

# WHEN GREEN WENT GOLD: DION AND THE GREENING OF THE GRITS

John Duffy



The environment was the issue that produced the winning green coalition at the Liberal convention, “a kind of green generational wave,” writes John Duffy, “churning the Dion and Kennedy camps together into a winning combination.” A wave of green scarves appeared before the second ballot, and grew through the fourth ballot. “The symbolism was unmistakable and the message crystal clear,” Duffy writes, “a vote for Dion was a vote for a thoroughgoing, environmentally oriented Liberal rebranding.” Dion is the first politician to ride the environmental issue to the leadership of any leading political party in the Western world. Duffy, the author of the acclaimed *Fights of Our Lives*, a study of watershed Canadian elections, looks down the road and sees “the electoralization of the environmental issue set.” Or green as pure political gold.

L'environnement aura produit la coalition victorieuse du congrès libéral, une sorte de « vague verte générationnelle qui a fédéré les camps Dion et Kennedy en une combinaison gagnante », écrit John Duffy. Les écharpes vertes apparues à l'issue du premier tour se sont ainsi multipliées jusqu'au quatrième. « Le symbole était évident et le message limpide : voter Dion, c'était revaloriser en profondeur l'image libérale aux couleurs de l'environnement. » Stéphane Dion est le premier politicien du monde occidental à miser sur ce thème pour accéder à la direction d'un parti. Auteur de *Fights of Our Lives*, une étude des grandes élections canadiennes, John Duffy prédit un bel avenir au tandem électoralisme et environnement. Car le vert vaut maintenant de l'or sur le plan politique.

**N**orman Davies's acclaimed masterpiece *Europe: A History* (1996) contains a very intriguing account of the fall in 212 BCE of the Greco-Sicilian city of Syracuse to the Romans. The fall of the city, which ended a lengthy siege, came when a certain Moeriscus treacherously opened the gates to the Romans in the dead of night. It was the decisive moment in an epic struggle, the second Punic War. The fall of Syracuse tipped the balance in a war that decided who would dominate the Mediterranean world: a fusion of Greek and Phoenician civilizations, or the upstart power of Rome.

Long before the anonymous poet wrote that “a kingdom was lost / and all for the want of a nail,” the mystery of individual agency has lain at the heart of the study of history. Those rare, decisive moments such as Moeriscus's betrayal bring us face to face with the central issues of historical inquiry and consciousness. What if Moeriscus hadn't opened the gate? Was the eclipse of the Greeks just a fluke? Would Carthage have triumphed over Rome and our world have been profoundly different? Or was the Roman rise

inevitable? Was Carthage's defeat and the subjugation of the Hellenic world historically foreordained? What of human events belongs to individual agency? What to larger historical forces? Do any such exist?

Davies meditates upon the possibilities that lay open at the moment of Moeriscus's betrayal. “Historians who look back at Rome's triumphant expansion are locked into the knowledge of subsequent developments...The difficulty is to see what other perspectives were in the offing...If Moeriscus had not opened the gate; if Syracuse had resisted the Romans as it once resisted the Athenians; if Hannibal had destroyed Rome as Rome would soon destroy Carthage; if, as a result, the Greek world had eventually fused with Semitic Carthage, then history would have been rather different.” But we are brought swiftly back to the central fact. “The point is: Moeriscus *did* open the gate.”

**L**ast December's leadership convention of the Liberal Party of Canada was a Syracuse-like moment. Thanks to

Stéphane Dion's fourth-ballot victory, a gate opened in Canada's political history, and, quite possibly, in the history of the global environmental movement. Viewed a certain way, the open-

climate crisis. As well, this article will explore the significance of Dion's victory to national politics in Canada. Finally, the article will explore some scenarios for the future of partisan

the dossier. The three-pillar thesis and his experience as environment minister were his campaign calling card, much more even than the *Clarity Act*. His overwhelmingly youthful delegate force revelled in the campaign's environmental thrust. His delegation bonded closely with Kennedy's similarly aged cohort, on the basis of shared values concerning party renewal to be sure, but on environmental questions as well.

