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L. Ian MacDonald: All tied as we go into overtime
Posted: October 02, 2008, 5:21 PM by Kelly McParland
[Full Comment](#), [L. Ian MacDonald](#)

Leaders' debates are usually framed with boxing metaphors, from knockouts to no decisions. But Wednesday night's French debate was more like a hockey game, with five players on the ice, four of them shooting on the goalie, Stephen Harper.

He stopped most of their shots, but they all scored a point or two against him. As predicted, Stéphane Dion won just by showing up and exceeding expectations. Gilles Duceppe, true to his experienced debating form, had several good shifts on the ice and tangled with Harper in his crease. Jack Layton looked good on the ice, but he was playing out of position, insisting voters think of him as a prime minister. Elizabeth May won just by being at the game and by being better than expected in French.

Harper? He was just goaling, and he looked cool to the point of being disengaged, rather like Carey Price of the Habs on a bit of an off night. The Conservatives wanted Harper to project a calm demeanour, a prime ministerial air. "He was perfectly Zen," wrote Lysiane Gagnon in her widely read *La Presse* column yesterday, adding Harper was "calm, reassuring, pleasant, above the fray. In short, he looked like a prime minister."

But as *La Presse* also reported in its main headline, there was "Heavy fire against Harper." Duceppe pounced on Harper's cultural cuts and kid crime package, the first as undermining "the soul of Quebec," and the other as setting up a "university of crime" for young offenders who would be housed with adults. Duceppe kept standing in the slot, firing away and if he didn't score, he certainly kept hitting the net.

Only two weeks ago, Duceppe had the air of a dispirited leader of a tired franchise, one that had lost its raison d'être. Then Harper and the Conservatives gave it back to them, Harper with his careless comment about "rich galas" on the same day as a free concert protesting cuts to cultural funding, and the Conservatives for not seeing that their crime package, a big hit in the rest of Canada, would play badly in Quebec

For blame for this turn of events, Harper need look no further than himself and his close circle of advisers, who are either impervious or tone deaf when it comes to Quebec.

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Editor: Kelly McParland (e-mail)

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For piling on, Conservatives unveiled a mobile billboard outside Bloc headquarters in Duceppe's own riding, with the message that Quebecers had wasted hundreds of millions of dollars electing Bloc members since 1990, with Michael Fortier from the unelected Senate as the messenger. How stupid was that?

It's for these reasons that the Tory trend line has turned south in the last two weeks, and that Duceppe was downright cocky on Wednesday night, reminding Harper the Bloc had received a majority of Quebec seats in every election since 1993, and boldly predicting it would do so again on Oct. 14.

It's not just trash talk. The Bloc has rebounded to around 40% in most of the daily tracking polls (actually 42% in yesterday's Nanos poll) while the Conservatives have fallen off to the mid-20s. That would produce a Groundhog Day result, the same as 2006, with the Bloc winning at least 50 seats, most of them in the big battleground with the Conservatives off the island of Montreal.

POPULAR Harper caught a big break on the morning of the French debate, when a [Live blog](#): CROP poll saw the Conservatives at 30%, only one point behind the Bloc, [The Palin-Biden VP debate](#) with the Liberals trailing badly at 16%, tied with the NDP. That would indicate a much more competitive race, and CROP has an enviable track record. But its poll of 1,000 Quebecers was taken, as always, over 10 nights ending on Sunday, and five of them were before the Conservatives [McParland](#): got hit by the culture-crime combo.

[The frustration and fumbling of Stephane Dion NDP reveals another plagiarism shocker](#) Even so, Harper had one clear moment where he scored on Duceppe, a clean 30-second hit where he referred to the Québécois nation resolution, which Duceppe opposed for two days in the House before finally coming around. As Harper re-lived the moment, Duceppe's discomfort was evident. His comeback was a lame line about getting the wrong wording from Harper's office, process stuff nobody cares about when such an important symbolic gesture was in the offing.

In sum, a tie game which Harper may have won by not losing.

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[accidentally feature](#) *L. Ian MacDonald is editor of Policy Options magazine.*

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[Send a note to the editor](#) by IainGFoulds
Oct 02 2008
7:51 PM

... I found it an insightful moment, when after the french debate, the correspondent from Quebec enthusiastically declared Mr. Dion the winner.

... Why? He "performed" well, with lots of "passion". Anything spoken by Mr. Dion was not apparently of any concern.

by IainGFoulds
Oct 02 2008
8:58 PM

... Mr. Harper is now reaping the result of his failure to use his time to educate Canadians against the principles of collectivism. So, he is now faced with four opponents demanding his government solutions and "plans" to everything from the environment to the economy.

... This is the failure of "incrementalism"- hoping to tip-toe away from collectivism, without educating away from it's prevalent philosophical premise. Thus, any "incremental" changes can be reversed in a moment.

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