined political framework, and the intellectual capacity to reshape public policies with innovation.

Those who fail will find that promiscuous voters, like promiscuous politicians, will quickly move along and never look back.

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