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The centre-left's last hope

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A non-compete pact among federalist centre-left parties -- the favoured option of most centre-left Canadians according to a new Canadian Press Harris Decima poll -- could have elected a 173-seat Liberal/NDP/Green coalition government in 2008.

CP-Harris Decima reported last week that 71 per cent of Liberals, 77 per cent of New Democrats and 74 per cent of Greens support some form of co-operation between the centre and the left.

A non-compete pact is the first choice among Liberals (32 per cent), New Democrats (40 per cent) and Greens (32 per cent) respectively.

A coalition after the next election is the second most popular option while an outright merger has the least backing.

Retired University of Winnipeg senior scholar and political geographer John Ryan ran the Oct. 14, 2008 election results through a non-compete scenario that assumes all incumbent Liberal and NDP MPs and second-place finishers in Conservative and Bloc Québécois ridings run unopposed by coalition partners and beat their Conservative opponents.

His 173-seat projection is therefore highly theoretical because it assumes all Liberals will vote NDP and vice versa. In fact, the latest Nanos Research poll finds 38.7 per cent of Liberals and 22.6 per cent of New Democrats would rather vote Conservative than for one another. However, a comfortable majority of 173 seats provides some flexibility, particularly since the Conservatives would, under the same scenario, elect only 92 MPs.

Ryan's non-compete strategy would entitle the Liberals to field 207 candidates, the NDP 96, and the Greens five. The Liberals could capture up to 125 seats, the NDP 46 and the Greens two, for a majority of 173. The Conservatives would, as mentioned earlier, win 92 seats and the Bloc 41. There would be two independents.

Ryan's analysis of the 2008 federal election, published in November, 2008 on the website www.globalresearch.ca, has suddenly become news because the drive towards a centre-left merger just won't go away despite official denials on all sides.

Ryan made some surprising findings. The Conservatives finished just 12 ridings short of a majority government with the support of only 22 per cent of Canada's 24 million eligible voters because voter turnout dropped to an historic low of 59 per cent. The record low turnout also meant the Conservatives won 19 more seats than their 2006 shaky minority despite capturing 168,737 fewer ballots.

Conservatives also benefited from vote-splitting on the centre-left. Ryan found the Conservatives captured 51 of their 143 seats with less than 50 per cent of the vote.

The need for centre-left realignment has been a recurrent topic in political circles ever since the 2003 merger between the Progressive Conservatives and the Alberta-based Reform/Canadian Alliance created an entity clearly to the right of Sir John A. Macdonald's historic nation-founding party.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservatives not only embrace aspects of U.S. Republican social and theological conservatism, but are implementing some of its policies in foreign and domestic affairs, polarizing Canadian politics between the 30 to 35 per cent of Canadians who support the right and the 65 to 70 per cent of Canadians who back one of the four parties on the centre and left.

Making matters worse, the four-way rivalry among the 65 to 70 per cent on the centre and left could doom them to perpetual defeat due to rampant vote-splitting in a first-past-the-post electoral system designed for two, not five, parties.

Ryan's analysis uncovered some other interesting statistics: The Conservatives won 143 seats and placed second in 93 for a total of 236. The Liberals were not far behind, winning 77 seats and placing second in 130 for a total of 207. The NDP placed first in 37 and second in 59 for a total of 96. And the Greens placed second in five ridings, three in Alberta and one each in Ontario and Nova Scotia.

The Greens took votes disproportionately from the Liberals, not the New Democrats. The Liberals lost 12 seats due to the strength of the Greens, four times the three seats the rise in Green support pried from the NDP.

History, principle and tradition make a centre-left merger a non-starter, Ryan believes. But a coalition in which all the parties would retain their identities has a good chance.

"I am hopeful that in the not-too-distant future reason may prevail, that eventually two-thirds of the Canadian electorate would have a political entity to reflect their values and a government to represent them: a non-compete agreement leading to post-election co-operation and perhaps coalition among the federalist centre-left parties," he says.

Frances Russell is a Winnipeg author and political commentator..