

French-language debate breakdown

Greg Lyle, Scott Reid and Gerald Caplan look back on the French debate and ahead to the English one

- Article
- Comments (50)
- >

GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE
OCTOBER 2, 2008 AT 6:38 AM EDT

How did the leaders fare in achieving their objectives in the French-language debate?



Gerald Caplan (*former NDP campaign manager*): To my growing surprise, the evening seemed to get better and better. At its best moments, and there were several, it was like being at a civilized debating society, or a sophisticated salon where people discussed big questions with knowledge and mostly good faith. But whether it changed any votes in Quebec may not be known for sometime. In fact, I fear that the slow beginning led many viewers to change channels and miss some enlightening moments. But that, too, will be known soon.

Everyone will note that most of the evening was devoted to four politicians attacking a fifth. It could hardly be any other way. Under the circumstances, Stephen Harper kept his cool, although the thin little smile playing across his mouth might have given away his frustration.

But we need to be clear: On the one hand, the case against Mr. Harper's government was being made toughly and persuasively; this was grist for Mr. Duceppe's mill, and he comported himself well as was expected. But on the other, as Mr. Harper surely never forgot, the perfectly reasonable but unexceptional performances by Mr. Dion and Mr. Layton should mean more of the anti-government vote splitting among all his opponents.

Elizabeth May also lived fully up to expectations and should be in a confident mindset for the English debate.



Greg Lyle (*former chief of staff for premiers Gary Filmon and Gordon Campbell*): What mattered in the debate was not just what happened around the table, but how those performances played against the strategic situation coming in.

Gilles Duceppe was the big winner. He has bounced back from a weak starting position, when he faced a loss of 10 to 20 seats, to pull ahead of the Conservatives once again. He clearly led the charge against Stephen Harper, providing no room for another challenger to make a breakthrough and effectively delivering the greatest hits of his best attacks against Harper. Mr. Duceppe has maintained the momentum he had previously established in the campaign.

I think Stephane Dion did well. Some criticize him for being too polite, but when he intervened - as he did on the economy with his "you are the danger" line - he was effective. Mr. Dion's biggest problem may have been his own campaign's decision to release a five-point, 30-day plan on the economy. At least one reporter seized on the echoes of Paul Martin's announcement to scrap the notwithstanding clause in last election's French debate. If it had been a real action plan it might have been more impressive, but it was mostly meetings and process. It feels like a distraction from a solid performance, certainly a performance that beat expectations. However, Mr. Dion can and should feel more confidence as he approaches the English debate.

Poor Jack Layton. If the reversal of Bloc fortunes has dashed Tory hopes, it has crushed a daring NDP dream. The NDP is doing better than ever in Quebec, but to gain seats it really needs the Bloc to fall apart. It looked possible on the eve of the election, but that's over now. The NDP's last remaining hope was for Mr. Layton to pull off a clear win in the Quebec debate. That didn't happen. In fact, while Mr. Layton had a good moment challenging Mr. Harper to repeat his English-language comments about culture in French, he generally failed to meet expectations. Jack needs to shake the night off and refocus to connect with the embattled middle class in the English debate.

Elizabeth May won by showing up. The francophones I was listening with had mixed reaction to her French, ranging from grudging admiration for making effective points in a language she clearly has not yet mastered to veiled disdain over her mangled grammar. Ms. May showed she was game for the fight, but she is unlikely to have changed anything in the Quebec dynamic.

Mr. Harper held off the attacks without losing his cool. He made no major gaffes. He scored a few points on Mr. Dion over the carbon tax, although in a pretty dispassionate way. Most significantly, he did nothing to turn the tables on the Bloc. In fact, Mr. Duceppe made a pretty key point comparing Mr. Harper to George W. Bush on guns and jails.

Mr. Harper did not advance or hinder his cause last night. However, given the Conservative decline in Quebec since the start of the campaign, that may mean he has missed a critical opportunity.



Scott Reid (*former communications director for Paul Martin*): It would be odd of me, after spending time working on Stephane Dion's debate preparation, to say otherwise. But I honestly thought that Mr. Dion did well. His objectives were few but they were all met. He managed to chart a sharp distinction between himself and Stephen Harper on the economy. He connected with plain language (for the most part) and overall he conveyed a sense of conviction. Early reviews from Quebec also suggested he was received well by viewers.

Gilles Duceppe was less dominant in his performance than in years past but also emerged as a winner. His job was to consolidate his advantage over Mr. Harper and not permit the Prime Minister to somehow steal back momentum in Quebec. And he did that decisively. Tonight probably earned him an iron hold on seats that Mr. Harper once felt could be his.

Jack Layton surprised me. In the past, he's proven to be a very effective debater and he had some solid moments early. But as the debate wore on he seemed to fade from the table. It may affect his party's impressive showing in Quebec to date.