**One possible narrative is that green power somehow swept the Liberal convention. It did not. Dion did not monopolize the green issue. Nor did he overwhelm other candidacies with a stampede built around the policy proposition. If anything, it may seem more credible to argue that the key to the Liberal leadership race was algebraic, not environmental — that once two evenly matched candidacies with low negatives among delegates effected a junction of forces, it was virtually impossible for either of the polarized candidacies with high negatives to prevail.**

ing of this gate seems as inevitable as the rise of Rome. It makes sense that a Canadian federal Liberal leadership convention in 2006 would elect the most overtly environmentalist candidate. It makes sense that in North America, where partisanship has largely gridlocked the emergence of environmental issues, blocking their entry into the partisan political mainstream, one of the first significant breaks in the pattern would come at a national leadership convention of Canada's Liberals in opposition.

But Moeriscus need not have opened the gate. Nothing resembling inevitability was afoot on the floor on the Palais des Congrès that weekend. No one who sat glued to his television watching the unfolding drama, or flicking on her car radio between hockey practice and grocery pickup to stay abreast of the action throughout the brief daylight of a December Saturday, can ever be convinced that the outcome was preordained. Nor should they be. It wasn't.

This article examines this most exciting of leadership conventions primarily from the perspective of the gate's opening. It will seek to locate the convention outcome in the gathering global dynamic of partisan engagement with the environmental issue set, in particular the increasingly urgent

engagement with environmental questions, especially the climate crisis, both in Canada and abroad. All the while, of course, I'll seek to pay due respect to the fact that nothing is inevitable, that human agency matters and that some gates are never opened because no one takes it upon themselves to do so at the critical moment.

**T**he first point of departure is probably the most vexing: determining the degree to which the environmental issue powered Dion's victory.

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But if the idea of a green sweep does not hold, neither does dismissing the importance of green politicking to Dion's win. The environmental issue was at the heart of Dion's campaign and its success. Dion campaigned on

A syllogism suggests itself. Environmental concern is a generational issue par excellence. Dion's and Kennedy's youthful delegates intimately shared the concern. Environment was therefore a kind of green generational wave, churning the Dion and Kennedy camps together into a winning combination.

Other factors were at play. The most important came the Monday before the convention, when a key by-election in London North Centre delivered a significant result: a strong second-place finish for the Green Party. This was exactly the sort of signal to catch Liberals' attention. Dion deliberately capitalized on the by-election by arranging for the successful Liberal candidate in London, Glen Pearson, to introduce the Dion demonstration on Friday night.

**A**ll of these factors went into the mix that produced the electrifying sight on Saturday morning of the entire Dion delegation decked out in bright acid green — an unprecedented colour for a federal Liberal campaign. The symbolism was unmistakable and the message crystal clear: a vote for Dion was a vote for a thoroughgoing, environmentally oriented Liberal rebranding. And a rebranding was exactly what the party was looking for to regain the grace from which it had fallen over 13 long years of rule. The genius of the Dion campaign was to anchor the rebranding proposition in



The Gazette, Montreal

**Green as gold:** When Gerard Kennedy went to Stéphane Dion, green scarves multiplied across the convention floor, eventually swamping the traditional Liberal red of the other contenders, Bob Rae and Michael Ignatieff. The insurgency of the Dionistas, based on the environment, was a successful revolt against the party establishment.

a single, popular policy proposition on which their candidate had impeccable credentials and could speak with compelling sincerity.

To fully grasp what happened in Montreal, it is perhaps less useful to look at the degree to which the environment delivered for Dion inside the Liberal Party, and more valuable to consider what Dion delivers to the environmental issue.

Stéphane Dion is the first acknowledged global environmental leader to lead a mainstream national party, having earned this credential through his forceful and highly successful chairmanship of the 2005 Kyoto Protocol COP-11 conference in Montreal and the year's worth of diplomacy leading up to it. He is, perhaps surprisingly, the first former environment minister elected to major national party leadership.

