

The Democratic Rebirth of Canada

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Saturday, April 23, 2011

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With less than a dozen days left in the federal election, I am prepared to call it...there is a democratic rebirth in this country. But I have one warning about reading too much into high turnouts in advance polls this weekend.

With Egypt capturing our hearts, and Tunisia, and Libya and a dozen other places in Africa and the Middle East seeking democracy, and the anti-neoliberal people's movements against worker bashing by the hyper-rich in Wisconsin and Ohio and dozens of other places in the world, I feared Canada would be passed over.

Not so.

We had a contempt of parliament vote in the House effectively firing the contemptuous Stephen Harper.

We have seen an election campaign with a consistently contemptuous ex-prime minister not even remotely trying to hide his disdain for democracy or applying for his old job again.

We have seen vote mobs, a stunning embrace of the NDP not as a radical new party, but a party whose policies have always resonated with millions of working Canadians, but now we see that after seven years of minority government that has enhanced democratic potential in Canada, the old tired binary choice of Liberal or Conservative is appearing increasingly obsolete.

That perception of obsolescence got a boost with the Conservative-Liberal passive coalition created when the Liberals decided to only sort of vote against Conservative policies. The Liberals ensured they passed by not allowing enough of Liberals MPs to attend the vote to stop bad policies.

Another boost came from Michael Ignatieff living down to expectations of his utter lack of charisma as a compelling leader with a vision. He kept up Liberal traditions of stealing progressive NDP policies, but we have seen him support Harper so much that he has already proven he'll campaign from the left but govern from the right. In this case he helped Harper govern from the radical right and now he campaigns from the left. Because this all happened backwards from normal, we are all seeing through it.

That is why the NDP is polling ahead of the Liberals. That is also why Jack Layton is considered by far the most desirable prime minister. And it may come from [his successful presentation in the debates](#). And this is why [analysis of one recent poll](#) inside the NDP surge this week shows the NDP poised to win 60 seats.

That is also why [in exploring the credibility of Jack Layton as prime minister](#), after a few more days of the NDP surge past the Liberals, another scenario for Layton to become prime minister is for the NDP to simply win more seats than the Liberals: reflecting a significant party implosion of credibility. This would

allow the NDP to explore a coalition or voting arrangement and further erode Ignatieff's chances of remaining Liberal leader, making Layton the only viable prime minister.

Since the Liberals lost their majority 7 years ago, they have hung on as official opposition. But the electorate has grown weary of their inability to provide a compelling message to resonate enough with voters to supplant the increasingly contemptuous Conservative party. The NDP has been the de facto opposition to this horrible government and the Liberals show no sign of caring to diverge from their passive support of the government. The public appears to be rewarding the NDP.

But the NDP support is soft, with a significant percentage of supporting voters not firmly committed to voting NDP. This may mean they may shift back to the Liberals at the last minute. That has happened in the past. The vote parking with the NDP may also result in strategic voting against Harper. Regardless, the surge we are seeing now has helped the Liberal party realize they lack the progressive credibility they have been promoting about themselves. That belongs to Jack Layton and the NDP team and the impressive BC caucus of the party.

We have seen the Canadian electorate brutally punish a political party once before in recent memory. During the era of majority governments in Canada, the voters revoked 167/169 seats from the Progressive Conservative party in 1993. In our post-majority era now, Ignatieff's weak campaign leads to a credible possibility that when they finish counting the votes in BC, where we will determine the result of the election, we could have another Conservative minority with fewer seats than in the last parliament, and an NDP opposition with more seats than the Liberals.

And since parliament just recently fired Harper, I see only one way for an opposition party to give Harper a chance to form a government before Layton does: if the Liberal party formalizes its previously passive coalition with Harper. Or Harper's successor, and Ignatieff's successor since Harper's third failure to get a majority and Ignatieff's loss of official opposition would end their era as party leaders.

But a warning:

Yesterday we saw spectacular turnouts and long lines at many advance polls across the country. We also saw some low turnout at some polls. I am eager to interpret that as another signal of this democratic rebirth in the nation that I so desire, but I've been burned by this once already.

Before the 2009 election in BC I optimistically but incorrectly interpreted seriously high turnout in advanced polls as both a resurgence in democratic participation because of almost a decade of anti-social abuse by the BC Liberal government and a connected rejection of that abuse setting up an NDP win. That didn't happen. In fact, voter turnout hit a record low in 2009 for a BC election.

And while Werner Heisenberg may have noted that the high turnout may have led to some complacency among progressive voters leading to them not showing up to vote on election day, that is not much to embrace for much credibility.

So my warning is that regardless of how advanced polls have high turnouts or not, we cannot allow ourselves to read anything into it as a predictor of May 2's results. We still need to get out the vote. All we may be able to conclude from any high turnouts in advanced polls is that lots of people want to vote

early.

So advanced polls opened yesterday, they open again today and Monday. We can vote on election day on May 2, but we can also vote any day at our riding's returning office until Tuesday. Check [Elections Canada](#) for locations.

And regardless of how the polling goes for the next several days, do your job of looking for more evidence of a rebirth of democratic participation in Canada, and if you live in a riding where a candidate refuses to show up to an all-candidates meeting, punish their contempt for democracy by voting against them.