

READING THE ENTRAILS OF THE TWO ELECTIONS — THE LIBERALS WERE FIRST PUNISHED, THEN ELECTED

Richard Gwyn

In an election nowhere near as close as indicated by the polls, Canadians returned the Liberals with a viable minority, and a strong Conservative opposition as a potential government in waiting. With collective wisdom, Canadians obtained the result they wanted, leaving the Liberals chastened while restoring competitive democracy. Did the pollsters and pundits get it wrong, even as the voters were getting it right? Richard Gwyn, columnist of the *Toronto Star*, suggests there were two campaigns, the first in which the voters vented their anger at the Liberals, and the second, following the leadership debates, when they focused on their real choices. They decided that, all things considered, the Liberals deserved to be re-elected though not given a free pass, while the Conservatives weren't quite ready for government, and the voters weren't quite ready for the Conservatives.

À l'issue d'un scrutin nettement moins serré que ne l'indiquaient les sondages, la population a réélu les libéraux à la tête d'une solide minorité, face à une forte opposition conservatrice en mesure d'aspirer au pouvoir. Pour les Canadiens, le bon sens a triomphé puisqu'ils ont puni les libéraux comme ils le désiraient et rétabli une démocratie performante. Sondageurs et spécialistes se sont-ils trompés là où les électeurs ont vu clair ? Selon Richard Gwyn, chroniqueur au *Toronto Star*, nous avons assisté à deux campagnes. La première a permis aux Canadiens d'exprimer leur colère à l'endroit des libéraux. La seconde, qui a suivi les débats des chefs, leur a permis de réfléchir aux véritables choix dont ils disposaient. Tout bien considéré, ils ont alors décidé que le Parti libéral méritait d'être réélu mais sans chèque en blanc, que le Parti conservateur n'était pas vraiment prêt à gouverner...et qu'eux-mêmes n'étaient pas vraiment prêts à se livrer aux conservateurs.

Not in a long time has an election so confounded, and embarrassed, the pundits and the pollsters. It was supposed to be close. It was no such thing. Outside of Quebec, where circumstances were special, the Liberals did almost as well as four years earlier; in British Columbia and the Atlantic provinces they actually gained votes. (The one polling company with no apologies to make — not that any of the others apologized — was SES: Four days before voting day its daily tracking poll for CPAC put the Liberals ahead by four percentage points, near enough to their final margin). The Conservatives, far from being close to winning, let alone by a majority as Stephen Harper once unwisely speculated, lost votes — a lot of them — when compared to the combined performances of their two predecessor parties.

The commonest, near-universal, interpretation of what happened was that a combination of last-minute Liberal fear-mongering and negative ads coupled with some Conservative bloopers sent New Democrats scuttling back to the Liberals for fear that Harper's hordes were at the gates of government. There is obviously something to this other than New Democrat self-exculpation. But why then did the Greens, equally vulnerable to the vagaries of strategic voting, win more than 4 percent, easily their best-ever? Why, in BC, where voters had the greatest possible leverage for strategic voting because the three national parties were so evenly matched there, did the NDP *gain* votes?

Certitude is impossible, and would be foolish, and not least because I was among the commentators who called the

result too close to call. As a substitute, let me offer a pure guess.

Perhaps the best way to read the entrails of so surprising and wayward an election is to concoct an interpretation that is surprising and wayward. It may be that two elections occurred and that observers got lost in between them. (Three elections, actually, since any federal

ties when both seemed headed toward near-extinction. Canada, therefore, is once again a two-party democracy if, as will be discussed later, in the uniquely Canadian form of a parliamentary democracy dependent upon the sporadic alternation of two almost identical parties.

As well, the NDP ended up as moderately happy, the Greens as

pay a good deal more attention to the substance as opposed to the details of electoral contests, than is generally recognized. Which, to deal here with the future, may mean that proportional representation is a bright idea whose time isn't yet needed.

One handy way to convey the nature of Election A is to label it a post-modern election, a term that has the great benefit of being able to be made to mean anything a user wants it to mean. The Liberals fast fall to even pegging — apparently — with the Conservatives from a starting condition that most

The first election, in the nine provinces and the three territories, was effectively a huge by-election. The second, attached to it almost seamlessly at about the middle of the campaign, was a conventional election in which voters did their best to elect the best-possible government as they saw it.

election campaign in Quebec is always entirely separate from that in the rest of Canada).