Dion goes beyond these "firsts," however. Bluntly put, he is the first politician to ride the environmental issue to a point so near Disraeli's "top of the greasy pole." Politicians respond to electoral incentives, and Dion has shown that the rewards of responding to voters' environmental concerns vastly exceed those held by the conventional wisdom to date. Dion has used the issue to take over a main-

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characterized by an ongoing and significant commitment to engaging the issue that is embedded deep within the

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**F**rom the global perspective, Dion’s ascension to the Liberal leadership is a landmark in what we might term the electoralization of the environmental issue set. We may define electoralization as the process by which the political system’s engagement with environmental concerns is shifting. The first stage of engagement is a model where the system’s major brokerage institutions — parties and governments — seek to accommodate on a *de minimis* basis the demands of citizens organized into stakeholder pressure groups (in this case the environmental non-governmental organizations, ENGOs). The second stage, which is commencing worldwide and to which Dion’s win opens the gate, is one where the big political actors deal more directly with the broad mass of citizens concerned about the issue, in a partisan competition to meet voter demands. The victor assumes power and confers on government a democratic mandate for action that leads to significant public policy change. The final stage — still some years away — is

electorates’ priorities, the parties’ ethos and policy propositions, and the institutional power structures of government.

In this magazine and other forums, I have argued that the time is ripe in Canada for transition from stage one to stage two, and that the Liberal Party could and should obtain an enduring electoral advantage by being the first mover. Since that intervention, events have moved more swiftly than anticipated, to the point where not only has Dion’s win opened the gate to the second stage of electoralization, but now Conservatives are seriously considering trying to enter this stage as well. To understand exactly where we are in this dynamic, it is helpful to examine

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Germany’s 1999 ecotax, a set of stiff tax disincentives to the burning of hydrocarbons, has been adopted in one form or another by Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland, and the majority of EU member states have embraced the principle of gearing taxation to environmental considerations. In January 2005, the European Union introduced the EU Emissions Trading Scheme, the world’s largest multi-country, multi-sector system for trading emission credits.

These perhaps modest, but important, policy successes mirror a fairly

modest degree of political success. At one level, the Greens have certainly penetrated Western European

governance. From 1979 to 2002, Green parties played a role in national government in no fewer than 15 European countries. As of 2002, collectively, 44 Green government ministers (at cabinet level) have been in government for 59 years. However, only one Western European Green party has polled more than 10 percent of the vote in a national election (Germany's Greens last year); generally the parties hover in the 5-8 percent zone, narrowly qualifying for parliamentary seats. The highest office to which a Green politician has risen has been the foreign minister of Germany, a post held from 1998 to 2005 by Green leader Joschka Fischer in the "Red-Green" coalition government of Social Democrat leader Gerhard Schroeder.

The pattern is one of limited political penetration and limited policy success in the developed world's political environment that is most hospitable for green politics. Europe is, after all, the global carbon economy's number one net importer, a fact that has built into the European society two unique green virtues: parsimony when it comes to energy expenditure and profligacy when it comes to reckoning costs imposed on energy producers elsewhere. Green politics ought to be more potent in Western Europe, and yet it has not been — not much anyway.

Why not? The answer may lie in the political structures of postwar Western Europe, which were designed to stabilize social changes, curb the power of any radical ideas that start to catch on, and maximize consensus-building as the supreme political virtue. Indeed, the European political system is in many ways designed to engage with most new policy trends according to the stage one model. The system is, to borrow a term from the climatologists, characterized by highly efficient negative feedback loops.

These mechanisms tend to absorb and accommodate any changes, rather than amplify or enlarge them. It is possible that the strength of these internal stabilizing mechanisms is playing a role in the gap between a green-hospitable European economy and political/public policy outcomes on environmental challenges.

