

The NDP Still Isn't Ready, But It Turns Out Trudeau May Be

With just over two weeks before the federal election, several points appear to be emerging.

The New Democrats have been given their star turn as a potential government, but have not made it. Their leader, Thomas Mulcair, has avoided the pink scare – deservedly, as he is not an extremist – but New Democrats, who can sometimes run a province more or less competently, have too many hare-brained ideas to be entrusted with the federal government. Its budget plan of insignificant tax rises, bountiful increases in social spending and a balanced budget, won't fly. The positions of the Conservatives (balancing the budget through spending restraint) and of the Liberals (modest deficits for spending on infrastructure), are at least plausible.

The NDP's foreign policy has all of the party's usual hobbling foibles, which are not relevant at the provincial level. Mulcair advocates complete avoidance of any military role in opposing ISIL, as if Canada were neutral in a contest between a savage gang of rabid sectarian torturers and decapitators of civilians, on the one hand, and almost every other civilized country on the other. Dispensing aid to victims is necessary, but as Prime Minister Stephen Harper, especially has forcefully responded, giving humanitarian assistance and training local forces and going on the odd bombing mission in the same week does not overstretch this country's talents at multi-tasking. (Canada flies about two per cent of the Allied missions, and avoids over-straining the wings of our venerable CF-18's.)

The same fantasyland problem arises in Mulcair's insane demand

for a boycott of Saudi Arabia. We would lose our \$15 billion defence sale contract with them, and if our action had any impact (it would in fact be completely ineffectual), it would be to assist ISIL in its furtive struggle against the House of Saud. In its almost endearing naivete, the NDP fails to apply the proper litmus test to any attempted ostracization and destabilization of uncongenial foreign governments: would regime change produce an improvement? Particularly after the disasters that followed the overthrow of the Shah in Iran, Saddam in Iraq, Qaddafi in Libya and Mubarak in Egypt (though the incompetence of the Muslim Brotherhood saved us from the full horror of that debacle), Canadian voters had the right to hope that NDP views would have matured a little. They seem no longer to demand withdrawal from NATO, though they would contribute even less to it than Harper has...

The NDP is still thrashing around in the deep end of climate change where very little is actually known, bandying about the discredited concept of cap-and-trade, and railing about Harper withdrawing from the Kyoto agreement. In fact, no country signed or remained in Kyoto except those that were going to be rewarded for their disintegration (Russia), or their economic primitiveness in not having a high level of carbon emissions (Zimbabwe's Mugabe and comparable despots, and all the world's failed states). The most amusing element of this part of the debate was Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau's harassment of Mulcair for once having advocated the sale of water to the United States. It was slightly reminiscent of Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis' success in the 1956 provincial election campaign, in which he accused the federal Liberals of having imported 300,000 dozen "Communist eggs" from Poland. Of course there was nothing wrong with buying Polish eggs, just as there is nothing wrong with selling water to the U.S., as long as it comes from rivers flowing toward salt-water oceans and doesn't reduce our water tables. But Mulcair's discomfort was humorous.

It should be remembered that the current position of the NDP is aberrant. In 2011, Quebec realized it could not go on forever voting for a separatist party in a federal election. Most Quebecois are not separatists and like to have some influence in Ottawa. Yet most find Harper's unmitigated waspiness and failure to truckle to Quebec irritating (the latter is rather to his credit). Former Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff was in a time warp, talking earnestly about the constitutional problems of 30 years before, like a man who had been away from the country that long. The late NDP Leader Jack Layton, meanwhile, conducted a whirlwind campaign in the interior of Quebec promising to repeal the Clarity Act and let Quebec secede on a 50-per-cent-plus-one vote on a fuzzy question; in the meantime, he would abolish the English language in the federal workplace in Quebec (i.e., federal government offices and federal sections of the private sector, such as banks). The habitants lapped it up. Ignatieff didn't figure out what was happening and didn't try to rouse a federalist response, while Harper was happy enough to have the ancient Liberal foe cut down at the knees, tearing away the base of its support since Laurier's time.

