



Campbell Strategies

The Election No One Wants?

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On Friday March 25, the Harper government was defeated on a motion of non-confidence, triggering a Federal election which will take place on May 2, 2011. Our resident Tory and Liberal political pundits, not surprisingly, have views on the upcoming election. Please see the opinion pieces below by Paul Brown and Barry Campbell.

FOR THE TORIES: INVEIGHING WE WILL GO
- By Paul Brown

Canada is changing but the Liberal Party and their media acolytes are not. Like aging hippies spinning Grateful Dead records recalling drug induced euphoria, the Liberal faithful still spin the Trudeau myths that cloud the reality of failed governance. Current Liberal policies are a rehash of old Liberal bromides, and their leader is an attempted resurrection of their lost and flawed hero. In the meantime Canadians have moved on. And, so too has the Conservative Party.

The political party who put the phrase "peace, order and good government" in Canada's founding document has demonstrated what the phrase means in 21st Century Canada. Common sense economic policies, principled foreign policy, and a balanced approach to the federation put Stephen Harper and the Conservative Party at one with the times.

Prime Minister Harper has built a new Conservative Party whose support in multicultural communities around shared Canadian values has left Liberals

gawking in frustration. While Quebec still seems enamored with the irrelevant Bloc Quebecois, the emerging Conservative base in suburban Canada is beginning to point to breakthroughs in B.C., Atlantic Canada, suburban Ontario and, even Toronto. A look at but a few of the Conservative candidates in Ontario tells a tale of a remarkable Conservative transformation. Mark Adler in York Centre, Dr. Kellie Leitch in Simcoe-Grey, Chris Alexander in Ajax-Pickering and Joe Oliver in Eglinton-Lawrence ---- each brings an impressive track record to challenge Liberal candidate whose greatest success was in the past.

While Canadians are mystified about the rationale for the fourth election in seven years, Thomas Mulcair and Bob Rae are smiling as they prepare to claim the prize they both cherish. And, Mr. Ignatieff is probably relieved at the impending end of his ill considered sojourn in Canada. As for the media, the years when we can look to Fox and CNN with disdain are over. The breathless hype, feigned crises, and shallow chatter have moved north. Media braying for an election over the past months was bewildering given that Prime Minister Harper had successfully steered Canada through a global economic crisis.

What should we expect over the next few weeks? The media will try to level the playing field with stories about Mr. Ignatieff being a surprisingly good campaigner and the Prime Minister's campaign will be found wanting. In the background will be the sad and uncomfortable story of Jack Layton's health. Then, the chattering class will discover that Canadians care about three simple questions: Who can provide the best leadership in challenging times? Which Party can end the never ending election campaign of the past seven years? Which Party represents my values? And, as the answers become clear, the media and the Liberal Party will circle the floundering Ignatieff like sharks while Canadians breathe a sigh of relief that the never ending election has concluded with Prime Minister Harper leading a majority Conservative government.

FOR THE GRITS: LE BEAU GESTE

- By Barry Campbell

At a time when people the world over are in the streets in their millions clamoring for democracy, you will forgive this writer's impatience with those who don't want an election.

Canadians never tell pollsters they "want" an election. Shame on PM Harper in particular, however, for saying (echoed by all his Members) that this is the worst possible time for an election. In our Parliamentary system, that's just not their call. I am sure that the Liberals will want to apologize to the Prime Minister for inconveniencing him with an election just now. Harper's latest arrogance towards pesky political process will be added to a long list Liberals will be using to portray Prime Minister Harper as contemptuous of Parliament, indeed of democracy.

Election pundits always try (generally without success) to predict the "ballot question". What will be on voters' minds as they vote on Election Day? The Harper Tories want it to be about economic management. "Will you trust the Liberals with management of a fragile recovery?" The Liberals will also want the ballot question to be about trust. "Can you trust the man (Stephen Harper) with power?" The very way the latter question is phrased acknowledges a stark reality: most believe the very best the Liberals can hope for is to limit Harper to another minority.

A recent poll gave the Liberals some positive news however. That poll indicated (other polls disagree) that the electorate may be evenly split over whether the most important issue is the economy (good for Harper) or integrity and transparency (bad for Harper). And there was further good news - regard for Harper has declined even among some committed Tories (a strange result if true). However, the Liberals may just catch a wave if support for Harper trends downward in the Campaign. Elections are often just about lucky timing. The Liberals are counting on the media (who

have already gone negative on Harper) to continue to do so because the media wants to see a contest - a rout is a boring story.

