

This week in history: May 30-June 5

29 May 2022

25 years ago: Parliamentary elections reveal new stage in the fracturing of Canada

On June 2, 1997, elections were held in Canada which signaled a new stage in the fracturing of the country. It resulted in a weakened Liberal government, a regionally polarized Parliament, and a further strengthening of the centrifugal forces tearing apart the Canadian state.

The Liberals owed their slim, nine-seat majority in the 301-member House of Commons to Ontario, where they won 49 percent of the popular vote and captured 101 of the 103 Commons seats. Canada's other major regions—the Atlantic provinces, Quebec and the West—all gave a majority of their seats to the opposition. But in each of these regions, the main rivals to the Liberals was a different party and one with a radically different vision of Canada's constitutional order.

The Reform Party, which won 60 of the 88 seats in the four Western provinces and the title of Official Opposition in Parliament, demanded that the provinces be given greater autonomy and the West a larger say in determining national policy. It fanned anti-Quebec chauvinism, denounced the Liberals, Tories and the social democratic New Democratic Party for “appeasing” Quebec. The Bloc Québécois, which captured 44 of Quebec's 75 seats, advocated that Canada's majority French-speaking province secede and establish an independent state. The smaller Atlantic provinces were divided between the Tories (Progressive Conservatives) and the trade union-based NDP, the traditional “right” and “left” oppositions to the Liberals within the framework of bourgeois politics and the Canadian state.

The makeup of the new parliament confirmed the breakdown of the traditional two-party system, in which the Liberals and the Tories alternated in government. Official politics were riven by profound pressures that threatened to result in the breakup of Canada into two or more states.

The regional polarization of Canadian politics had two fundamental causes.

The Canadian nation-state had been undermined by the development of a global economic order in which production was no longer organized primarily to serve national markets. As Canada's economy had become increasingly bound to that of the US, regionally based factions of big business emerged that had divergent and often opposed interests because they had different connections to the much larger US economy and to the continent-wide economic union created by the North American Free Trade Agreement, which had taken effect in 1994.

To secure access to the US market and achieve the economies of scale needed to make Canadian capitalism internationally competitive, the Canadian ruling class, under the 1988 free trade agreement with the US, scrapped the century-old National Economic Policy. With poorer regions of the country no longer having protected markets, sections of big business in more prosperous parts of the country saw little reason to share federal resources through “equalization payments” and other transfers aimed at mitigating regional disparities.

50 years ago: Poet Joseph Brodsky expelled from the Soviet Union

On June 4, 1972, the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky was expelled from the Soviet Union. Brodsky had been part of the wave of Soviet dissidents, mainly artists and intellectuals, that emerged in the 1960s and openly criticized the authoritarianism of the Stalinist regime. At the same time, these dissidents could see no other way to a new era of democracy outside of capitalist restoration in the USSR.

Brodsky had been a student of poet Anna Akhmatova in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) where the anti-Soviet writers were hounded by KGB agents and had their writings censored by the authorities. In 1964 Brodsky was sentenced by the Stalinist regime for the crime of “social parasitism”—the ultimate irony to be handed down from the distributors of inequality in the USSR.

The charge was a blatant suppression of political criticism. The court ruled that Brodsky was never officially recognized by the state as a poet and had not sufficiently contributed to the nation. During the trial the judge asked, “Who has recognized you as a poet? Who has enrolled you in the ranks of poets?” Brodsky replied, “No one. Who enrolled me in the ranks of the human race?” Brodsky was sentenced to spend 18 months in the remote Arctic village of Norenskaya.

Brodsky's suppression made him a darling of establishment intellectual circles in the West, who jumped at the opportunity to portray the repression of democratic rights under Stalinism as the inevitable outcome of socialism. In fact, outside of the dissident artistic circles within Russia, Brodsky had little notoriety until the transcript of his trial was published and widely circulated abroad.

After international pressure drew attention to the Brodsky case his sentence was commuted and he was allowed to return to Leningrad in 1965. For the next seven years he continued to write, developing works that denounced social life under Stalinism but are also deeply pessimistic and cold.

“This whole realm is just static. Imagining the output of lead and cast iron, and shaking your stupefied head,
you recall bayonets, Cossack whips of old power.
Yet the eagles land like good lodestones on the scraps.
Even wicker chairs here are built mostly with bolts and with nuts,
one is bound to discover.

—from “The End of a Beautiful Era” written 1969

Brodsky continued to receive great acclaim in the US where his works were published more widely than in the Soviet Union. Eventually, considering his presence to be too much a thorn in their side, the Stalinist bureaucracy expelled Brodsky from the USSR in June 1972.

