The dish is back. Justin Trudeau can continue his unspoken campaign to be recognised as the best-looking world leader since Ireland’s Mary Robinson, as he has been re-elected to a third term as Prime Minister of Canada.

In many respects this 20th September contest was a non-entity of an election. Trudeau was hoping for a majority, which would mean 170 or more seats, but his Liberals are going to end up with only small gains, if any - the projection is 158 seats, one more than previously.

The opposition Conservatives made little real impact, and will also finish in around the same place as last time. The New Democrats, Canada’s equivalent of Labour, repeated their poor showing of two years ago, and the Parti Quebecois gained a bare plurality of seats in Quebec, nowhere near enough to make the separatist case credible again.

So it will be business as usual in Canada, with a minority Liberal government kept in power by the NDP, and the fact that even its opponents don’t have any great argument with it. But this government, however similar to the previous one, will be walking into a very different situation when it returns to office.

Trudeau just can’t help shaking people up. Having won from a distant third place in 2015, he has now raised a
question few people wanted shoved in their faces – because one of the problems of democracy is that no one knows the answer to it, as this election result proved.

What exactly do people want from the leaders of democratic countries? Firmness or responsiveness? Inclusivity or exclusion? Some have a gift for taking the right steps, some don’t. But you can’t govern by consent, or expect a particular result from doing so, when nobody knows what they want.

**Big guy, small legitimacy**

The pandemic has created a situation very similar to wartime in many countries. Increasingly, things are being done by diktat, which we are told is necessary. However there is only so far people will accept this, or accept particular people making the rules. The voters remember that their government is only there because the public were consulted, and they aren’t being any more.

The scenario in Canada was a very familiar one. The present government was elected in 2019, before the pandemic. As the people in charge, they were left holding the baby, leading the country through a situation they hadn’t been elected to address.

If the various parties had stood for election then on manifestos which outlined what they would do in the event of a global pandemic, and nothing else, the result might have been different. The right people to lead in peace are not always, or even often, the right people to lead in the very different environment of war, crisis and disaster.

So Trudeau was faced with the usual choice. The government was the government, whether or not anyone wanted it to lead the country at such a time. It had to get on with the job of rolling out a response to the pandemic, whether or not it had a policy, whether or not it had the expertise.

There is a saying in the US, in reference to the practice of electing public officials – “There is no Democratic or Republican way to sweep the streets”. Even if most voters have turned against the government they elected, it has to do what is necessary, free of ideology, and be seen above all to be governing for the whole country, not just its supporters.

The choices were: do I stay in power, perhaps forever, because a crisis demands stable, consistent and effective leadership? Or do I ask the public whether they want me to stay, or bring in someone elected to do this specific job of crisis response, which no one specifically elected me to do?

Either choice has its drawbacks. Stay in power, and you could prove inadequate, or be seen as clinging on for the sake of it. The less people can control who governs them, the more they are likely to complain about what their elected governments do.

If you go to the public, you can come across as running away from responsibility, creating uncertainty and expense instead of providing leadership. The public may be more interested in what the government is going to do to help them than who is in that government, and elections will only get in the way.

Trudeau took both options – dealing with the pandemic, then asking the public what they thought about how he was doing it. The next Canadian election wasn’t due for another two years, it wasn’t a case where regular scheduled elections had been postponed indefinitely due to the circumstances.

But having grappled with the problem and put down tangible markers, Trudeau then asked Canadians whether he should carry on that way, or let someone else do something different. The response was - you can stay where you are, but you can’t do what you like.

Canada doesn’t want to make Trudeau its knight in shining armour, who will lead it through the pandemic to better times. Despite his claims, there is no mandate for him to fulfil his programme, only to carry on holding the reins because no one else has come along who is any better.

The new government will be in zugzwang. It has to make moves because it has been lumbered with doing so. If it offers too much vision, it will be reminded that it is only there as a minority, on sufferance. If it appeals to the public for guidance too much, it won’t be doing the job it has been elected for, with fatal consequences for some.

But what else is a crisis period government supposed to do? History gives us no clue as to whether it should go this way or that in a democracy. The people themselves don’t know what they want, or who to blame, or what to do about it – and when their leaders can’t afford to upset them, this presents an existential problem deeper than any war or
pandemic.

