

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Brexit lessons for Canada

Editor's note: This story was written before the October 21 Canadian federal election.

Politicians have messed up the UK and are messing up Canada.

This was expected to be our final medical class reunion. We gazed at the mighty, magnificent Castle of Edinburgh from the fourth-floor balcony of the New Club on Princes Street ("New" being a relative term – the club was founded in 1787.) What I didn't expect was the possibility that the 312-year-old Union of the Scots and English Parliaments (1707) may be in its last years as a result of the incompetence of British politicians and the obdurate pig-headedness of the politicians of the European Union – the EU being an organization like the Hotel California: you can checkout any time you like, but you can never leave.

After an ill-considered British referendum, the vote to leave the EU in the whole of the United Kingdom was 52% for leaving and 48% against. But in Scotland the result was different: only 38% for leaving and 62% voting to remain. Unwillingly being dragged out of the EU, the Scots are aware that in an isolated UK, the 62 million people in the rest of the UK would hold financial and political sway over the mere 5.5 million Scots.

Scottish hearts and minds have been focused on the likelihood of a second independence referendum with an optimistic plan to re-join the EU as an independent country. How could British politicians have misread the tea leaves as badly as they did? Easy – and it is happening right here in Canada. Here, we have many fixed-agenda federal politicians lacking the old art of compromise.

In Scotland, I watched astonished as thousands of people gathered at Holyrood Palace on a grey, rainy Saturday afternoon and marched up the ancient High Street waving St. Andrew flags (the blue and white cross called the "Saltire" – a diagonal X-shaped cross on which St. Andrew, the Patron Saint of Scotland, was crucified.) A Trumpian crowd estimate might be 50,000 but it was probably nearer 25,000 to 35,000 people marching in the demonstration.

I'd flown from Calgary to London on October 2, leaving one of the most depressing election campaigns in my 45 years in this country. It had been a bad two months. Another USA president going through the theatrics of impeachment; a slight, 16-year-old Swedish girl – a Joan of Arc for this mad world – haranguing the United Nations Assembly to applause with her existential panic at the shortly approaching extinction of life in this world; and the people of Hong Kong brave and determined but with a forlorn hope of establishing some form of democracy.



Dr. Alexander Paterson visiting Edinburgh: "As for the dismal Canadian election, I could not believe the volume of lies, misrepresentation and half-truths coupled with vote-bribery using other people's money."

As for the dismal Canadian election, I could not believe the volume of lies, misrepresentation and half-truths coupled with vote-bribery using other people's money. I could not believe the Canadian electorate was responding to the blue-sky blather characterizing this demonstration of democracy for which brave young people in Hong Kong are striving against a thuggish "communism with Chinese characteristics." However, The Digital Democracy Project (a project from McGill's Max Bell School) reports that there's little evidence of foreign hacking and false ads on Facebook – maybe because few "facts" are being put out – it's mostly been sloganeering.

But then I remembered Joe Schmo's Restaurant in Sicamous, BC – a lunch spot 50 yards from Tim Hortons, half-way on the drive from Calgary to Vancouver. It's an upscale biker kind of joint that has placards stuck on the wall with wisdom like "You don't have to be crazy to work here. But it helps." The cod and chips are OK at Joe's, and the service quick. One new placard I hadn't noticed before read: "Half the voters in this country have less than average intelligence."

Maybe Joe has something there. And maybe the politicians are justified in assessing the electorate as being so dumb as to be unable to see the hornswogging going on:

- J. Singh promising (without blinking) everything free from teeth to toes to toupées.
- The Sheik of Araby pointing the finger of scorn and faux outrage at what anybody said 10 to 15 years ago years ago about gay marriage, abortion or the LGBTQ community, and peppering every identifiable group with a few million bucks.
- Smiley Scheer doing the same thing but more conservatively, only a few hundred thousand here and there.
- Ms May with her crucifix and photo-shopped metal straw. “Jesus Christ is my hero,” she said. And then apologized for saying such an outrageously religious thing.

Or maybe I’m just losing my sense of humor about all this BS. What a parcel of rogues for a nation!

As predicted, everyone is “moving forward” and all this moving forward will increase the national debt until over 30% of revenues will go to bond holders as interest payments.

As for health care, it’s drowning in the pond – no – slough of promises. The Liberals have backed away from immediate national pharmacare, although still blowing \$6 billion to develop it. It will be “tied to outcomes and negotiated with the provinces and territories.” How will that go over with hard noses like Doug Ford in Ontario? Doug will be more intent on poking Blackface in the eye.

The rest of their health care platform is blarney. “We will strengthen health care and make sure all Canadians get the quality care they deserve ... and will collaborate with the provinces and territories to move forward with more accessible care, shorter wait times, and better health outcomes, and make sure that every Canadian has access to a family doctor or primary health care team, improving the quality of care for the nearly 5 million Canadians who today lack access; set clear national standards for access to mental health services so Canadians can get the support they need quickly, when they need it most; continue to make home care and palliative care more available across the country.” I thought the provinces did all that. Sounds like they’re opening up private health care clinics – but possibly not.