Governments usually defeat themselves by being perceived as tired or arrogant or corrupt or mired in scandal. The question is: have recent revelations about the Tories risen to that level in the minds of the public? Has there been some issue, some revelation or will something be said in the heat of the Campaign which will crystalize in the voters' minds a picture of Stephen Harper that is unflattering enough to be his undoing? Harper has thrown a lot of red meat at his core supporters (more prisons, ending the gun registry, more crime bills) to lock up their votes. The Liberals have to hope to catch a break with the unaligned public to inspire them to vote because if the disenchanted don't vote Liberal, Harper gets his majority. At this point in the Campaign, a triumph for the Liberals would be if Canadians (particularly those inclined to vote NDP) would give them a second or new look.

The Liberals might even score a few points against the Tories on economic management and fiscal issues. After all, the proposed Budget was thin and devoid of anything to address concern about jobs, investment and economic strategy.

On the fiscal note, it is hard to believe (and particularly frustrating to Liberals) that the Liberals, the great fiscal managers of the 1990s who shepherded Canada from fiscal basket case to G-7 superstar, ever allowed the Tories to steal this ground from under them. Liberals need to remind Canadians that they can be trusted as fiscal stewards. Tory fiscal probity? Not a chance! Finance Minister Flaherty was a failed Ontario Finance Minister who promised a balanced budget and left the Province with a \$5+ billion deficit. He took over as Federal Finance Minister with an inherited surplus. The Federal Tories started to run up deficits even before the downturn. Great fiscal managers? To be fair, additional deficit was occasioned by the economic downturn. But the overall deficit has been created on

the Tories' watch - it is theirs to solve. So what is there plan to do so? It is no plan at all except to lower taxes, close their eyes, cross their fingers and hope for growth to pull us out of the ditch.

As any of us who have worked on government budgets understand growth usually disappoints, its timing is unpredictable and its sustainability heartbreaking. But Tories will make no hard choices or accept any real responsibility to address Canada's fiscal challenge. Like their predecessors in the 1980s, they have set five year targets to get Canada back into balance. Five year targets have been discredited time and time again. The only thing a five year target gives a government is the certainty that it will extend beyond the Parliamentary mandate so they can't be held accountable for its failure at the next election. Everyone knows you can't predict five years out. In the 1990s, Prime Minister Chretien and Finance Minister Paul Martin instituted three year rolling targets and got the job done on their watch. Tories will not achieve their deficit reduction goal. Canadians have seen this movie. Liberals will have to clean things up.

Elections are unpredictable and can take on a narrative beyond the best plans of the election strategists. We will have to wait to see how this 2011 Election narrative develops. We can only offer some early observations:

- The election is going to be bruising. The Tories sense they are very close to their coveted majority. If he doesn't get it, Harper could be gone. The Liberals know the choice is stark. Do better this time or face the abyss.
- The Campaign will be nasty. Mr. Harper will continue to attack Mr. Ignatieff, his origins, time spent abroad, loyalty. The Liberals will inveigh against the "Tory Regime".
- Expect the Tories to hammer away at the "coalition of Liberals, the NDP and the Bloc".
- Liberals will try to bring down Harper a notch with the help of the media. Doing so will undermine the cult of personality around Harper. Bring him down

and there's nothing left of the "Harper Tories", the "Harper Government", "Stephen Harper's Canada".

- Expect the Liberals to decry the "one party state" Harper is trying to create in Canada.
- Do not expect any discussion of issues of interest to the business community except for taxes. There will be no discussion of industrial policy, foreign investment, foreign ownership limits, a national securities commission, trade policy. Some issues are, as one Tory Prime Minister once said, too important to discuss during an election.
- Don't expect much discussion of social policy either.

Some find it hard to believe that the Liberals could even achieve a minority without a significant galvanizing event in the Campaign which undermines the Tory juggernaut. The Liberals are simply too damaged in Quebec, the West remains a wasteland and bedrock Ontario is rocky ground for them this time. The split on the left and centre left is as difficult for the Liberals today as the opposite was for the Tories in the 1990s. But Opposition parties never consign themselves to perpetual opposition. Their goal is to replace the Government. Occasionally that means taking what some may see as a terrible but noble risk - le beau geste.

Contact us

If you have questions regarding the topics in this newsletter or related government matters, please contact our consultants.

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