A Note on Party Switchers

by Professor Desmond Morton

Recent high profile examples of Members of Parliament who have changed parties has raised a number of questions about the frequency of such behaviour as well as political and ethical questions. This article is based on a study, originally prepared for the Office of the House of Commons Ethics Commission in August 2005. It is reproduced by permission of the author and the Office of the Ethics Commissioner.

The institution of political parties, with their unifying discipline, makes possible Canada's version of parliamentary government. It is the logical, even inevitable, result of our nineteenth century belief in "responsible government". It fulfils our constitutional goal of "Peace", and "Order", though its critics may deny that it also guarantees "Good Government". Still, most Canadians regularly demonstrate a commitment to stability in government, while achieving, as Professor David Docherty has observed, a notable instability in parliamentary representation.[1]

Party Discipline in Canada

Canadian party discipline is, of course, a contrast to the comparable party function in the U.S. Congress. In both regimes, governing parties exercise discipline through access to a "spoils" system.[2]

Like most divergences from the American model, rigid party discipline raises Canadian doubts, particularly among citizens and regions who feel alienated by many government decisions. This has inspired a recurrent demand from Western Canada and occasionally from Quebec for MPs who will act as delegates from their constituencies. That has led, from the era of the Progressives, to the corresponding obligation of reforming parties to make their members adhere to party doctrine. It is no coincidence that the Progressives, Social Credit, the

CCF and Reform-Canadian Alliance have had more switchers over the period studied (1921-2005) than the two traditional Canadian parties. Does it take more "discipline" to be undisciplined? In the atmosphere of the post-1993 election, the decision by the Chrétien Liberals to ignore their promise to repeal the Goods and Services Tax, justified York South-Weston MP John Nunziata to vote against his party in the full knowledge that he would be suspended from his party's caucus. He was joined, afterwards, by Dennis Mills who quietly resigned the Liberal whip to share in the protest, though he returned to his party caucus soon after.[3]

Sheila Copps adopted a different, braver and much more costly strategy by resigning her seat and winning re-election in her riding of Hamilton East. By-elections are expensive for the federal treasury and for competing candidates, and very few Canadian MPs have followed Copps' example.

Table 1 on the following page shows the number of Party Switches per Year from 1921 to August 1, 2005.

Different Views of Party Discipline

Constituency control over a member of parliament or legislative assembly remains a recurrent theme in Canadian political discontents.[4] The Progressives offered a dramatic introduction of the principle by winning 65 primarily rural and Western seats in the 1921 election and forcing the victorious Liberals into a minority government by denying them constituencies they might otherwise have won. Though the Progressives had the second largest caucus, they rejected the conventions of party discipline and refused to form the Official Opposition. This

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Table 1: Party Switches per Year from 1921 - 2005							
Year	**Switches**	**Year**	**Switches**	**Year**	**Switches**	**Year**	**Switches**
1921	2	1941	0	1961	0	1981	0
1922	1	1942	1	1962	1	1982	3
1923	0	1943	3	1963	17	1983	0
1924	0	1944	3	1964	3	1984	0
1925	3	1945	8	1965	6	1985	0
1926	13	1946	0	1966	0	1986	3
1927	0	1947	0	1967	1	1987	2
1928	0	1948	0	1968	4	1988	2
1929	0	1949	9	1969	0	1989	1
1930	1	1950	0	1970	2	1990	16
1920s	**20**	**1940s**	**24**	**1960s**	**34**	**1980s**	**27**
1931	0	1951	0	1971	7	1991	3
1932	4	1952	0	1972	5	1992	0
1933	0	1953	2	1973	0	1993	3
1934	0	1954	0	1974	2	1994	1
1935	12	1955	1	1975	0	1995	0
1936	0	1956	0	1976	0	1996	3
1937	1	1957	3	1977	2	1997	4
1938	1	1958	2	1978	2	1998	0
1939	0	1959	0	1979	2	1999	3
1940	7	1960	0	1980	0	2000	10
1930s	**25**	**1950s**	**8**	**1970s**	**20**	**1990s**	**27**
Total switches 1921 to 2005 = 229 Average number of switches per decade =27 Note: Repeat identity switchers included with the year of each switch						2001	9
						2002	12
						2003	7
						2004	12
						2005	4
						2000s	**44**

