

The St Laurent Concordat  
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Stephen Harper faces a difficult task in squaring the war in Afghanistan with his political need to win more seats in Quebec. French-speaking Canada is traditionally anti-war, indeed almost pacifist in its outlook, and opinion surveys demonstrate strong antipathy to the Canadian commitment in Kandahar. Moreover, Quebec's tolerance for large defence expenditures is limited so long as the fiscal imbalance dominates discussions between the Prime Minister and Premier Jean Charest. At the same time, opinion polls make clear that Quebec is the most anti-American region in Canada, almost visceral in its reaction to President George Bush and all his works. All this poses a serious problem for the Conservatives and their chances of forming a majority government.

There is, however, a clear precedent for dealing with Quebec in such situations. Louis St Laurent, the Liberal Prime Minister from 1948 to 1957, had most of the same problems to handle, and he did so well enough to win vast majorities in Quebec in the three general elections he fought.

St Laurent joined Mackenzie King's wartime government as Justice minister in late 1941, and he supported conscription in November 1944. He then won the leadership of the Liberal Party and became Prime Minister in the fall of 1948. He took Canada into the North Atlantic Treaty, the nation's first peacetime military alliance and won a smashing victory in the election of 1949. In Quebec, his Liberals took 68 of 73 seats. The next year, war broke out in Korea, and St Laurent committed the country to the United Nations "police action," sending ships, aircraft and an infantry brigade. There were no huzzas from Quebecois, but neither were there demonstrations in the street.

Soon after going into the Korea, St Laurent sent an air division of fighter aircraft and a brigade group of infantry to Germany as part of Canada's commitment to NATO. His government poured huge sums into rearmament, the military rising in strength toward 120,000 while defence spending crested at over 7 percent of GDP. No one cheered in Quebec, but in the 1953 election, St Laurent's Liberals won 66 of 75 seats and another big majority. Even in 1957, the election St Laurent lost to John Diefenbaker, he held on to the party's Quebec base, taking 62 of 75 ridings.

How did St Laurent do it? First, he was a good politician. "Uncle Louis" could kiss babies with the best of them, but he was also highly intelligent, arguably the equal of Pierre Trudeau or Stephen Harper in brainpower. He thought in terms of Canada's national interests, understood the threat Soviet Communism posed to democracy, and recognized that Korea was as much a front in the Cold War as was Western Europe. He knew Canada had to cooperate with the United States at home, in Europe, and in Korea. If war with the Soviets had erupted, he intended to implement conscription.

But St Laurent was a francophone, and he understood that Quebec's thinking about foreign and defence policy still lagged behind the rest of Canada. The opinion polls made this clear. What to do? First, he went regularly into Quebec and spoke about the need for Canada to work with its allies. In one speech at a service club, he pointed to a bishop at his table and, referring to how the Soviets had imprisoned a Hungarian cardinal, said he did not want to see this happen in Quebec. Such messaging resonated. At the same time, the Liberals ensured that Quebec got its full share of military bases and defence contracts.

There was an implicit bargain in place there, a concordat between the federal government and Quebec. We don't like the military build-up, Quebec said, but we trust this Prime Minister to do nothing rash and to see that Quebec's needs are met. Three successive Liberal sweeps in Quebec showed the power of the deal.

That concordat is what Stephen Harper is creating anew. Harper too is a national interest politician, and (like most English-speaking Canadians) he is ahead of the public mood in Quebec. But the new Prime Minister will ensure that Quebec gets its full share and more of the contracts for the rebuilding of the Canadian Forces. He has already given Quebec a seat in the Canadian delegation to UNESCO, a long sought goal of the province. In return, Harper must believe, Quebec's opposition to the Afghan War and to the Conservatives who have made it their own, will remain muted enough to allow him to win his majority.

Stephen Harper, consciously or not, has set out along the path Louis St Laurent blazed a half-century ago. His Liberal predecessor won Quebec's trust by persuading French Canada's that he would do nothing rash. Harper has begun that process. Much is at stake for the Conservatives in Quebec, but Harper has begun well in staking out the terms of a new concordat.

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