NORTH AMERICA 19.03.2019 | Raoul Gebert

Trudeau in trouble

Once certain to be re-elected, Canada's Prime Minister Trudeau is now mired in a corruption scandal

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Canada is in the midst of an election campaign, with all seats in the Lower House up for grabs on 21 October 2019. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, the red-hot favourite as recently as last summer, heads into the crucial stage of the campaign under growing pressure. At minus 20 per cent, Trudeau's personal approval ratings have sunk to an all-time low, while the opposition Tories are at least neck-and-neck with his party in recent polls. However, the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) is still struggling to take advantage of the situation. Only around 15 per cent of Canadian voters think their leader Jagmeet Singh would make a good prime minister.

The cause of the upheaval is the SNC-Lavalin scandal that broke at the beginning of this year. The Canadian engineering firm has been tainted by bribery allegations. In the meantime, the justice minister and Trudeau's principal secretary have lost their jobs over political pressure on the judiciary from the prime minister's office. Then, on 4 March, the president of the Treasury Board, a popular politician, resigned in protest. Time will tell whether the prime minister endures a similar fate or rides out the storm.

Still hugely popular abroad, the Canadian premier could indirectly benefit from a new right-wing populist party founded by the former Conservative foreign minister Maxime Bernier in 2018. He has caused a split in the official opposition with a staunchly libertarian yet populist and anti-immigration agenda. So far, the damage has been at a manageable level for Conservative opposition leader Andrew Scheer. However, in the long run, he will have to fight on two fronts against the right-wingers in his own ranks while courting disaffected liberals in the centre.

An open race

Meanwhile, the leader of the social democratic NDP, Jagmeet Singh, still remains largely unknown. As he was only elected to the House of Commons in a by-election in February 2019, he still has to get used to parliamentary life in Ottawa. Accordingly, the NDP has been unable to truly capitalise on the SNC-Lavalin scandal so far.

Despite making history as the first non-white Canadian party leader, Jagmeet Singh has to first keep his own team together. A record number of NDP MPs are likely to stand down in 2019, and the party is still heavily in debt following its electoral setback in 2015. In addition, as a practising Sikh, Singh has met resistance in the highly secular province of Quebec, where 16 of the 44 elected social democrats hail from. For instance, the NDP lost to the beleaguered Liberal Party in a by-election in the Outremont constituency.

Ultimately, it remains to be seen whether right-wing populist and social democratic alternatives will gain momentum or whether there will actually be a face-off between the measured Andrew Scheer and the hip liberal Prime Minister Trudeau. There are also two regional parties in the mix: the separatist Bloc Québécois in Quebec under its popular new leader Yves-François Blanchet and, in British Columbia, the Green Party, headed by its long-serving leader Elizabeth May. So with six parties and a first-past-the-post system, the outcome in many of the 338 constituencies is anybody's guess. In addition, Canadians tend to be floating voters, and turnarounds of up to 20 per cent in opinion polls are not uncommon.



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