**Yeah but, no but**

The Canadian scenario has been played out before in other places. Often the end result has been the same, and as now, no one knows whether that is a good or bad thing, and where it leaves them.

A well-remembered example was Edward Heath’s calling of the February 1974 election in the UK. At a time now distinguished from others by the amount of industrial unrest his country faced, The National Union of Mineworkers went on strike demanding better pay and conditions.

As the Arab boycott was in full swing, the oil price had risen sharply, increasing the dependence on coal. Heath’s response included imposing a three day week for industry in order to preserve precious fuel stocks, and make a political point.

For some, the miners union was holding the country to ransom by threatening to starve the country into submission, when the government had been elected by the people and the miners’ leaders only by their own members. For others, Heath and his government had caused the trouble by their failed industrial relations policy. For them, the miners were the people, the government the unrepresentative force.

When the conflict between the two became too great Heath sought vindication for his position by betting most voters would take the former view, bombarded as they were with newspaper propaganda about trade unions destroying democracy. He called an election on the platform “Who Governs?” Then he was surprised that people wanted to think about other things, and cast their votes for other reasons, because no one could answer that question.

Some, and particularly his own supporters, thought Heath was wrong to call an election at a time of national crisis, instead of leading the country through that crisis. Others felt that it was only fair that the people should decide who should resolve a crisis which hadn’t been there when the government was elected, regardless of whether they wanted the government to stay or go.

But both sides knew the other side had a case, and there was no one definitive answer. No one knew either what to do about the miners’ strike, so could not support either side, which is what voting Labour, the party of the trade unions, would have meant.

Heath’s support ebbed away until he gained a plurality of votes, but slightly fewer seats than Labour, with neither side near a majority. As in Canada, the UK uses first past the post, which distorts the relationship between votes cast and seats won.

The Liberals had their best showing in almost 50 years, and other parties also won a smattering of seats. What did it mean? No one could answer the question of whether Heath or the miners should govern, and instead preferred to cast a plague on both houses, rather than try and answer it.

Heath eventually had to resign because he couldn’t get the Liberals to keep him in power, not least because they had gained all these new votes from people who wanted Heath out. In came Labour with a minority government of their own. This pacified the miners, but achieved little else.

Eventually Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, feeling he had no mandate without a majority, did what Justin Trudeau did and called in early election, in October the same year, which like this last Canadian election was dubbed “the election nobody wanted”. He got his majority, but only just – by one seat, a form of “damning with faint praise”.

Still no one wanted to answer the question of whether a Prime Minister should lead and be damned or ask and be damned anyway. The one seat majority soon vanished, the industrial problems got worse, the government ignored a number of parliamentary defeats which would have made other governments resign but still didn’t provide any effective leadership.

Margaret Thatcher then came along with a “sod you all” style of leadership and was attacked in the same way by the same sides. Elected to be such a strong and different leader, she was then vilified for doing so. It is hardly surprising that her name was later adopted, as an in-joke, for one the characters in Due South, the well-known Canadian TV series.

**Whose fault is it now?**
So what does Trudeau do now? Plough ahead, and everyone will remember the charges that his election was a vanity project, or simple power grab. Keep asking for public support, and that public will wonder why he is Prime Minister at all.

As always in a democracy, it comes down to exactly who is being consulted. If the people seen to have a voice are also felt to be representative, the people feel they are in charge, and working in tandem with the government. If people don’t relate to the people believed to have influence, they feel the government is imposing everything on them, even though their voting rights and civil rights are in no way different from the first case.

A leader is expected to guide their country without question when they have people around them the public trusts. As was said of Lloyd George after his success in the First World War with cross party support, “He can be dictator for life if he wishes”. When people don’t trust the figures around the leader to reflect their own views, they want a choice in who leads them. But in neither case do they actually know what they want their leaders to do, or even want to find out.

Liberal democracy works effectively for more people, more of the time, than any other system yet devised. Until that is you ask people what they want their democracy to be. What is the balance, what is it designed to achieve, who should feel most at home within it?

Democracy can’t survive if the people don’t know what they want. With Trudeau, Canada had the chance to lead everyone to the Promised Land. Now it knows that it wouldn’t recognise the road to the Promised Land if it saw it - and unfortunately, Trudeau himself is likely to be the first leader sacrificed to try and cover that up.

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