

Past 10 years show a Canada unravelling

by Heidi Kingstone

The Canadian government teeters on a precipice. There are no acceptable leaders to fill the gap. While there won't be a coup or revolution, there is also no clear path ahead.

Canada must decide where it is going. In typically Canadian fashion, the sense that something will work out prevails. Meanwhile, the economy is robust.

But this state cannot last, especially in the midst of scandal, the resurgence of separatism, lack of direction and identity, fraud, corruption, defection and sleaze – all the juicy meat and potatoes of a gripping tabloid story of epic proportions now engulfing Canada.

On May 11, the House of Commons passed a motion calling on the Liberal government to resign. On Tuesday, high-profile Conservative MP Belinda Stronach crossed the floor to take her place in the Liberal cabinet. Peter Mackay, the deputy leader of the Conservative Party and her boyfriend, from whom she is taking a break, is said to have found out minutes before her announcement. By Thursday, the minority Liberal government had survived a confidence motion, staving off the possibility of an immediate election, ending months of political crisis.

In a story of pork-barrel politics that has kickbacks, dodgy contracts and brown envelopes stuffed full of money passed on to politicians and others, it is hardly surprising that 64 percent of Canadians think their prime minister, Paul Martin, is a liar.

It's hard to imagine any situation in which turmoil is used to describe Canada. Geographically the second largest country in the world, Canada's position globally has virtually slipped into oblivion. Despite its well-earned international reputation as a peacekeeper and its status as one of the best places in the world to live, virtually everyone outside its borders views it as either deadly dull or hugely insignificant; unable to escape from the overarching shadow of its dominant southern neighbour.

Canada has slept, and the world has passed it by. Look beyond the bucolic scenes of roaming moose and majestic pine trees, and Canada is unravelling.

Contradictory? The story begins in 1995, when Canada almost broke apart. The French-speaking province of Quebec called a referendum. The result came within 50 000 votes of the province declaring sovereignty. This frightened the life out of Jean Chretien, the former Liberal Canadian prime minister. So he decided there ought to be a way of enhancing the federal presence in Quebec in order to promote unity. Treasury funds were allocated for this purpose.

What is now happening in the Great White North is the direct result of those actions 10 years ago that have ended up mirroring the Liberal Party in the worst scandal of its history.

Justice John Gomery was

appointed to investigate the political shenanigans that the Liberals, and the Quebec separatists, got up to that resulted in multimillion-dollar kickbacks in return for lucrative advertising and sponsorship programmes. Money was distributed without proper checks and balances.

Rumours began to circulate in the capital in 2002. Sheila Fraser, the federal auditor-general, suggested the police investigate how C\$1.6 million (R8.1 million) of federal government advertising contracts were handed out. Fraser found that C\$100 million was paid to a variety of communication agencies, long thought to be little more than a vehicle to reward loyal Liberal supporters.

The ensuing scandal has forced Prime Minister Martin to declare that he wanted to get to the bottom of this. From the Quebec perspective, it seems as if the Gomery inquiry makes Canada's largest province, the sole recipient of the funds, corrupt. Not only has the inquiry begun to cost more than the problem it is probing, it has fuelled a resurgence of Quebec separatism.

The sponsorship scandal dominates voters' thinking, outstripping healthcare, the issue closest to every Canadian's heart, by 3 percent. Some 61 percent of those polled believe the

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prime minister is the federal leader most likely to tell a lie if it would help politically, reported Canada's national paper, *The Globe and Mail*; one expert said cynicism about politics was so high that "dishonesty has increasingly become less relevant as a voting issue".

Canada now lacks a truly national party. If Quebec, with a long separatist history, didn't vote Liberal it would turn to the Bloc Quebecois – a party interested in sovereignty, albeit with links to Canada.

Stronach's power-grab hurts the Tories, and recent polls suggest a new election would only bring another minority government. If the Conservatives' potential alliance with the Bloc Quebecois had come about, the deck would have been stacked in favour of separatism, said Stronach.

Canada is beset by other issues. For too long it has basked under the protection of the United States. Now it has to strike a delicate balance with its biggest trading partner. How will it remain friendly and maintain independence?

Canadians no longer feel it is enough to define themselves simply as "not American". What will their new identity be? That, as well as the future, isn't clear.