was a major political bonus for the Conservatives and left the Progressives largely impotent. In W.L. Mackenzie King's notable phrase, Progressives became "Liberals in a Hurry". Two members switched immediately to the Liberals to play at least some role in King's government; others followed, as "Liberal Progressives" Still others, mostly members of an informal parliamentary "Ginger Group of radical Labour and Progressive MPs, broke

away to take up a United Farmers' of Alberta label and, eventually, to identify with the Depression-born Co-op-erative Commonwealth Federation (Farmer- Labour-So-cialist) or CCF.

Under its leader, J.S. Woodsworth, and influenced by the heir to his Winnipeg North-Centre constituency, the Rev. Stanley Knowles, the CCF was social-democratic in ideology but quite conservative in parliamentary affairs.

Its MPs normally struggled to master House of Commons procedure and to play by the rules, even if they were sometimes interpreted with some ingenuity to expand back-bencher influence. This made the CCF a contrast with other western-born political parties and sympathetic historians have claimed that the CCF became the agenda-setter for governments in the late-war and early postwar years.

Like other western-born parties, the CCF could benefit from Western resentment of a central-Canada-dominated political system. Ottawa was a long way from the West and, despite the ebullient optimism of the early decades of settlement, federal policies were almost invariably shaped with the larger populations of Ontario and Quebec in mind. Whatever the party in power, Westerners seldom felt adequately empowered, except perhaps during the Diefenbaker years in government. Quebec, too, frequently felt aggrieved, notably in the war years, when British and patriotic voices were raised for the conscription of reluctant Quebeckers, and later, when Quebec demands for a "special status" within Confederation were treated with scant respect by most anglophone Canadians. The lists of "switchers" include a disproportionate number of Quebec and Western MPs expressing their discontent with party labels they seldom controlled or which, in the case of the Progressives and, later, Reform, virtually legitimised an independent spirit.

As shown in Table 2 moves of discontented Créditistes and wartime Liberals give Quebec the largest number of switchers while Ontario and the Maritimes have the fewest.

Identifying Party Switchers

Who switches their party label during their parliamentary career? Is it a matter of finding oneself in the wrong party? Or does one's party abandon its MPs? Changing one's mind in any setting is positive evidence of the wisdom of responding to evidence. However, such an interpretation is, sadly, exceptional. Consistency may be a hobgoblin of tiny minds, but the mental energy many citizens give to understanding politics tends to be sadly small. Mind-changing is generally deplored, save for those whose adjustment conforms with one's own prejudices. One small consequence is that using the biographical data in the centennial edition of *The Canadian Directory of Parliament*[5] (my original intended reference frame) turns out to be quite inadequate. Most of the information was supplied directly or indirectly by members themselves, and no less than ten ignored any past aberrations in their party loyalty.

I have accepted a more elaborate though imperfect set of categorizations extracted fundamentally from the *Journals* of the Canadian House of Commons, published on the web by the Journals Branch/Direction des

Table 2: Party Switchers by Region and Decade							
Decade	British Columbia	Prairies	Ontario	Quebec	Atlantic	The North	Total by Decade
2001-2005	11	17	6	7	3	–	**44**
1991-2000	–	6	4	12	5	–	**27**
1981-1990	1	3	1	20	1	1	**27**
1971-1980	2	3	5	10	–	–	**20**
1961-1970	–	4	4	26	–	–	**34**
1951-1960	–	1	–	7	–	–	**8**
1941-1950	1	3	3	17	–	–	**24**
1931-1940	6	15	2	2	–	–	**25**
1921-1930	1	14	2	1	2	–	**20**
Total by Region	**22**	**66**	**27**	**102**	**11**	**1**	**229**

Note: Each case represents a single switch of party identity. For example, Thomas Caldwell, a New Brunswick Progressive, appears twice, because he switches his label twice but remained a Progressive MP. These cases include John Loney who won the Ontario riding of Bruce for the Progressive Conservatives in 1963 and 1965 and later won Edmonton North for the Liberals in 1993. Deborah Grey and Chuck Strahl pass from the Canadian Alliance to Democratic Representation to Independent, a two-step path shared by others, but returned to the Alliance by 2002, representing three switches each in two years.

