

# Editorial

Home news Editorial How the Tories lost a majority



## How the Tories lost a majority

### ELECTION 2008

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It was the eve of the pivotal leaders' debates when a group of Liberal strategists gathered to quickly draft a plan for Stephane Dion to save Canada from the exploding crisis in world markets. At least that's what the subsequent press release claimed.

In fact, Dion's so-called "30-day plan" was largely just a promise to hold a lot of meetings with experts to draft an economic plan after he became prime minister. Truth was, far from sparing Canada from an economic apocalypse, the whole purpose of the scheme was simply to save Dion from being caught with no plan at all. The strategy worked so well it almost turned the election on its head, and became one of the many odd twists in an often-bizarre 37 days on the campaign trail.

The genesis of the Dion plan was the Conservatives' request that the TV networks allow more time during the debates to discuss the unfolding economic crisis. "We were convinced Harper was going to show up and drop some huge economic salvation plan in the middle of the debates," a Liberal insider recalls. "We needed something -anything - Dion could put on the table."

Instead, Harper produced no plans to do anything, dismissing the financial crisis as some kind of stock correction. "What Canadians are worried about now is not the job situation, not losing their homes like in the U. S.," the prime minister said blandly.

The Liberal strategists couldn't believe Harper had just handed Dion another break. By the next day, the struggling Liberal leader was being presented as an economic visionary, "the man with a plan," and a heart that could feel Canadians' pain.

Suddenly, Harper was the uncaring leader with no plan, as Dion would say, leading a "laissez-faire, we-don't-care" government. It didn't matter that Dion's strategists had recognized the same reality confronting Harper - namely, there was no way anyone could plan for an unprecedented world financial crisis unfolding unpredictably from one day to the next. Ergo, Dion's own non-plan.

No matter. The perception of Harper's getting caught with his plans down helped fuel a sudden drop in Conservative popularity, and gave the Liberals momentum for the first time in an otherwise hapless campaign.

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It is opening day of the campaign, and Stephen Harper jets off to launch his campaign in Quebec, a symbolic nod to the province that holds the key to a Conservative majority.

Polls indicate the national election is entirely the Conservatives' to lose. The Conservative campaign machine is slick, well-organized, staffed with experienced pros, and fuelled with enough money for two elections.

Polls have long showed Canadians view Harper as a stronger leader than his Liberal and NDP opponents put together. The party has led in the polls almost continuously since the last election, but never managed to move into majority territory very long before public opinion retreated.

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With no burning issue to justify the election, the ballot question on Day One is leadership, exactly what the Conservatives had planned. After all, Harper is up against Dion, arguably the most ineffective Liberal leader in modern times. As a bonus, Dion is running on a new carbon tax far too complicated for the 10-second clips of the modern election campaign.

The campaign opens with schmaltzy Conservative ads intended to attract the women's vote to a warm and cuddly Stephen Harper in a poofy blue sweater. Long before the writ is dropped, the Conservatives have used their massive war chest to fund attack ad campaigns framing Dion as weak and "not a leader." Now the election

ramps up the attacks, starting with the Conservative website featuring an animated pooping puffin dumping on Dion's shoulder.

In the same week, Harper is also forced to ice his chief spokesman, Ryan Sparrow, for trying to slag the outspoken father of a Canadian soldier killed in Afghanistan. Finally, Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz is forced to apologize for off-colour jokes made during the deadly listeriosis tainted meat crisis.

Collectively, the gaffes cast the nasty image the Conservatives were trying to shed, effectively pooping on all those fuzzy-sweater ads. The incidents also helped distract attention from something far more significant to the election - Stéphane Dion's campaign of confusion.

\* \* \*

Dion shuffles into the election giving a barely comprehensible speech to reporters in the lobby outside the Commons. He spends most of the next six hours giving media interviews and going nowhere in his campaign bus parked outside.

By the end of the first day, Dion's big red wagon has gone from being parked in Ottawa to being parked in Montreal. Flying anywhere is out of the question. The Liberals' 30-year-old Air Inuit jetliner - the only one they could find a week before the election - won't be ready until four days into the campaign.

The day Dion was chosen leader 22 months before the election, he called on his party to get ready for an election. Half of the Liberals at the 2006 leadership convention turned on their heel and left the place the minute Dion was crowned. While Dion made great efforts to try to mend fences, Liberals backing Bob Rae and Michael Ignatieff stayed away in droves. Even those who tried to volunteer were ignored until they gave up.