The first election, in the nine provinces and the three territories, was effectively a huge by-election. The second, attached to it almost seamlessly at about the middle of the campaign, was a conventional election in which voters did their best to elect the best-possible government as they saw it.

During Election A, voters had fun, essentially by scaring the hell out of the Liberals. (Not all: Maritimers were clearly determined from the start to remain tied to the Liberals). In Election B, voters turned to doing their duty. They did this, whether by intuition or luck, with extraordinary skill. The humbled Liberals won the gold, but received their minority (even if a sizeable one), only in the form of a recallable loan. The Conservatives won silver. From mid-campaign on they, and most particularly Harper himself, had come to expect doing a lot better. Nevertheless, they still won a lot: elevation to the status of a genuine national alternative and so to within reaching distance of an eventual victory, as compared with the condition a year earlier of the two right of centre par-

delighted and the Bloc Québécois as ecstatic. There were of course disappointments, in the West most obviously, or, more exactly, in Alberta. But it's an open question whether Albertans voted Conservative because they actually wanted a Conservative government or whether they voted against the Liberals in order to attract attention and respect, while knowing full well that the Liberals would end up as the government. But that so many were more or less satisfied by the results and so relatively few really crushed suggests strongly that the

observers saw as a minority Liberal win for sure, and a Liberal majority as entirely likely, does take some explanation. Paul Martin did campaign ineptly. As he often does, Martin had far too many priorities, so voters received no impression of vision or policy direction. For his part, Harper was cool, confident, quiet, and so doing, did exactly what he should have been doing, that is, got out of the way while his opponent tripped over his own shoelaces.

But there were countervailing factors that in a conventional election

Paul Martin did campaign ineptly. As he often does, Martin had far too many priorities, so voters received no impression of vision or policy direction. For his part, Harper was cool, confident, quiet, and so doing, did exactly what he should have been doing, that is, got out of the way while his opponent tripped over his own shoelaces.

pre-election pooh-poohing by pundits about voter cynicism and apathy as well as the post-election hand-wringing about the reduced turn-out were grossly overdone. (The lowered turn-out, it must be stated, was caused both by actual non-voting and by the non-appearance of would-be voters on the often erratic permanent voters' list).

Rather, Canadians may care a lot more about their governance and

ought to have cancelled out most of this self-inflicted damage. The country was in great shape, almost certainly its best shape in the 40 years since the heady, mid-1960s years of Expo '67 and the Centennial of Confederation. The economy was booming. Our finances were brimming over, in Ottawa anyway. National disunity was in recession. We had, by not going to Iraq, gone further than ever in our history toward defining Canada as quite dif-

ferent from the US. For all of this the Liberals had to have merited some credit, if only for allowing success to happen by itself.

The offsetting factor to all these countervailing factors was of course the sponsorship scandal. It actually wasn't — can it now be said? — *that* bad. The "\$100 million missing" was the result of media hyping of some exaggerated writing by Auditor General Sheila Fraser. The scandal was grubby and tacky. But nobody died. No money is yet known to have gone, in the manner of John A. Macdonald and the CPR, first from government to contractor and then back to the politician. (The specific campaign contributions to the Liberals of the Liberal ad agencies were all quite chintzy.) And it was about the sacred cause of national unity.

So maybe the "rage" of voters during the first few weeks that all commentators noted wasn't so much caused by the sponsorship scandal as by voters using this scandal to stoke up a passion they felt for other causes. A sense the Liberals were taking them for granted. A sense that they weren't being respected. A sense — if so, so much for voter cynicism and apathy — that Canadian democracy was being under-minded, even imperiled, by the way we had ceased to be a two-party democracy so that the Liberals could do just about anything they wanted. So, scare the hell out of the Liberals, an accomplishment without risk precisely because the country was in such great shape.

