



St. John's in Newfoundland, where the Liberals' clean sweep of Atlantic Canada's 32 seats began on October 19. Istock photo

The Atlantic: Anatomy of a Clean Sweep

Charles J. McMillan

Justin Trudeau won Atlantic Canada not with money or tactics but with the classic investments of time and attention. As his longtime friend and adviser, Charles McMillan, points out, Brian Mulroney thought Atlantic Canada was important enough to win that when he ran, as newly chosen leader, for a seat in the House, he ran in Central Nova. That riding, along with every other Tory sure thing in the region, went to the Liberals this time. The blame for that, writes McMillan, goes to Stephen Harper.

Change vs. Stay the Course, Inexperience vs. Tested Leadership—these were the slogans framing the narrative of Canada's 15th election since Pierre Trudeau came to power in 1968. While the surprising majority government achieved by Justin Trudeau may confound the war rooms of the NDP and Conservatives, the seeds of his victory were planted in Atlantic Canada, as the new leader started the arduous process of rebuilding his party, from the ground up. Unlike in the other regions of Canada, the outcome was never in doubt—the Nanos nightly tracking polls, after all, showed the Liberals ranged from 45-

55 per cent—so the only question was the seat count. All four provincial governments quietly lent their support, three were Liberal and the fourth had former Premier Danny Williams, extending hell and fury towards Stephen Harper.

Harper sowed the seeds of his own destruction in Atlantic Canada, not simply because of his early and dismissive comments about the region's "culture of dependency," but because of ministers who did little to build a forward-looking organization with compelling candidates, a strategy to win incumbent seats from the Liberals, and a capacity to listen to voters, premiers, and business stakeholders. Indeed, when asked to speak at the well-attended funeral in Truro, of former Nova Scotia Senator Fred Dickson, a Conservative partisan with friends in all parties across the region, Harper not only said publicly that Fred wasn't his friend but added, "I have no friends." In Atlantic Canada, where communities are close and friendships are lifelong, it was a telling comment.

For Harper, the headwinds in Atlantic Canada were brutal. Local and national polling showed Conservative support in the low 20s for the past three years, and in a region where incumbency is a decided advantage, the 13 Tory seats were all in play, including the three in Nova Scotia, where Conservative members, including Peter MacKay in Central Nova, decided not to reoffer. Further, party insiders knew from recent provincial elections—three won by the Liberals—that Trudeau had a chance in all 32 seats but 26-27 were very likely. The NDP hoped to gain three and Harper hoped to hold at least three Cabinet members—Gail Shea in Cardigan, Keith Ashfield in Fredericton, and Bernard Valcourt in Edmundston.

But other factors added to the headwinds. Changes to the Employment Insurance Act made it more difficult for seasonal workers to receive benefits. In no province was there a leading Con-

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servative who championed the region, and no strategy to take the 10 seats that Harper first won and build a regional base of 18-20. Few of his patronage appointments or Senate choices added to Conservative support, and some (such as Mike Duffy) were deep distractions. As incumbents like Gerald Keddy or MacKay decided to step aside, there was no desire to attract new stars.

Even worse, Harper and his war room catastrophically underestimated Justin Trudeau and the Liberal team. His campaign spokesman, Kory Teneycke, telling the media before the first debate, "if (Trudeau) comes on stage with his pants on, he will probably exceed expectations," typified both Conservative hubris and the lack of discipline from the top. Indeed, Harper made a fatal decision to employ a William Gladstone metaphor of balanced budget and low taxes in the areas of Conservative support, like suburban and rural Canada, where the economy is soft and unemployment is high, particularly for young people. Paradoxically, in the areas of Harper weakness, urban and multicultural cities, the economy is strong, mainly due to low interest rates and residential construction.