At election time, a large part of the Liberal party was sitting on its hands on the sidelines, waiting for life after him. It showed. Dion's disorganized and disoriented first week became a long march to nowhere. His mangled English had the effect of sucking the enthusiasm out of his stunningly small partisan crowds.

Even when adult supervision arrived on the scene, Dion refused to back off his vastly complicated "green shift" plan for a new carbon tax. As we noted, "the Liberal campaign has become a painful attempt to sell voters a confusing policy badly explained by a terrible communicator."

After two weeks of campaigning, the Liberals had sunk to a polling level not seen in almost 25 years - a level almost even with the rising NDP.

\* \* \*

NDP Leader Jack Layton shows some moxie out of the starting gate with a rally in Stephen Harper's own riding in Calgary. The New Democrats have never had more money, a better organization or more complete candidate recruitment (with a few notable ejections mid-campaign). The party's core campaign team has been meeting every Friday for almost two years to stay on high alert, never expecting that the Liberals would prop up the Harper government as long as they did.

Layton had to establish himself in the first week as a viable alternative to Harper, while completely ignoring Dion. No one would run a tighter campaign than the NDP. The Dippers' narrative never wavered: Which party do you trust to stand up for the little guy against the big oil companies, the banks and the phone guys?

In a concerted effort not to be the scary party of the left, the NDP platform was peppered with the word "prudence," even though it proposed to cancel \$50 billion in planned tax cuts for corporations in the midst of a market collapse.

Layton's end game was simple: Stop voters from stampeding to the Liberals in the last week of the campaign to head off a Conservative majority. He got a little help from the fellow in the poofy blue sweater who did more than anyone to stop a Conservative majority.

\* \* \* Ever since Harper became Conservative

leader, no single political issue has preoccupied more of his energies than winning over Quebecers, culminating in their recognition as a "nation." All that wooing didn't come cheaply - Harper has poured billions into Quebec in his 30 months as prime minister.

To his credit, this was to be the first federal election in almost 40 years when sovereignty wasn't an issue. The Conservatives were poised to steal up to 30 seats from the Bloc Québécois.

But Harper's new best friends in Quebec are also lefties and more than a tad sensitive about it, too. Sometime in the summer, Harper's government decided to chop \$45 million in funding for various film and arts programs.

The move had already touched off a protest among the arts community in Quebec when Harper decided to throw gas on the fire in the third week of the election. Asked about opposition to the cuts, the prime minister put on his Reform hat: "I think when ordinary people come home, turn on the TV and see ... a bunch of people at a rich gala ... all subsidized by the taxpayers, claiming their subsidies aren't high enough ... I'm not sure that's something that resonates

with ordinary people."

Within days, protest rallies in Quebec were drawing more than 1,000 people at a time. A YouTube spoof of a Quebec musician begging for money from a panel of anglo bureaucrats got 500,000 viewers in two days.

Oops, there goes 30 seats in Quebec. Says a Conservative strategist: "There went our majority government. No doubt about it."

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If there was anything close to a turning point in the campaign , it started during the televised debates two weeks before voting day. It wasn't just that Dion had his 30-day "plan" and Harper didn't. Harper was also showing his "empathy deficit" toward Canadians understandably worried about what the worst market meltdown ever would do to their savings, their pensions, maybe even their homes.

Harper wanted to look prime ministerial in the debates. Instead, he just looked like the cold fish most Canadians have come to expect.

Conservative strategists say Harper's problem was having one head for two hats - the analytical economist saying Canada's position is sound, versus the politician who needed to connect with average voters. When Harper suggested the catastrophic collapse of world markets might offer some interesting opportunities to pick up cheap stock, public opinion hit the fan. Suddenly, Harper was saying how much he understood Canadians' concerns - heck, his own mother was at 24 Sussex worrying about her future.

Pollster Nik Nanos puts it all succinctly: "I don't think Canadians wanted a warm and cuddly Stephen Harper, and I don't think talking about his mother helped things at all. What they wanted to hear from their prime minister was he cared about what was going on, and he was not going to panic, but if action were needed, he was going to act."

\* \* \*

As Canadians gathered for Thanksgiving dinner, the prime minister was calling Dion and the carbon tax a double disaster for humanity, while the Liberal leader was crossing the country calling Harper a liar. The NDP vote was holding, the Bloc was poised to sweep Quebec, and Green queen Elizabeth May was up for best sport of the campaign.

After 37 days and something like \$350 million, Nanos's polling was showing public opinion heading back toward where it started.

Regardless of the outcome, as an exercise in democracy, let it be said that rarely has there been more ado about less than in this election.

\* Greg Weston writes for Sun Media/Osprey Media.

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