Journaux.[6] This series is very much more complete than depending on self-identification, though cross-checking with the *Canadian Directory* for the pre-1967 period soon reveals its imperfections. Repeat switchers are often ignored, although repetition is fairly common, particularly when temporary schisms are resolved in the ranks of Social Credit, Progressive Conservatives and Canadian Alliance, and even more so when MPs profess themselves "Independent" Liberals or Conservatives. Facing an election with the burden of an unpopular government or leader, or with the prospect of being cut off from party funds may represent a sobering alternative.

Using a quite extensive definition of switchers, such as politicians who take a break from politics, usually with help from the voters, and then attempt a return with a different party, Canada's federal parliament has known about 166 "switchers" since 1921.[7] They include such distinguished Parliamentarians as Joe Clark, James Shaver Woodsworth, founder of the CCF, Alberta's ultra-Conservative rancher, Jack Horner and Belinda Stronach, a high-profile parliamentary celebrity.[8] (There were actually more than 200 switches but this includes individuals who changed parties more than once).

Did switchers find themselves at odds with their party. Indeed so. In some cases, such as the Liberals' Jag Bhaduria, whose resumé seemed to have a few unsubstantiated claims or Carolyn Parrish, an outspoken critic of President George W. Bush, or the Alliance's Jack Ramsay, whose value as a tough-minded Justice critic

was undermined by an RCMP investigation of his conduct while a member of the Force, their own parties acted to sever the connection.

After his Royal Commission on Price Spreads had pinned a number of prominent Canadian business leaders as Depression-era profiteers, Harry Stevens became an unacceptable colleague for R.B. Bennett's Conservative government. By forming his own Reconstruction Party, Stevens made his own break with his life-long party, although the votes he drew for his candidates in the general election of 1935 might actually have saved Bennett's majority. Although Stevens was the sole Reconstruction candidate elected, he rejoined his old party in 1938 after Bennett had retired to a British peerage. He did not run in 1940.

Abandoning a Fading Party

As shown in Table 3 many of the "switchers" have been refugees from vanished or fading political parties. When the Progressives won 65 seats in 1921, they presaged a multi-party system in Canada's Parliament that has sometimes faded but never died. The Progressives did not survive the 1930 election. Even leaders like Thomas Crerar and Robert Forke had had to choose between seeking influence with the government as "Liberal or "Liberal-Progressives" or righteous marginality by re-labelling themselves United Farmers of Alberta.

Similarly, the slow decay of Réal Caouette's substantial Quebec following after the 1962 federal election soon

Table 3: Party of Origin for Switchers by Decade											
	Lib	Cons/PC	CCF/NDP	Reform/CA	SC	Rall	Prog	BQ	Ind.	Other	Total
2001-2005	5	6	1	14	–	–	–	5	6	7	44
1991-2000	4	11	2	3	–	3	–	–	4	–	27
1981-1990	3	14	2	–	–	–	–	–	8	–	27
1971-1980	6	3	–	–	3	5	–	–	2	1	20
1961-1970	3	4	1	–	24	–	–	–	2	–	34
1951-1960	1	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	6	–	8
1941-1950	8	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	8	7	24
1931-1940	5	1	1	–	2	–	2	–	–	14	25
1921-1930	1	–	–	–	–	–	16	–	1	2	20
Total	**36**	**39**	**8**	**17**	**30**	**8**	**18**	**5**	**37**	**28**	**229**

Note: While few Members are elected as Independents, freedom from party discipline exercises a powerful but seemingly short-lived attraction for MPs since no group suffers proportionately more switches. "Other" parties include such temporary identities as the United Farmers of Alberta and Democratic Representation and such transient creations as Unity and Reconstruction.

led to a separate Ralliement des créditistes, followed by a partial and short-lived reunion. The death throes of the historic Conservative Party or its revival thanks to a take-over by the Canadian Alliance led to many label-changes which may well have been intensely ideological but equally in vain.