After a short stay in Vienna, Brodsky made his way to the US where he was immediately promoted within the bourgeois intelligentsia. Brodsky became a professor at the University of Michigan, and toured and taught at several other elite universities. He would go on to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1987 and later became a Poet Laureate of the United States.

Brodsky's generation of Soviet dissidents at times demonstrated great courage and intransigence against the repressions of the Stalinist regime.

However, divorced from a materialist understanding of history, Brodsky had become deeply hostile to socialism and sought out the mythical “democracy” promised by capitalists waiting to carve up the nationalized property in the USSR.

75 years ago: US unveils Marshall Plan aimed at ensuring economic dominance of Europe

On June 5, 1947, US Secretary of State George C. Marshall unveiled a new doctrine in a speech at Harvard University, under which the United States would take primary responsibility for the economic reconstruction of Europe, following the devastation of World War II. The foreign policy initiative, rapidly dubbed the Marshall Plan, was developed by the Democratic Party administration of President Harry Truman and won rapid support from the Republican-controlled Congress.

Marshall’s speech followed the breakdown of talks between the US, Britain, France and the Soviet Union at the Moscow conference, which lasted six weeks, until April 24.

The Soviets had rejected the proposed terms of peace treaties with Germany and Austria. They charged that the US was unilaterally reneging on earlier agreements. These included that Germany would be compelled to pay vast reparations to the Soviet Union for the war of aggression which killed some 30 million Soviet citizens, and that the development of German heavy industry would be suppressed to prevent the threat of a revived German imperialism.

In his speech, Marshall spoke in general terms about the economic dislocation resulting from the war. Marshall warned that this threatened a breakdown of world economy. “Aside from the demoralizing effect on the world at large and the possibilities of disturbances arising as a result of the desperation of the people concerned, the consequences to the economy of the United States should be apparent to all,” he stated. The aim of a US-funded recovery of Europe would be to “permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist.”

Marshall made a number of references to the dangers of mass starvation and poverty. At the time, however, his administration was limiting food rations in US-occupied Germany, in a policy that resulted in major demonstrations.

The real aim of the plan was to set in place the economic structures that would ensure US hegemony over Europe. In addition to developing markets, the plan would entail US government assistance to American businesses to make lucrative investments and trade deals with European states.

The US would also offer the economic assistance to states within the orbit of the Soviet Union. This was both an attempt to develop the penetration of American capital into Eastern Europe, and to undermine the development of a Soviet sphere of influence, under conditions of the development of the Cold War.

The unveiling of the Marshall Plan, which would be adopted by Congress in early 1948, followed the outlining of the Truman Doctrine a month before. Under the latter policy, the US would intervene anywhere in the world that the purported interests of “freedom” and “democracy” were threatened. The first concrete application of this program was support for extreme right-wing forces in Greece waging a brutal civil war against a popular uprising led by the Communist Party.

On May 31, 1922, in a speech to the British House of Commons, Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill warned the Irish leaders to adhere by the conditions of the recent Anglo-Irish Treaty, which had established the Irish Free State as part of the British Commonwealth and required officials to take an oath of loyalty to the British crown. The treaty codified the separation of Ireland into a northern section, predominantly Protestant and ruled directly by Britain, and a southern section, predominantly Catholic and considerably larger, with nominal independence.

Churchill and British imperialism were concerned about the pact for the upcoming Irish elections that had been made a week earlier between the two wings within the Irish Nationalist organization, Sinn Féin.

One side, led by Michael Collins along with a slight majority of the Dáil Éireann, the Irish nationalist assembly, supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty; the other, led by Eamon de Valera, the former President of the Republic, opposed the treaty, along with a substantial section of the leadership of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which had fought the British in the Irish War of Independence from 1919 to 1921. Violence had already broken out between the two factions.

In his speech, Churchill, concerned that a movement could emerge that would take Ireland completely away from British subjection, compared developments there to the revolutionary events in Russia, which had resulted in the October Revolution in 1917: “Will Ireland ... wander down these chasms which have already engulfed the great Russian people?”

Churchill then told the parliament—and the Irish nationalists, including Michael Collins, who were in the spectators’ galleries: “We shall not in any circumstances agree to a deviation from the treaty, either in strict letter or honest spirit.” He then threatened to mobilize the British garrison still in Dublin.

The threats of renewed war with the British effectively destroyed the electoral pact, which would have resulted in a coalition government, and the two factions of the nationalist movement ran as separate parties.

The pro-treaty “Free Staters” won a majority. The British continued to interfere and by the summer, the Free State, armed by the British, was fighting a civil war with the Anti-Treaty elements in the IRA.



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100 years ago: Churchill warns Irish nationalists