This analysis sounds unconventional. But what could be more unconventional — or more post-modern — than an election in which people not taking part in it exercised critical influence upon it? Ontario's Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty lost the federal Liberals a lot of votes by a budget which broke his promise not to raise provincial taxes. Alberta's Conservative Premier Ralph Klein lost the federal Conservatives a lot of



CP Photo

Stephen Harper and Paul Martin go toe-to-toe in the leaders' debate, which marked a turning point in the campaign. Before that, writes Richard Gwyn, the voters were venting their anger at the Liberals. Afterwards, with a nudge from Liberal attack ads, they began focusing on their choices.

votes by musing about how his province might breach the *Canada Health Act*. In the "third" election in Quebec, provincial sovereigntist leader Bernard Landry lost the federal, Bloc Québécois, sovereigntists

quite a few votes by forecasting that their success could open the way to another referendum.

Then everything changed. But scarcely an observer realized it. Harper, it was overwhelmingly reported (a

judgement reinforced by polls) had won the leadership television debate by not losing it. Thereafter, all the forecasts were for a virtual Liberal-Conservative tie.

It wasn't so much, as an internal Liberal poll discovered, that Martin had in fact won the debate, probably because people for the first time got a glimpse of his basic decency and well-

So maybe the "rage" of voters during the first few weeks that all commentators noted wasn't so much caused by the sponsorship scandal as by voters using this scandal to stoke up a passion they felt for other causes. A sense the Liberals were taking them for granted. A sense that they weren't being respected.

intentioned earnestness until then half-concealed by Martin's image as a big businessman and by his record as a sober-sided finance minister. Nor was it, although this also made a difference, that Harper let down his guard to talk about possibly winning a majority and then mishandled the indiscretions of some of his MPs and of the press release issued by his own campaign headquarters accusing Martin of being soft on pedophilia. It was that Election B had started.

This was a conventional election. The job of the voter, within their regional and socioeconomic contexts, became that of electing the best possible government. The Conservatives had no policies — or not really. (Their first policy convention has since been postponed to 2005). They were still getting to know each other, let alone to know about governing, of which none of their MPs had any federal experience. The Liberals were the Natural Governing Party. Martin was as well-qualified as any newcomer to 24 Sussex has ever been. Best of all, he, and all his party, were now properly humbled. These were the key forces at work. Others, like the negative ads,

surely had some influence. But as former Preston Manning policy guru Rick Anderson noted shrewdly in a post-election column for *The Toronto Star*, negative ads can only be effective — and, so much for Canadian political niceness, these date back to the very nasty ones deployed by Pierre Trudeau against Joe Clark in the 1980 election — if and when voters already half-believe their negative

message, in this instance, that Harper and the Conservatives had a "hidden agenda."

What happened in the end thus was pretty simple. Canadians elected the government that most of them are most comfortable with. That's a centre-left government with a reasonable national balance. Absent Quebecers, very possibly temporarily it's essentially the old Trudeau coalition of city-dwellers,

Negative ads can only be effective — and, so much for Canadian political niceness, these date back to the very nasty ones deployed by Pierre Trudeau against Joe Clark in the 1980 election — if and when voters already half-believe their negative message, in this instance that Harper and the Conservatives had a "hidden agenda."

women, immigrants and liberal-minded professionals. Call it centrism with a caring face. Rather than fleeing the Conservatives near the end, many voters were probably just strolling back home where they felt most at ease.

One observer who understood this noted in a post-election column in the *National Post* that, "The two-thirds of Canadians to the Left of centre on taxes and social programs

really believe these are the core of Canada's distinctiveness vis-à-vis the U.S." He then ended with this forecast: "Stephen Harper did well in this election, but circumstances will make it difficult for his party do better next time. Paul Martin did not do especially well, but circumstances make it difficult for the Liberals to do much worse."

That commentator was Conrad Black, taking time out from some rather pressing financial matters. He was damnably astute. Except for one possibility. Harper could make the Conservatives electable by making them like the Liberals and so restoring

our distinctively Canadian two-party system of occasionally alternating two virtually identical parties, the Liberals a millimeter to the centre left and the Conservatives a quarter-inch to the centre right, as Brian Mulroney and Joe Clark once did. These days, Harper sort of talks this way. But whether, as a true-believing ideological conservative, he really wants to, and whether the ex-Reformers, who are now the majority among the Con-

servatives, will ever allow him to, is a subject for another commentator.

Richard Gwyn, award-winning columnist for The Toronto Star, has covered national politics since the Trudeau years. He is the author of The Northern Magus, the best-selling biography of Pierre Trudeau, and Nationalism Without Walls: The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian. gwynr@sympatico.ca