By contrast, well before the election was called, Trudeau toured the region regularly, taking his family on holidays to Atlantic Canada, and at one farm picnic in 2014 at Lawrence MacAulay's Cardigan, PEI riding, a packed crowd of 5,000 people showed up. Trudeau, reflecting on previous leaders of various parties, started the rebuilding process at the riding level, attracting well-known local candidates, many not overly partisan. Luck, that glorious feature

of winning campaigns, helped but was not decisive: the Duffy trial and court revelations filling the airwaves since August, deeply motivated the ABH supporters. Candidates like former Tory MLA Peter Penashue running in Labrador exposed the weakness of the Harper slate.

During September, Harper evangelists with next to zero resonance in Atlantic Canada, such as Jason Kenny, Pierre Poilievre, and Chris Alexander, defended Harper's approach to defence issues, refugees from Syria, and Trudeau's deficit spending on infrastructure in a region where good infrastructure ties the region together. Their lame pronouncements, tied to cracks in the vaunted Conservative war room, attracted local media attention, and the barring veterans of groups from a Harper rally in Fredericton inflamed voter's distrust of peevish, central control. That paranoia reinforced in the public mind the Conservatives' rejection of Ches Crosbie (son of John Crosbie, who had worked tirelessly behind the scenes to get Danny Williams and Stephen Harper on speaking terms) as a candidate. The last two weeks in Atlantic Canada prophesied the possible results nationally.

The campaign strategists for each party ended up with totally different tactics. Mulcair toured the region sparingly, hoping to save the lone NDP seat in Halifax and that three-way splits might win a few seats elsewhere. Harper visited early, and then late in the campaign, defensively visiting ridings held by Conservatives, including—in the last days—Fredericton, only to have the Conservative candidate lose his seat.

By contrast, as Liberal support climbed daily, if only incrementally in Quebec, the Liberal team put the chartered jet into high gear, visiting Tory and NDP incumbent ridings, with volunteers organizing huge rallies and Trudeau drumming home his ballot question: real change. The bandwagon effect shrewdly played off media reaction to a man in motion asking for support from dejected and rejected Conservatives. That and the Liberal advertising blitz, timed perfectly for maximum impact, turned the election into a two-way race. By election day, the decision was easy: Harper or Trudeau.

In Atlantic Canada, many Conservative candidates came third; Conservative ministers like Bernard Valcourt and Gail Shea. Most embarrassingly, Peter MacKay's riding, a Tory stronghold his father, Elmer, first won in 1971, and where Brian Mulroney ran in 1983 when he first became leader, voted Liberal. The neighbouring seat, once held by Robert Coates, was won by Bill Casey, the ex-Conservative who was expelled from Harper's cau-

cus, despite repeated visits by the Prime Minister in support of incumbent Scott Armstrong.

The 32-seat sweep, plus the Gaspé riding representing Magdalen Islands (originally part of the Catholic Diocese of Charlottetown), once represented provincially by René Lévesque (who was born in Campbellton, NB) paralleled the huge gains across the country. Trudeau's victory was now in the history books, coming from third to first, winning so many new seats in all provinces, rebuilding Liberal fortunes in their base, French Canada, and attracting immense support in urban Canada. Unlike his father in 1968, he surrounds himself with political pros, and like Brian Mulroney in 1984, or Jean Chrétien in 1993, he is unlikely to turn the political side of the party into the PMO.

The new PM controls unequivocally the political centre of Canadian politics, in all regions, and will learn from other prime ministers how to manage his caucus. Further, unlike his father, who lacked a strong caucus in West-

ern Canada, he will not introduce policies like the National Energy Program that hurt a region and a province so dramatically. The Atlantic Caucus has an unprecedented opportunity to introduce bold initiatives to reduce or eliminate their have-not status, such as building on traditional strengths but becoming an exporting superstar in energy, agriculture, education, and food products.

Timing, as Bobby Kennedy noted, is everything in politics. Justin Trudeau, a student of politics, timed his support perfectly, and has a clear mandate for change. To the world, the new PM said that Canada is back. To Ottawa, he might have added: magnanimity is in play. To the pros in the Tory and NDP campaign war rooms, it is now time to get a new education. **P**

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