

Government can now move on eradicating trade barriers

NEIL REYNOLDS

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It was a tragic moment, election night, when Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff, an ordinarily decent and intelligent man, offered his professional services to the remnant of the once great Liberal Party of Canada. It apparently didn't occur to him that his colleagues wouldn't want him around much longer, thanks anyway. He used much of his podium time to lecture on the intricacies of campaigning from the centre. He is, apparently, an authority. Pity he didn't congratulate Conservative management consultant Bernard Trottier, who took him down in his own Etobicoke-Lakeshore riding. It would have been a classy thing to mention the man who made his leadership profoundly academic.

Two important things happened in Election 2011. The Liberal Party and the NDP figured significantly in neither.

The first is the fact of majority government – meaning that the government can govern: To use an American term, the country will now have a Conservative administration. This is more important than it appears. In minority governments, opposition parties meddle in executive functions, try to exercise executive power – which isn't theirs' to exercise. They invariably think that the government has to do something merely because the opposition passes a resolution. It is old parliamentary wisdom: A majority government can do anything it wants, the Commons can't.

The second is the fast-tracking of the government's high-priority objectives, many of which weren't mentioned in the election (negotiations for a North American "perimeter border," for example, and for a Euro-Canada trade agreement). These high-priority objectives are of historic importance.

Liberals who wonder what went wrong on Monday should note that the Conservative Party has now successfully transformed itself into a great liberal party (as the term "liberal" was understood by Sir Wilfrid Laurier, the greatest of the Liberal prime

ministers). The final step in this transformation was the Conservative breakthrough in Greater Toronto. The fact is, the country doesn't need two liberal parties – which explains why Canadians got rid of one of them on Monday.

The Liberal party was historically the party of North American economic integration and free trade. Great Liberal parties, however, require great liberal principles. The NDP got most of the attention on Monday night – and, for that matter, throughout the campaign. But the NDP triumph is of no great historic significance. Canadian history is full of examples of progressive parties that have gained ascendance only to disappear abruptly into the mists. Take the Progressive Party itself. Ninety years ago, in the federal election of 1921, Liberal Prime Minister Mackenzie King won 118 seats. The opposition parties won a total of 118 seats, too: a rare parliamentary tie. The radical Progressive Party, in a breakthrough performance, won 58 seats, the Conservative Party won 49 and Independents of one kind or another won 11. Yet King governed without a coalition for a full four-year term – and the Progressive Party disappeared in the election of 1924.

Mr. Layton and the NDP caucus are not ready for prime-time performances. With a majority government, though, the Governor-General will never need to ask Mr. Layton to form a government merely because of a parliamentary happenstance. The NDP Leader will need carefully to manage his Quebec caucus: Will the Quebec tail wag the Canadian dog?

As for the Liberals, the issue is a fundamental choice: Will the party move right to find historic liberal values – or move left to join the NDP? Most Conservatives and many Liberals can find common ground on the country's top three strategic objectives: fiscal restraint, the paying down of the federal deficit and the slimming of government; the negotiation of a Canada-U.S. "perimeter border" and advancement of the resulting economic integration of North America; and various free-trade agreements, among them especially the Canada-Europe trade agreement.

Liberals erred in this election by doing what Liberals have done successfully in many elections: campaigning to the left. This time, they made themselves essentially indistinguishable from the New Democrats. Mr. Layton engineered a distinction – the memorable one-liner in the leaders' debate. "If [Canadians] don't show up for work," he scolded Mr. Ignatieff for his attendance record in the Commons, "they don't get a promotion."