



The Big Three: Stephen Harper, Justin Trudeau and Tom Mulcair at the debate on the economy in Calgary on September 17. Trudeau's position on running a stimulative deficit played well with "change voters." Adam Scotti Photo

Lessons From the Big Armchair: Go Clean or Stay Home

Robin V. Sears

The strategies and tactics of the 2015 federal election campaign will be sifted through for years to come by political professionals seeking to replicate the alchemy of Justin Trudeau's victory and avoid the unforced errors of his rivals' losses. Former NDP strategist and seasoned political observer Robin Sears dissects a campaign that was a disaster for his party but a victory for his country.

“Short memories are all that keep most politicians’ careers afloat, snorts a cynical Canadian political journalist. Sadly, those same short memories bedevil campaign teams who regularly repeat the same dumb strategies that failed the first time out, or they repeat their previous strategies a second time thinking they will payoff twice.

Perhaps short memories can also be blamed for the many times that cam-

paigners breach granite-hard principles of military and political strategy. Ones like: Never underestimate an opponent. And don't magnify the offence by bragging publicly about what an idiot you think he is. As both New Democrats and Conservatives learned to their cost, it allowed Justin Trudeau to vault from "unready lightweight" to prime minister.

New Democrats always fear being seen as incapable of "managing the peanut stand" in the eyes of skeptical centrist, fiscally cautious voters. So they, too, failed to understand that repeating Jack Layton's pledge of a balanced budget only gave permission to the Liberals to sound more progressive by promising to plunge Canada into deficit.

The nonsense propagated by the usually economically illiterate political pundit class that conflates debt and progressive politics is always irritating. But it is an almost universal shorthand that New Democrats should have had a better pushback for.

Tommy Douglas and Allan Blakeney would spin in their graves at the stupidity of promising to sell your government into servitude to the bond market to fund ongoing programs. Like fiscally responsible social democrats everywhere, they would argue, "Find the sustainable revenue to fund your ongoing programs or don't launch them..." Setting the GST back to pre-Harper levels would have funded everything that the Liberals have promised to borrow billions to fund.

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After all, Liberal strategists David Herle and Gerry Butts had played the same game many times in Ontario campaigns past, including 2014. Economists may be horrified that a party could win successive majorities while dragging

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Ontario down to Bob Rae levels of debt and deficit spending. Ontario is now the most indebted sub-national jurisdiction in the developed world: \$300 billion in debt, adding billions in new borrowing annually, and now sending \$1 billion a month in interest payments to their bondmasters—Ontario's third largest expenditure after health and education. New Democrats should have had a more devastating attack on such fiscal foolishness.

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Many Canadians will have concluded that there were two winners and two losers on October 19. Canada is perhaps the biggest winner, having chosen a strong majority progressive government with the support of a large plurality of Canadians. The revived Liberal Party is also clearly a big winner. The losers are obviously the Harper team and the NDP.

However, at this juncture it would seem the Conservatives loss is far more serious, and will likely have very long term reverberations. As *National Post* columnist Andrew Coyne eloquently put it:

“The post-mortems in the press are full of the inevitable anonymous finger pointing about divisions within the campaign team ... It isn't about that... The damage that has been done is far greater than this defeat. It isn't just the Conservatives who have lost favour with the public: it's conservatism.

“It has been so long since Conservatives put forward any bold or radical policy ideas...the public may be forgiven for concluding either that they don't exist, or that they are so far beyond the pale as not to be worth considering.

“Conservatives need to rediscover what it is they stand for... they need to sever themselves from the bullying, sneering culture of the Harperites...It should not be exclusively a liberal or left-wing idea that opponents are to be treated with respect, not insults; that learning and science are to be valued, not derided; that politics should bring people together rather than divide them...A politics of substantive differences, civilly expressed.

“If I'm not mistaken, that is the formula that just elected Justin Trudeau.”

There are the many lessons to be learned from the attempt to introduce the politics of culture, religion and ethnicity into Canadian politics for the first time since

the 1950s. The Harper team had flirted with these toxic messages in 2011, making insinuations about the values that Canadians expected immigrants to share. But in this election, for reasons that they came to regret, they decided to double down, and to challenge both Tom Mulcair and Trudeau on the niqab issue.

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The gravity of this lapse in judgement is hard to exaggerate. It is a very long time since Canadians have been exposed to the politics of cultural or religious division. The Liberal Party campaigned against the CCF in BC using vicious anti-Chinese advertising in the 1930s. There was an occasional whiff of anti-Semitism in the Duplessis era in Quebec in the 1940s and 50s. But it is only in 2015 that an American Republican-style ‘southern strategy’—the Nixon era effort to whip up anti-black sentiment among working class white voters—has ever been attempted in modern politics in Canada.

Conservative spokesman Kory Teneycke vehemently denied any role was played in their campaign by the egregious Australian race politics practitioner, Lynton Crosby. Key Tory war room veterans, however, trained under Crosby in the 2007 and 2010 campaigns in Australia. They were insiders as Crosby’s client, Australian conservative Prime Minister John Howard, successfully used ‘refugee boat people’ as a campaign wedge. Some were also involved in Boris Johnson’s campaigns in London, which Crosby led, where “English values” was the dog-whistle used by the UK Conservative candidate for mayor.