**Starting at the July 2005 Gleneagles G8 Summit and continuing through to the publication of the Stern Review last October, Prime Minister Tony Blair has with increasing urgency geared his government's political and public policy agenda toward addressing the global climate crisis. Numerous green policy initiatives are underway. (While Canada's government drifts along with no federal interim targets for reductions between now and 2050, debate is under way in the UK cabinet over whether annual reduction targets are needed or five-year benchmarks would suffice!)**

The idea that a kind of political Eurosclerosis restrains the transition to stage two engagement by Europe's political system gains currency as one examines current developments in the UK. There, the transition to stage two is well underway. Starting at the July 2005 Gleneagles G8 Summit and continuing through to the publication of the Stern Review last October, Prime Minister Tony Blair has with increasing urgency geared his government's political and public policy agenda toward addressing the global climate crisis. Numerous green policy initiatives are underway. (For example, while Canada's government drifts along with no federal interim targets for reductions between now and 2050, debate is under way in the UK cabinet over whether annual reduction targets are needed or five-year benchmarks would suffice!)

At the same time, the leader of the British Conservative opposition, David Cameron, is more than keeping pace. A glance at the Conservatives' website ([www.conservatives.com](http://www.conservatives.com)) reveals an eye-popping transformation. Cameron's new Conservative Party presents itself graphically as a blue-green alliance, a merger of sustainabili-

ty and market forces that promises to better New Labour's 60 percent carbon emissions cut, taking it to 80 percent by 2050 and holding average global temperature increase to 2 degrees Celsius.

The causes of the UK's newfound political verdure are numerous and complex, but what cannot be denied is its suddenness. This rapid march into

stage two engagement in the UK has all been done mid-mandate, with no electoral acid test being applied to the two parties' green *démarches*. The sole indicator of Green electoral power was a 6.3 percent score in the 2004 European Parliament elections. Perhaps the first real test will come in the Labour Party's leadership succession, coming this September with Blair's forced retirement. The overwhelming front-runner, Gordon Brown, 56, has served in the House for almost 25 years, and will celebrate in May a decade at No. 11 Downing Street. Brown is a cautious, consensus-oriented figure attractive to the party's traditional working class constituency. As chancellor of the exchequer, he is reported to have resisted more aggressive green taxation of transportation fuels and is said to give pride of policy place to more traditional bread-and-butter issues. It will be interesting to see if a younger, greener challenger emerges to Brown — likely aiming at longer-term ambitions — as the leadership race gets underway.

The structure and tone of British politics has a lot to do with this impressive pace of transition to stage

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two. In a manner unthinkable in the consensus-oriented, gerontocratic, collective leaderships of Continental parties, Blair and Cameron have taken their parties in the direction they and their advisers believe the public and partisan interests dictate. European publics are just as concerned about greenhouse gases as the UK's; Britain's top politicians, however, have a power to act that their European counterparts do not share. And in the UK's remorselessly competitive political marketplace — where one or two elections as leader is far from unusual, contrasted with Western Europe's sometimes decades-long tenures of service at the top — these politicians must use this power to adapt to electoral trends quickly, or perish.

One other factor helps account for the difference between the British and Continental environmental response in the political sphere: the form of representation. The Continent's proportional representation gives the Greens a toehold in legislatures and executives that the UK's first-past-the-post system does not. However, the parliamentary "floor" given to the Greens also functions as a political "ceiling," in that it permits the big-tent parties to keep environmental issues at arm's length, off in a ministry somewhere or deep in the bowels of an inter-party coalition agreement. The effect has been to disaggregate environmental issues from the mainstream policy agenda, rather than force the aggregators of that agenda, the big-tent parties, to find a place for the environment at the big table.

Proportional representation has allowed for slow-and-steady environmental gains, but at the cost of keeping green issues in a stage one state of engagement with the parties. The first-past-the-post system is biased more toward "tipping points," where big-tent parties tend to keep major files on

hold until, almost at a stroke, they embrace them.

Britain's experience to date certainly appears to show that environmental engagement can experience a sudden thaw. The United States may be about to make the same transition, only in this case it would be from a freeze so deep that to describe the US political system as even engaging with environment in a stage one model would be a stretch. In America's winner-take-all political marketplace, environment has been a Democrat

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issue in a period of widespread Republican dominance, at the national and state levels and in the executive and legislative branches.