Mr. Harper suffered greatly from the format and from peculiar strategic choices. On the first matter, the gang-up of four-on-one proved to be even more pronounced than expected. He was under fire constantly and, despite a pleasant, reassuring manner, did not always respond persuasively. As for his strategy, it may have been a mistake to strike so passive a tone. On many occasions he seemed to leave an impression of near indifference. For a leader looking to recapture

Quebeckers' minds, he had more work to do and the first debate must measure as a disappointment.

Elizabeth May received positive immediate reviews from media but I am less convinced she penetrated with Quebec voters. Still, her ability to put the boots more than once to Mr. Harper suggests she could be a significant factor when the debate shifts to English.

One other winner was the format. The less austere setting — putting the candidates around a table — created a few moments of chaotic crosstalk. But it also gave rise to a much less scripted, much more spontaneous discussion that was pleasingly substantive.

How did the French-language debate set the stage for the English one?

Reid: The English debate will see a much more aggressive posture from Mr. Harper. In particular, we can expect him to concentrate on Mr. Dion. He'll try to goad the Liberal Leader into more of a discussion about the Green Shift and steer far clear of the current chaos on world markets.

Mr. Layton may also take a more aggressive approach — focusing mostly on Mr. Harper but with occasional detours to slag Mr. Dion.

Ms. May is certain to shine brighter. She has the capacity to improve her party's fortunes more than anyone else on stage. And what that might mean for the other parties is waaaaay hard to predict.

For Mr. Dion, there will be uncomfortable pressure to repeat an above-expectations performance. He will face an even tougher task this time as he hopes to manage his way through English.

The most important difference, though, will come from someone who was not present for the first round: Steve Paikin. As we saw in French, the open discussion sections have the capacity to turn into chaos and the moderator exercises significant discretion. In the first half hour, that clearly worked to Mr. Harper's disadvantage. Mr. Paikin is a pro and a terrific choice as moderator. Expect him to be a little quicker with the whip hand than Stephan Bureau was. That could alter the flow and force of the discussion significantly.

Lyle: Mr. Harper has momentum going his way in Ontario, so there is less pressure to do anything spectacular in the English debate. If the first night was anything to go by, Mr. Harper will play it safe. But I don't think he will.

The English debate is a perfect opportunity to pin Mr. Dion on the carbon tax, which is the Tories' key weapon in this campaign. If Mr. Harper can create one moment around that issue, he can use that moment to launch a final push to break into the last Liberal strongholds in Toronto and the Atlantic provinces. But he has to make it personal. He needs to be explicit about the working families he feels win with Conservative policies and lose with the carbon tax.

Mr. Dion needs to play the same role in English that Mr. Duceppe played in French. Mr. Dion needs to lead the charge against Mr. Harper and not be derailed by any attacks on him and the Liberal plan. He needs to drop some of the politeness he showed in French but continue with the "You are the danger" attacks. But the critical question for Mr. Dion is whether he can find a better answer on the carbon tax.

Mr. Layton needs to get back on his game. He made a good effort in French, but Mr. Duceppe edged him out. Odds are the language was a big part of it. Mr. Duceppe is not likely to be as forceful in English, and Mr. Dion played a pretty polite game, so if Mr. Layton puts his elbows out, he should be able to establish himself as Mr. Harper's leading opponent. Like Mr. Harper, Mr. Layton needs to focus on who wins with the NDP and clearly tie the Liberals to the Conservatives as two peas in the pod. If he can do that, he will win the night.

Ms. May showed she has game in the first night but her limited French hampered her efforts to use it to its full effect. In her native English, she will certainly give her base reason to believe and she showed the potential to give swing voters a chance to think again.

Mr. Duceppe showed a good balance of gravitas and aggressiveness in French. If he can score any further points to demonstrate how Mr. Harper does not share the values of Quebec, it's all gravy for him.

Caplan: The first question is, who's going to watch? If you had a choice between these five in English and Sarah Palin versus Joe Biden, what would you choose? Well, you must choose, thanks to the dictatorship of the TV networks who make the big decisions. I think it's outrageous that the date wasn't shifted to another evening, and it's only the greed of the networks, including the CBC, that stood in the way of a date change. Nothing could make the case more strongly for an independent commission to run these debates, as is the case in the U.S.

I predict the English debate (for those who watch) will be a little messier than the French one. Everyone has a great deal at stake. For each leader, it's really a make-or-break night. Several jobs are on the line.

Mr. Dion can only be anxious and nervous, which is unlikely to enhance his language skills. Mr. Harper has a majority riding on B.C. and Ontario. Mr. Layton needs to KO Mr. Dion while trying to ignore him. Ms. May refused to make common cause in French with Mr. Dion; it will hurt him if she remains feisty and independent again. And Mr. Harper will relish even more the palpable fact that his four combative opponents are supported by over 60 per cent of the public, yet not one of them is likely to get more than 28 per cent of the total vote. With stats like that, Mr. Harper can tolerate another night of being ganged up on. But watch his thin little smile.

As for Governor Palin...

-  Article
-  Comments (50)
- >

Recommend this article? 20 votes

View the most recommended

Autos