Mulcair has tried to go Layton one better by po-facedly telling English Canada the nose-lengthening whopper that he is the true federalist, on the grounds that only when the Quebec nationalists are armed with these concessions will they have the self-confidence to remain in Canada. The walking political corpse of Bloc Leader Gilles Duceppe is picking up a bit of the nationalist vote, and Trudeau and Harper are both gaining votes among the 40 per cent of Quebecers who are outright federalists and the 40 per cent who are somewhere between enthusiastic Canadians and Quebec separatists. Mulcair is being gradually exposed for selling the country a pantomime horse where the front and back legs aren't coordinated. More could be made outside Quebec of his desire to allow the separatists to produce another trick question, then to allow them to drag four million Quebec federalists out of Canada and

into a sovereign Quebec.

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Mulcair has been strong in Parliament and is perfectly presentable in person, but on the hustings he has seemed flaccid, elderly and unstylishly hirsute. Barring an astonishing turn in the next two weeks, the Conservatives and NDP will both slip significantly from their performance in 2011. Regardless of which party ends up with the most seats, the big winner will be Trudeau, who seems likely at least to triple the Liberal parliamentary contingent. Four years ago, there was rampant speculation about whether the federal Liberal party would survive, rather than fold into the NDP with the centrist and right-of-centre Liberals gravitating to the Conservatives. Now, the NDP seems to be retreating very gradually back to a third party just outside the federal mainstream.

What seems to be shaping up is a contest between comfort with the executive competence of Harper and a rising confidence that Trudeau is not just a pretty face with famous and controversial parents. The pompous Conservative advertising about "Justin's not ready" has been largely debunked and Trudeau is carrying the fight to Harper on several issues. He has been exposing the scandalous enfeeblement of the Canadian Armed Forces despite all Harper's King Lear fist-shaking at Russian President Vladimir Putin and others. Both opposition leaders have stuck to their guns against Harper's repressive endorsement of more and longer and harsher imprisonment, and Trudeau has rather courageously attacked the practice of revocation of citizenship, even for terrorists.

An argument can be made for revoking the citizenship of those who have violated the oath they took in becoming citizens, but

expelling people could prove a totalitarian measure and Trudeau and Mulcair are right to oppose it. Here, as with his absurdly draconian crime bill and his Orwellian security bill (C-51), Harper's disregard for human rights is worrisome. Nor should Harper get away with his mistaken claim that Canada is the leading economic performer of the G-7. No one can complain that the U.S. has a higher economic growth rate after it has doubled the national debt in seven years to buy a pallid recovery. But Germany, and even the United Kingdom, have better unemployment levels and economic growth rates than Canada, a country which is now, unlike other G-7 nations, in a recession.

There is some truth to Mulcair's allegation that "Harper put all his economic eggs in one basket (oil), and then dropped the basket." It is surprising that there has not been a greater public outcry that the reduction of the price of gasoline has only been about a third of the reduction of the world oil price. With all that said, Canada weathered the 2008 financial crisis well and Harper deserves some credit for that.

Trudeau seems to be regaining enough of the old Liberal dexterity of being just far enough to the left of the Conservatives as not to seem like tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum to voters of the centre-left, and adequately to the right of the NDP not to frighten the cautious Canadian bourgeoisie. It is almost always a question of natural tactical political skill that determines whether the centre, which Trudeau is trying to rebuild, is a position of strength or weakness.

As of now, a parliamentary majority seems unlikely. The largest party will probably form the government, but if that is the Conservatives, Harper will have great difficulty persuading either of the main opposition parties to keep him in office unless he is well ahead of them and close to a majority. Another Conservative might manage it, but Harper does not have the minority governing skills of Mackenzie King,

whose opportunistic cunning he in some ways replicates, nor the ability to dragoon the NDP that Pierre Trudeau exercised from 1972 to 1974. (The Pearson government is not comparable, as it was only four or five votes short in a four-party House of Commons.)

They are an interesting trio of quite different leaders, and it should be an intriguing election night and aftermath.

First published in the