

Canadian Politics: Tom Mulcair Deserved Better

The New Democratic Party's treatment of Thomas Mulcair is disgraceful and cowardly. My own background with Mulcair does not make us natural allies, as he objected in Parliament to my return to this country four years ago, and I have generally not supported the NDP at any level.

Our only personal encounter was accidental, brief, and perfectly cordial. But his party has presented the country with a spectacle of ingratitude, scapegoating, and betrayal that will be long remembered by voters of all parties. Everyone qualified to have an opinion would agree that Mulcair's parliamentary performance as leader of the opposition has been as distinguished as any in living memory, almost as effective and less destructive than that of John Diefenbaker, and up to the highest traditions of Tommy Douglas, David Lewis, Ed Broadbent and Jack Layton.

In the 18 federal general elections since its founding, from 1962 to last year, the NDP was in the band between 13.6 per cent of the vote and 20.4 per cent, except for the debacle of 1993 when it received only 6.9 per cent, and the bonanza of 2011, when it scored 30.6 per cent. Mulcair gained 19.7 per cent last year, a total that, apart from 2011, has been exceeded only twice, narrowly, by Broadbent in 1980 and 1984, with 19.8 per cent and 20.4 per cent of the vote. Mulcair's total of 44 MPs is the second highest in the party's history, behind only Layton's bumper performance of 2011, with 103 MPs.

The point is not that Mulcair led them to an unprecedented disaster, the point is the freakish result in 2011. That was the only election since 1965 that the Liberal party was not led by a Quebecer or quasi-Quebecer. John Turner was a Montreal lawyer and MP for five elections. All the others,

Jean Chrétien, Paul Martin, Stéphane Dion, and both Trudeaus have been Quebec MPs, except Michael Ignatieff in 2011. He was sensitive to Quebec issues, but in a rather dated way. The formula has not worked except when the Liberal leader was a Québécois, or had a de facto associate prime minister for French-Canadians, roles in which Ernest Lapointe and Louis St. Laurent served W.L. Mackenzie King. Obviously, Laurier and St. Laurent didn't need a Quebec lieutenant. Lester Pearson did, and only found one at the end of his term, Pierre E. Trudeau, and never had a decisive majority of Quebec MPs, nor, as a result, did he have a majority government.

Ignatieff, though conciliatory and reasonably bilingual, was at a disadvantage opposite Layton, who spoke the language like the native he was, and just as Quebec was wearying of being largely represented in Ottawa by a separatist party that could not produce much patronage or favouritism for Quebec. Layton appealed to nationalists by promising to repeal Chrétien's Clarity Act, requiring a clear majority on an unambiguous question for any province to secede. In 1980 and 1995, René Lévesque and Jacques Parizeau had presented a trick question that purported to offer Quebec all the benefits of sovereignty and association with Canada: eating and retaining its fiscal and constitutional cake. All polls show that about 20 per cent of Quebecers are outright separatists, adieu to Canada and the hell with it; and about 40 per cent, including practically all the non-French, are outright federalists – they might like some concessions from Ottawa but they think separation would be insane. This group includes many of the immigrants Quebec has attracted from supposedly French-speaking places such as Haiti, Morocco and Lebanon, to replace the unborn created by the province's collapsed post-Catholic birthrate. Their interest in Quebec nationalism is about as fuzzy as their knowledge of a metropolitan version of the French language and as their numbers grow, they do not incite optimism about the future of the separatist cause.

As Ignatieff, no great rabble-rouser at the best of times, settled in with the Liberals, and Quebec tired of the Bloc, Stephen Harper publicly said he would reduce grants to French-Canadian cultural causes, and was implicitly unimpressed (with some reason in many cases) by their artistic virtuosity anyway. Layton not only promised to ditch the Clarity Act, but also to banish English from the federal government or federally chartered private-sector workplaces in Quebec. This was as good as it gets for the Quebec nationalists: \$2,000 per capita per year continues to pour into Quebec in transfer payments – Danegeld from the rich English-speaking provinces, but Quebec becomes officially unilingual and can go back to blackmailing the country with referendum questions resembling Yvon Deschamps' old joke about "An independent Quebec in a strong Canada."

In these unique circumstances, with Layton much more at home in Quebec and in French than Harper or Ignatieff, and peddling the fullest nationalist Monty that had any chance of being enacted, he stole the clothes of the Bloc. The Liberals were slumbering and the Conservatives would rather have the NDP than the Bloc and liked a more even division than traditional between the Liberal and NDP vote-shares. Thus did Layton come in with 59 Quebec MPs (and 44 others) to become the leader of the official opposition. He was mortally ill, and before anyone pointed out very audibly that he had been playing footsie with the separatists, he died, received a state funeral, and Mulcair succeeded to a precarious heritage assembled by a man who had instantly become a mythic leader. Layton showed great agility in seizing the nationalist vote in Quebec as he did, but it was going to be very difficult for anyone to replicate that feat after the federal Liberals were restored to the hands of the Trudeaus.

I was one of those who answered Mulcair's false claim that he was the real federalist because it was only by making the concessions Layton had proposed that Quebec would have the

self-confidence to reject independence. It was unutterable bunk, of course (but not bad improvisation), and in last year's election, the Bloc made a goal-line stand for pure laine separation, and the Liberals and Conservatives both ran strong federalist campaigns and accused the NDP of rank hypocrisy. There is no real place for a separatist party in a federal election: the Bloc took most of the separatists who could be bothered voting (19.3 per cent of the provincial total), the Conservatives and Liberals split the straight federalist vote fairly evenly, with a little of it going to the non-French NDP, and the Liberals took about half the votes in the grey zone between the constitutional status quo and the secessionists, slicing the NDP off at the knees (Liberals 35.7 per cent, Conservatives 16.7 and NDP 19.3).

It was only a bad NDP night compared to the one-off result of four years before. Mulcair had the NDP in the national lead a month before the 2015 election, an absolute historic first, and undoubtedly lost ground because of his principled stance on the nonsensical issue of the niqab. He should have finessed it, but as soon as Justin Trudeau convinced the country that he was not an airhead whose sole claim to high office was surviving childbirth, as the other parties had portrayed him, Mulcair was on a suicide mission. He did his best to make the NDP a serious and fiscally responsible party; he failed and the surest proof of it is that he is being scapegoated now. He should follow the honourable path of Bob Rae and return to the Liberals, where he should be received graciously. Let the Naomi Klein eco-Marxists have the NDP; then they will learn how overwhelming political defeat really tastes. Mulcair has a political future if he wants it; those who have torn him down do not.