When it comes to environmental issues, the gates of change in the US have been held shut not by the institutional power of this or that structure of American government, but by the power of a dominant Republican Party which has pursued a

highly polarizing political strategy of governing in the narrow interest of its political base. That base includes not only the nation's massive oil and gas extraction industry, which produces 7.1 million barrels of petroleum each day, but also the affluent suburban citizens who consume the plurality of the nation's 20 million barrels each day. (Compare to Germany which produces 158,000 barrels a day and consumes 2.7 million barrels a day despite having a population fully 27 percent the size of the US's.) Global warming, and

environment more broadly, has been frozen out — in a way that would be outright impossible in the accommodating, consensus-oriented political systems of Europe, and at least difficult in Britain's somewhat consensual political culture.

There is much, however, to suggest that the gates of change are swinging open again in American politics. Environmental concern, with the climate crisis first and foremost, may at last be coming to the fore. The impetus is arising outside the Washington beltway, in local initiatives that have been bubbling up, in municipal and state efforts, in Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's re-election campaign in California, even in the runaway success of former vice-president Gore's film, *An Inconvenient Truth*. Democrats, having won a majority of the state governorships and the US House and Senate seats for the first time since 1994, have promised aggressive action to make up for lost time on climate and on broader environmental issues. The US government admitted in late December that polar ice melting arising from climate change is endangering the polar bear population, the first such admission made by the executive branch and an anticipation of more such to come. Democratic contender John Edwards, in announcing his campaign for the

presidency in 2008, ranked “leading the fight against global warming” and “getting off our addiction to oil” as priorities on par with foreign policy, health care and social policy. He is thus the first serious presidential contender to put the environment at the centre of his candidacy. He won’t be the last.

Here in Canada, with our British political system, somewhat American political culture and a federalism that brings with it characteristics reminiscent of Western Europe (as well as Quebec’s distinctly Continental values and traditions), we are fairly clearly witnessing the transition from stage one to stage two political engagement. The first stirrings of genuine environmental engagement at the national level were the efforts of John Roberts as environment minister in the early 1980s to put the acid rain issue on the political map in Ottawa and Washington. The Mulroney government expanded Ottawa’s growing commitment, with successful conclusion of the acid rain battle, the ambitious (for the time) Green Plan and the environmental protocols of NAFTA, as well as the 1987 Montreal Protocol on ozone depletion and the 1992 Rio accords on climate change and bio-diversity. The incremental expansion of Ottawa’s environmental infrastructure and programming continued throughout the Chrétien years, before experiencing a massive burst in the Martin government’s tenure with Environment Minister Stéphane Dion’s Project Green and the 2005 Goodale budget. This effort, aimed at catching up on a Kyoto implementation track on which the government had fallen dangerously behind, plowed more than \$5 billion into climate change and other measures. It was hailed at the time as a breakthrough, earning plaudits from ENGOs and environmental academics alike.

In retrospect, the 2005 budget was probably the high water mark of stage one federal engagement in Canada. The next significant move of the Martin government on the environment belonged perhaps more to the second stage. The UN’s global Kyoto implementation conference, held in Montreal at the beginning of the 2005 national general election campaign, will be remembered as much for the criticisms of America’s global warming policy by Martin and former US president Bill Clinton — in Martin’s case made with electoral considerations partly in mind — as for the very real achievement of the conference, under Dion’s chairmanship, reaching an agreement for future actions under the Kyoto framework that many had considered unattainable. The process of electoralizing the environmental issue continued throughout the campaign, as Conservatives, New Democrats and media commentators increasingly pointed to the government’s weakness

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The arrival of the Harper government in one sense marked a severe setback for the environmental issue set — climate change in particular. The decision to withdraw de facto from the Kyoto Protocol is obviously a very severe setback. However, Harper’s dra-

matic departure from Ottawa’s growing stage one engagement with the environment seems mainly to have served to accelerate the issue’s electoralization. Sensing opportunity, Liberals and Greens have rapidly stepped into the vacuum Harper created, and in so doing have made the environmental issue set a key, high-salience differentiator between the two major parties for the first time in history.

