

Prime Minister Layton and Proportional Representation

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Friday, November 28, 2008

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Since during the federal election campaign over the last 3 months I've talked with friends about the outside chance of Jack Layton becoming prime minister. It's still an outside chance, but it improved when Flaherty said an unsurprising bunch of nothing useful last night.

I've been impressed with the social movement that swept Obama to the presidency and spilled into Canada to send the federal NDP to a place where they raised more money from more people than the Liberal party.

Now with renewed talk of crashing the arrogant Harper government, Layton has a chance to become prime minister. Here's how.

Election Financing as the Trigger

Harper is on record as wanting to destroy the Liberal party, not just defeat them. So one of the first things he does in this new parliament, while not seriously addressing meaningful interventions on behalf of working Canadians in this economic meltdown, is to remove the per-vote funding for political parties. His is well funded, the Liberals are always 8 minutes from bankruptcy and the NDP and Bloc are populist parties with solid and growing funding machinery.

So changing the financing rules to push the Liberals into financial purgatory seemed like a solid Harper bully move. The Liberals have been a party of corporate entitlement, so they do not have a populist funding regime. Maybe now after a few failed elections in this decade they will seriously work on building one.

Harper incorrectly stated today in the House foyer, typically without taking questions, that Dion [or anyone] cannot become prime minister without electoral support. Nice campaign rhetoric, but really, no one was elected to a majority so anyone who can come up with 155 votes has a legal shot at governing.

Coalition Dynamics

Judy Rebick wrote a piece in the Globe and Mail a few weeks ago on a 3 party coalition that can orbit a few key policy similarities and box out Harper. [Canadians for a Progressive Coalition](#) are working well coordinating the advocacy for an anti-Harper, progressive alternative and email campaigns to all opposition MPs from people all across the country, which returned a few emails from Liberal lackeys condemning the move as bad policy. Typical Liberal birthright arrogance about not wanting to share.

So today we learned that Ed Broadbent and Jean Chretien have been trying to broker a coalition with Bloc voting support to keep Harper from ramping up his attacks on all things not radically right wing.

Prime Minister Layton

So who gets to be prime minister in a limited coalition? Dion is a lame duck as he announced he's stepping down at a convention. Some kind of new leader for the Liberals established over the next few days is unlikely and potentially illegitimate to party members or caucus.

The Bloc can quite easily stay out of a formal coalition with just a pledge to support votes. So Duceppe will not be prime minister. But there is something else to the Bloc. Plenty of people who are not separatists have been voting Bloc for some time now. Why? Because the Bloc gets things done for the province and the party's social and economic policies are on the whole enviable, especially to progressives. And people vote Bloc to keep majority governments from the Conservatives or the Liberals because they are bad for Quebec since a majority federal government shifts the power too centrally and blocks provinces' relative power.

So that leaves Prime Minister Layton, and not because his campaign rhetoric was that he wanted Harper's job. With the lame duck Dion or fresh new Liberal leader being questionable prime ministers, and Duceppe being a separatist, the only compromise that isn't a deal breaker could be Layton.

Proportional Representation

My agenda all decade has been to advocate for the end to majority governments in Canada and our 19th century electoral system which best serves a two party system, which Canada is far from today. Each minority government that gets elected puts a larger spotlight on the elephant in the room: that the electorate is too split or regionalized for simply two national motherhood parties. This means majority governments will become mathematically unlikely.

So if the opposition can crash Harper's bully government, we will have a system more like proportional representation than first-past-the-post, but with the Conservatives on the outs. This event can be a springboard to electoral reform.

Changing to a PR system will ensure entrenched Quebec advocacy for the Bloc without need for referendum threats. It will mean millions more votes for the NDP as so many won't need to vote strategically anymore. It will also mean the Green Party getting dozens of seats to support a green agenda, except to the extent that their platform isn't progressive enough to address the hyper-consumerism that is aggravating the climate crisis.

And the Liberal party, though they will bleed votes to the NDP, Greens and Bloc, will have a chance to survive. And the Conservatives? Who cares. Let their solid base do its work and elect the dozens of MPs that reflect their crazy right wing ideals.

So at least the three non-Conservative parties may leap towards PR to improve their future access to parliament, and the Conservatives may have to join in just to keep from being wildly marginalized forever because they too are no longer a national party that can get things done.

And this all bodes well for the BC election on May 12, 2009 when we will try again to pass a PR referendum that would have passed last time if the 57% didn't fall short of the suddenly new 60%

threshold for referenda.

So the goal isn't so much to get Layton in as PM, but to stop Harper from continuing his socially conservative and economically neoliberal, anti-social agenda. And out of it we may end up getting a far more fair electoral system.

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