

Does Canada blaze the trail?

An ageing, uncharismatic finance minister who expects to inherit the job of prime minister; an established centre-left party which has been in power for over a decade and no longer excites; a young Tory challenger who tacks leftward to beat back the fear of conservative nastiness among middle-class voters and the media; the prospect of a hung parliament. Sound familiar? Of course. This describes the situation in Canada before Stephen Harper's narrow Conservative victory over Paul Martin in the election in January. Beyond the British parallel, the more serious point is the long-standing shift towards social liberalism in the politics of many western societies. The political scientist Ronald Inglehart developed the concept of "postmaterialism" in the 1980s to describe this phenomenon. At the time, many were distracted by the neoclassical economic revolutions of Thatcher and Reagan. But the trends spotted by Inglehart slowly emerged. Only in America, where evangelical Protestants' fertility countered the liberal trend, were things different. Today, those born after 1949 dominate the media and form a majority of the western electorate. All conservative parties must bend to their wishes if they hope to be elected. Much less clear is what Gordon Brown can do to avoid Martin's fate.