

The Landslide Election Victory That Isn't

by Lidia Frech - Sunday, May 08, 2011

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I initially had a vague plan for this post but have decided to go with whatever comes to mind to create an election commentary medley of sorts. Actually, it more resembles a rather large balloon filled with statistics and cynicism and it keeps growing!

The Conservatives have won a majority government and this ensures their fixed and uninterrupted rule until 2015. (Yes, I chose my words carefully in writing “rule” versus governance). Majority government and popular rule ring with a rather peculiar tone in this country. The Conservative party gets to do what they want during the next four years and have the mandate to do so with 39.6% of the popular vote. The notion that 60% of Canadians did not vote for the Conservatives, and get stuck with their whim and fancy for the next four years, seems an egregious prospect to many and it is.

However, the fact that we persistently elect governments whose share of seats in the House of Commons is not proportionate to votes actually cast is a staple feature of Canadian democracy. Take note of the trend as it is the norm under our first past the post electoral system and this election simply provides redundant confirmation of this.

The Liberals secured a majority government in 1993 with 41.3% of the popular vote, in 1997 with 38.4% of the popular vote and in 2000 with 40.8% of the popular vote. Irrespective of who gets a majority in parliament our first past the post electoral system, and rates of electoral participation, are going to produce perplexing results and it is worth examining the particulars of this election in some detail.

While the Conservatives received 39.6% of the popular vote, or the support of 5,832,401 Canadians, they picked up [54.2% of the seats in the House of Commons](#). There were 2,783,175 Liberal voters in this election or 18.9% of the popular vote and yet the Liberals received only 34 seats (11% of the total). In B.C., the Liberals received the support of 13.4% of the popular vote, that's 251,081 electors, and yet held on to [only 2 of the available 34 seats](#). Our first past the post electoral system worked well for the Liberals when they were enjoying majority governments in the 1990s but not so much anymore.

In 2008, the Bloc received the support of 1,379,991 voters and elected [49 members to the House of Commons](#). In 2011, the Bloc received the support of 889,788 voters but elected only 4 members. Thus while Bloc seats have been reduced by 92%, [1 in 4 Quebecers did vote for the BQ](#).

The Orange tide! The NDP is now the official opposition with 102 seats and the support of 4,508,474 voters or [30.6% of the popular vote](#). In 2008, the NDP had the support of 18.2% of the popular vote [but 37 seats](#). The overarching support for the NDP across this country in this election is both historic and inspiring.

However, in some provinces the orange surge did not translate into actual members elected. In Saskatchewan, the NDP earned the support of a third of the electorate but no seats! That's right, 32.32%

of voters or [147,084 people voted NDP but elected none](#). The Conservative party received the support of 256,004 voters or 56.26% of the popular vote in Saskatchewan and yet they secured [13 seats out of 14 seats in that fair province](#).

In Manitoba, while popular support for the NDP increased in this election, the number of NDP members elected actually decreased. Thanks to our electoral system, an increase in popular support for a party can function in an inverse relationship to those actually elected. In 2008, 112,247 Manitobans voted for the NDP, representing 24.04% of the popular vote, which translated to [4 out of the available 14 seats in that province](#). In the 2011 election, the NDP received the support of 126,716 Manitobans, or 25.8% of the popular vote and yet [only 2 NDP MP's were elected](#). The NDP secured 42.9% of the popular vote in Quebec, that's 1,628,483 electors but picked up 77.3% of the seats or [58 in total](#).

The Liberals did nothing to push for electoral reform when they governed and I don't expect the Conservatives to engage this issue considering they are the current beneficiaries of our first past the post electoral system. The NDP and the Greens have been the only parties that have actually in any meaningful way embraced the prospect of electoral reform and some form of proportional representation. Awesome! Let's get more of them elected.

Another major feature of this election has to be the non-voter. While voter turnout did increase somewhat from 58.8% to 61.4% in this election, the largest bloc of voters in Canada continues to be people who do not vote at all in federal elections. As a case in point, look at Alberta. When I look at the CBC Canada Votes map of the province it appears as a sea of blue with an orange island dead centre. Closer examination of the election results reveals that the province may not be the bastion of Conservative support that it is made out to be in most media reports.

The Conservatives in Alberta won 27 out of the available 28 seats but received only 66.8% of the popular vote. This result becomes even stranger when considering electoral turnout in Alberta is just 56.4%. What this means is that 1,080,057 electors did not cast a ballot at all while 933,201 Conservative voters decided the fate of the entire province. (Save for that island of orange in Edmonton Strathcona). Oh yes and 73,770 Albertans [did vote Green in 2011](#). There are 3,361,426 people in Ontario alone that did not cast a ballot in this election and yet the 2,455,900 electors in Ontario that supported the Conservative party picked up 73 seats in Ontario, that's [68.9% of seats, with 44.4% of the popular vote](#).

This commentary is not a blame manifesto against people who choose not to vote but a call to seriously examine this issue. Why are so many Canadians choosing not to vote? Why are so many people disaffected? How do we fix this? Does it matter? Would our election results be markedly different if we had higher rates of electoral participation?

I am going to argue that really, we have not yet fully experienced what living under a Conservative government looks like. Here's a small preview of what we can expect. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives provides you with [a helpful link](#) to a site where you can see how much you will be paying towards those shiny F-35 Jets, new prisons and oil company subsidies here: <http://contactyourmp.ca/harpercst>.

Somehow I never imagined I would be subsidizing companies whose operational fall out includes flammable carcinogenic tap water but evidently the scope of my imagination needs to expand into realms

of hereto uncharted fantasy. [Why again are we discontinuing](#) anti-gang and community programs for youth, that offer educational, social, employment and mental health support, in favour of tougher young offender laws, mandatory minimum sentencing and limited use of conditional sentencing? Evidently youth will grow up to be healthy members of communities through time spent in jail; it will be an educational experience indeed. What happened to evidence based public policy? My goodness, can we get climate change back on the issue agenda sometime soon?

We will keep seeing these types of elections results until some form of electoral reform is seriously contemplated in this country? For the 60% of Canadians that did not vote Conservative, buckle your seat belts you're along for the ride! Actually everyone is along for the ride, whether you voted or not.

Understandably some of us may feel dejected but there are sprinkles of hope that abound including the Orange tide. I am inspired by the perseverance, political principles, and passion of Elizabeth May, her dedicated volunteers and the voters of Saanich Gulf Islands who chose Green. We now have the first Green elected MP in North America and under a first past the post electoral system. (It's my post, so I don't have to pretend to be objective and conceal that I think this is wonderful.) You heard right, 75.2% of the electorate came out to vote in Saanich-Gulf Islands. This gives me great hope as to what can happen if more of us did.