Looking ahead, the principal question concerning environmental politics in Canada is now whether or not the Conservatives will make a serious attempt at catching up to the Liberals’ embrace of the environment. Harper has moved to close his vulnerability, with the cabinet shuffle of January 4, the long-overdue establishment of a senior cabinet committee on environment and the inclusion of “climate change” as a priority. Now, Harper needs to decide whether environment is a major problem best solved by conservative public policies (as Preston Manning argues), or whether conser-

vatism dictates that environmental problems, insofar as they exist, should not be solved by public policy at all.

If Harper takes the former route, Canada’s next election will likely prefigure Britain’s. There, two parties, both very serious about the environment, will differentiate on the issue

chiefly by applying their ideological frameworks to dealing with the problem. Britain's next major policy battle will likely be between a "red-green" approach from Labour — heavy on governmental solutions and mobilization of social actors — and a "blue-green" approach from Cameron's Tories, applying market-based populism to resolving the climate crisis.

**Such is the achievement of the Liberal Party last December 2. And it carries with it at long last the promise of meaningful environmental engagement by Canada's national government. Our political system is catching up with Canadians on the paramount challenges of our time. The next federal election will be the first national election in which the environment plays a critical role.**

If Canada's Conservatives choose, however, to act as though their values and principles direct them to minimize the environmental challenge, or to minimize political response to it, our next election will likely prefigure America's. There, it seems likely that the Democrats will commit fairly wholeheartedly to the issue, while Republicans will continue with a stance that ranges from denial to very grudging acceptance of the problem, and solutions that lean strongly toward allowing or enabling non-federal-government actors to take the lead.

In all likelihood, Harper's Conservatives will choose the latter course. Why? Because the caucus, the activists, the donor base and the voting base want it that way. Not all Conservatives disagree with current climate science. But most of those who do are Conservatives. And they are not likely to flock toward the green standard all of a sudden. This party is, after all, a product of a takeover by the Reform Party — the most democratically run in Canada with the possible exception of the PQ. It does not turn around on a single poll, or by-election result, or cabinet shuffle.

The Liberals, by contrast, have made that turnaround. That is

what happened in Montreal. And it happened in a way that is most unusual for the Liberals. If anything, one would expect this highly centralized, Ottawa-wise, consensus-oriented, "natural governing" party to have continued indefinitely with a stage one engagement on environmental issues. The Liberal Party of Canada carefully manages change in

Canadian society. Liberals usually see themselves as campaigning on the promise of harnessing change in a safe, positive way, positioning themselves between go-slow Conservatives and let-'er-rip New Democrats. They win office on this promise of balance, and slowly stream the required changes into public policy via the federal power structure, through federal-provincial conferences, in the funding of stakeholder groups and so forth. In other words, the Liberal Party acts much like a dam, behind which change builds up, and is slowly sluiced out downriver. The dam stays in place; the floodgate aperture is fixed; Canadians feel safe; change occurs incrementally.

However, the Liberal Party is not always the same animal. Its day-to-day incarnation is the Ottawa version of the party: the "natural governing" group of caucus, leader and advisers. As well, key players link to the centres of institutional power on Bay St., Boul. René-Lévesque, and Howe St., in Queen's Park and the Grande Allée. Others connect with important figures in the legal community, still others with environmentalists, feminists, human rights activists and cultural community figures. This set of people mans the Liberal dam, holding the sluice gate that allows incremental

change to occur at a more or less constant aperture.

But this day-to-day natural governing "party" is not the same institution that appeared at this leadership convention. Few business figures and no senior civil servants attended. Moreover, at the convention, 35 percent of the delegates were under 25. More than half the convention was under 40. Just for that brief period of a leadership race, the "natural governing" apparatus shared control over the sluice gate with a mass of young people.

So when a generational wave issue — like the environment/climate change — coincides with a leadership convention, the sluice gate is cranked wide open, and a floodtide of change comes roaring through. The results are amazing to behold. The issue, long held back with its potential energy building, goes mainstream, generational power shifts in the party, and the whole massive apparatus of Canadian politics and public policy begins to engage in a whole new and much more meaningful way with the challenge at hand.

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Because Stéphane Dion opened the gate.

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