So it is a moot point whether Crosby



The identity politics of the niqab hurt the NDP and helped the Conservatives in Quebec, but then the snitch line on “Barbaric Cultural Practices” proved a bridge too far for the Conservatives in the rest of Canada. Flickr photo.

was pulling levers in their war room in 2015. The Tory war machine is steeped in experience of the Crosby use of race, religion, and ethnicity as political attack weapons. Their use of the niqab bears all the hallmarks of the Crosby approach to the use of ethnicity as a political wedge.

Seeing the devastating impact that the niqab issue was having on especially the New Democrats in Quebec, Conservative ministers Chris Alexander and Kellie Leitch raised the temperature further by announcing the launch of the “Barbaric Cultural Practices” tipline, claimed to be for the use of brutalized Muslim women to report their abuse. Now, apart from the absurdity of suggesting that there is an inadequacy in existing channels for any abused woman to report attacks, the snitch line message was insulting to the Muslim community as a whole.

To place the offence in appropriate context, imagine if a Canadian minister of the Crown had made a similar announcement about Orthodox Jewish women, or Buddhist novitiate priests. It is reassuring that Canadians rejected the toxic bait, but

sad that the immediate reaction was quite muted.

Neither the Liberal nor the NDP leader was successful in counter-attacking on the issue, however, on a level that placed responsibility where it should logically have rested, with Stephen Harper.

The Liberal Party ran a professional and optimistic campaign. They took the risk of allowing their leader to be seen in unscripted and freeform settings. They won the support of the media, in part, by an open and accessible style, permitting long and free-flowing press conferences. Performing without a safety net, Trudeau gained confidence steadily during the campaign.

The lesson for future campaign strategists is clear: provide a new leader with a strong team of advisers and counsel and then give them a chance to fail, because that’s the best way to build their confidence and the respect of a target audience.

The Conservative campaign was a disaster on too many levels to itemize, but there is perhaps

one over-arching lesson from their strategic failure. When any institution decides to promote a long-time number two to the senior leadership, there needs to be both supervision and a Plan B. As the corporate world has seen many times, number twos are often at the top of their growth potential, and crash as the new boss. The late Sen. Doug Finley was always the final decision maker in the Harper era on campaign strategy. Even as ill as he was in 2011, his “wise elder” function was an important check against dumb ideas and deviations from strategic discipline.

His replacement by a feuding set of lieutenants, nominally under the direction of Jenni Bryne, turned out to have been a major error. Campaign staff, candidates and eventually even the media, became aware of the tensions, and later open warfare, among Byrne, Guy Giorno, Ray Novak, and Teneycke. But internal knife-fights are hardly unknown in campaign management politics, and some campaigns manage to deliver success in spite of them. This one failed so spectacularly for an entirely different reason.

A seasoned Tory campaign strategist, and long time rugby fan, observed at the very launch of the foolishly stretched campaign period, that he was concerned that his colleagues had fallen into a very bad strategic trap: fighting the last war. The temptation to re-run what worked before is, of course, very human and may seem almost prudent and sound: “Why change something that isn’t broken?!”

But as this old Tory pointed out, in championship level play, in politics or in rugby, it is always wrong to repeat yourself. Your opponents know your old playbook, and they will have developed counters to each favorite campaign gambit. He cited the superlative achievements of the New Zealand All-Blacks, that tiny country’s international rugby superstars, victorious year after year.

Their approach to staying on top—magnificently analyzed in James

Kerr’s Legacy—begins with one unshakeable principle: never repeat last year’s strategy.

The team rigorously analyzes their own performance and their peers’ observed strengths and weaknesses, from the previous year’s games in the off-season. Then they start to build a new strategy, from scratch, each time. It’s hard to throw out old favorites, but that discipline has kept them at the top of their sport for longer than any other team in any other sport.

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The Tory campaign team would have benefited from studying the All-Blacks approach to ensuring victory after victory. Instead, the Conservatives ran a dull and gimmicky campaign, one that might have survived a normal 37-day election. But in the end, in a campaign more than twice as long, they were reduced to game show stunts and rallies with allies as dubious as the Ford brothers.

The NDP needs to use the next four years building a campaign infrastructure up to the task of running a real national campaign. The 2015 model was not. The classic failing campaign weaknesses were all clearly visible: constipated feedback and message delivery loops, weak and sometimes inappropriate resource allocation, strategic paralysis and departmental silos, and finally, creative and speech messaging out of sync with emerging campaign challenges. For future ref-

erence, they also need to get better at anticipating the attacks they will face, and developing strong counters to them, as well as developing platform planks attractive to key audiences—well in advance of writ day.

The Liberals need to ensure that the thousands of new volunteers and campaign lessons are successfully turned into a deeper, broader and more well-trained national party apparatus. Their success in Ontario, for example, would simply not have happened without the support of the provincial party’s superb campaign apparatus. They also need to get better at integrating ground organization technologies with the centre. But then none of the parties do that as well as the best US campaigns did four years ago—and the Americans are far more advanced today.

The overarching campaign lesson for the Conservatives is the need for a bigger tent. Now shut out of either seats or organization—with the exception of an enclave around Quebec City—from the Ottawa River to the Atlantic Ocean, and weak everywhere in urban Canada, the Conservatives geographic base has shrunk badly. They won a plurality of support only among high-school educated, low income, white male rural and small town voters; not a demographic base with a future.

A new Conservative government will have to emerge from a hard-right Alberta-based foundation and angry old white guys. Needless to say the next leader should also come with an authentic smile.

This campaign has one over-arching lesson for which every Canadian should be saying a small prayer of thanks, however.

There is still no path to victory employing the politics of division and hate in Canada. **P**

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