Apart from the first five years of the current decade and the notably passive 1950s, party-switching has been relatively consistent on a decade-by-decade basis of approximately twenty per decade.

As mentioned above, party-switching can be habit-forming. Most MPs who leave their party become Independents for a few days or months until they find their way to another political party and sometimes even to their former home. A cynic may be tempted to believe that prospects of victory under another label is a motive, but the electoral success rate of switchers has not been impressive. Perry Ryan of Toronto-Spadina left one of the safest Liberal seats in Canada after twenty years of incumbency to become a Conservative, a sacrificial way to become an ex-MP.

The Legitimacy of Switching

In 1974, the *Election Act* was amended to allow the candidate's party affiliation to appear with his or her name on a federal ballot. A pre-condition was certification by a party's leader. The specific source of this provision was a conflict in 1972 when Moncton's Mayor, Leonard Jones, had secured the Progressive Conservative nomination after making his anti-French language views nationally known. Since his candidacy would be an embarrassment for the Progressive Conservatives in Quebec and in other parts of Canada where the party was making a concerted bid for support, the leader, Robert Stanfield, tried to disown Jones but had no official means to do so. After 1974, all party leaders were given a powerful lever to control the presentation of a party's candidates. While the NDP, Bloc and Reform-Canadian Alliance have avoided use of the power, the Liberals have used the power to appoint candidates in a systematic attempt to attract stronger gender and ethnic balance in winnable ridings and in the resulting caucus.

Since voters can now vote for a party as well as a candidate, are their interests affected when a successful candidate refuses to represent the party for which he or she was elected? Is a candidate bound by the policies of the party he or she represents. Do voters have a claim to "Truth in Advertising"? Prior to 1974, a candidate was officially an "independent", and a significant part of any election campaign was to fix the memory of party affiliation in the electorate's mind. The 1974 amendment has relieved campaigns of that burden; can it be assumed to go farther in binding a candidate's right to switch to a different party allegiance?

When Mr. Ryan switched to the Conservatives while continuing to sit for Toronto-Spadina, one of the strongest Liberal seats in Ontario at the time, much partisan and editorial opinion insisted that his duty was not to switch but to resign, testing his new allegiance in a by-election. Toronto's more Conservative press recognized the issue but worried that the cost of a by-election was a sufficient deterrent. Mr. Ryan's fate was, of course, deferred until the ensuing general election. The issue recurs since partisans deplore defection as much as other partisans welcome a positive conversion.

Notes

1. See David Docherty, *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa: Life in the House of Commons* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997,) pp. 36-59.

2. From the statement attributed to President Andrew Jackson that "To the victors belong the spoils", literally patronage for appointments and contracts. Cynics have seen "Responsible government" as a means of removing such "spoils" from the Governor and his supporters and placing them under control of a government "responsible to the Legislature and therefore fully entitled to reward its dependable supporters. Routine assumptions about patronage and the spoils system have been challenged by political reformers, though one of the most ardent of them, Sir Robert Borden, needed the accident of a coalition "Unionist" coalition government to make serious headway with civil service reform. One reason for the ensuing collapse of Unionism was the disturbing absence of gratitude among Canadian voters for a government which had banned liquor, given women the vote and tried to professionalize the public service of Canada. Hardened politicians were not surprised.

3. Docherty, *op cit* 141, p. 254.

4. For an extended and sometimes critical examination of the issue, see Docherty, David C., *Legislatures* (Vancouver, UBC Press, Canadian Democratic Audit Project, 2005). Professor Docherty makes little direct reference to the "party switcher" aspect of MP behaviour.

5. Johnson, J.K., *The Canadian Directory of Parliament, 1867-1967* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1968).

6. See http://www.parl.gc.ca/information / about/people/house/HofCChange.asp?=lang=E.

7. In categorizing 166 MPs as "switchers" I have tried not to double-count those who keep moving after their original choice, though each shift is counted and indicated separately.

8. This article was written before the decision of David Emerson to switch from the Liberals to the Conservatives in February 2006.