At the time of writing this article, the Conservatives have not released their official platform on health care but according to *Maclean’s* magazine:

“Conservatives have pledged to increase health transfer payments by at least 3% annually and uphold other parts of the health accord. They’ve dismissed Pharmacare, instead focusing on those not covered provincially or at work. The party has promised \$1.5 billion to buy more MRI and CT machines and to expand eligibility for the disability tax credit.”

The NDP platform is so much wishful thinking that it can be summed up by bringing up any medical topic or subject – just rest assured, it will be free. This is so far from Tom Mulcair’s sensible pledge in the 2015 election to attempt to balance the budget that they do not deserve any meaningful discussion in serious magazines such as *Alberta Doctors’ Digest*. I don’t sing the praises of Singh – anyone can trot out slogans and be amusing with a fantasy platform that none can be bothered challenging. They need a new leader. Ms Notley?

The Greens, by focusing on the climate climacteric, have a less detailed health care platform. They will boost funding to train doctors and nurses, and expand midwifery programs and extend health care coverage to include universal pharmacare plus dental care for low-income Canadians. I do like their promises to tackle health threats posed by pollution and toxic chemicals. The opioid crisis? They would decriminalize all drug possession. Phew ... they may take seats from the NDP and the Liberals especially in BC, so the Greens may be the party holding a balance of power as they do in BC.

The English debate was a farcical blabber of people shouting over each other, being refereed by a bunch of central Canadian so-called "moderators." The French debate was better moderated. I don't understand the problem of moderating these debates. When people start talking over each other, you shut off their microphones and give them a yellow card. A second offence and they're red carded. It's hard being a leader moderated by patsies. Mr. Trump (late of "You're Fired") should be brought in as moderator next time.

But paying for all this beneficence? There has been minimal talk of Canada's energy industry and its key role in the prosperity of this country. Citizens of Alberta are quietly fuming over our funding of transfer payments (largely to a shoulder shrugging, ungrateful Quebec) and the forked-tongued talk about pipelines and their failure to get built, the blatant favoritism shown to central Canada, especially Quebec, with the SNC-Lavalin outrage and the Liberal Party's cozy relationship with that company. And surely people realize there will be a recession soon.

And I am hearing plenty of people at dinners and parties (who in previous years were happy to contribute to the wealth of the country) now asking: "Remind me how Alberta benefits from Canadian federalism," with the answer being: "Precious little. Your role is not to benefit but to keep the money flowing. And be the butt for the sole cause of climate change."

A critical part of the country is being shunted aside and is expected to put up with it – keep on supplying the dollars, says the rest of Canada, and let us lecture you on the harm you're doing and how to run your business.

It takes little time for a fringe faction to become mainstream. All it takes is a sense of injustice, of being ignored and being taken for granted, for the forces of independence to take hold.

"What do we want?" shouted crowd leaders in Edinburgh.

"Independence!"

"When do we want it?"

"Now!"

A minority Liberal government looks likely after the election with a ruling majority possible with support of the Greens and/or NDP. This is the worst outcome possible for Alberta and by extension, Canada. It will enfeeble even further the resource economy, decrease investment and government revenues, vastly increase state expenditures which will have to be covered by taxes, all with a recession likely soon. And it will do very little about global climate change given that Canada's emissions are less than 2%.

The hypocrisy of the current federal government has been staggering (the SNC-Lavalin affair and the firing of capable ministers, the purchase and non-support of the TMX pipeline, the prosecution of Vice-Admiral Norman, etc.); the antics of the prime minister in his pursuit of a career in the United Nations have been embarrassing (dressing up in India; black face, brown face and dark face; doing nothing about illegal immigration; camping and canoeing grants) to say nothing about jetting around the country with two airplanes, though I will say he can answer hostile questions in a cool, capable way.

If actions here are anything like events in Scotland, the consequence of a weak, fractured, central government in Ottawa will be an upsurge of western anger, a referendum on transfer payments, and increased support for independence. In contrast to Scotland, which is a ready-made independent country with its own legal system, education system, religion and currency capability, a province like Alberta is unlikely to be able to follow through on threats of independence. But there will also be increased support for the Bloc Quebecois looking again at independence. Sounds far-fetched? No, it isn't. Preparations are even now being made as we turn away from the fake debates, the hypocritical finger-pointing, the smarmy, smug virtue signalling.

Federalism in Canada is a Hotel California ("Checking out, sir? But you can't leave.") It's not working for important swathes of the country.

I only hope Joe Schmo's Restaurant placard in Sicamous is wrong, and that the mid-range of smarts is higher than the average.

Banner photo credit: Dr. Alexander Patterson