

Assessing the first two weeks

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What has each campaign done well in the first two weeks, and what does each one need to do better?



Greg Lyle

(former chief of staff for premiers Gordon Campbell and Gary Filmon): The NDP has run the best campaign so far. It set a clear ballot question, the ads and its events generally work together to support that ballot question and, most importantly, it has not made any mistakes that distract from its message.

The NDP has made a big bet on Quebec this election, with a \$1-million ad buy to drive a breakthrough. Now that it has made the bet, it needs to follow through. To me, that means thinking about the French debate and developing some potential moments where Jack Layton can square off against Gilles Duceppe and strip the social democrats out of the sovereigntist coalition just as the Tories are pulling whatever

bleus are still left.

The Greens have also had a good campaign, although that is primarily due to one great success – elbowing their way into the debate. The Greens have little ability to make things happen consistently on the ground and few dollars for ads, so they need Elizabeth May to come out with her own “you had an option” clip that pulls the green and the alienated voters to her party.

The Tories are doing okay, but only just okay. They have a strong, clear ballot question. Their events and their ads are supporting that message. But the gaffes are distracting voters and, even worse, raising questions about what sort of people these Conservatives really are. The sweater ads are great, but there is a mean-spiritedness in the puffin ad, the Sparrow controversy and the cold-cut scandal that leaves people feeling that maybe the wool is being pulled over their eyes.

That said, the Tories feel like a campaign that has yet to shoot its best arrows. Where is the TBar ad on taxes? I am betting the Tories will use the debates to kick-start a final push that refocuses the debate on the carbon tax to appeal directly to the besieged middle-class voters that will determine the outcome of the election. Swing voters are primed and ready to respond favourably to that sort of appeal.

Like the Tories, events have been conspiring against the Bloc as key sovereigntists have spoken out against the party. The Bloc does have a clear strategy – drive up fear of a Tory majority and appeal to voters as the best way to stop it. Swing voters are driven by emotion, so appealing to fear makes a lot of sense. That's why we see so many negative campaigns. But a strictly negative campaign can turn people off both the attacker and the target, opening the door to a third choice like the Greens or the NDP. The Bloc should stand for something, not just against the Tories. Come up with an agenda, just three things you would do that the Tories can't copy either because they are too far to the left or too nationalist. If the Bloc do that, they can rally voters to them while driving voters away from the Tories.

Looking at Stéphane Dion, we have to wonder whether it is just events that are conspiring against him. A key truism in politics is do the strategy, don't say the strategy. The shift from Mr. Dion and the environment to the team and the economy would have worked better if they had just done it and not announced it. There is nothing wrong with advising the leader to shift issues and approaches. There is something wrong in providing that advice through media leaks.

As I have noted earlier, the Liberals don't really seem to have a ballot question. Is it which party will ask you to sacrifice more for the environment? It looks that way from the media coverage. Get a ballot question. Get a plan. Turn the guns out. Get behind the leader. And not just because it is easier to push him out from behind.



Scott Reid

(former communications director for Paul Martin): For those solely monitoring the polling numbers, this might have seemed like the week that wasn't. The parties appear to be largely frozen in public support. No team made a surge. No campaign saw their top line plummet. Not surprisingly, a lot of punditry has been committed to the notion that nothing much is going on. Don't believe it.

Nothing never happens during an election. Each one of the 36 days helps move you closer toward or farther from your goal. Simply because that goes undetected in the daily tracking doesn't mean all is still.

The consequential trends so far in this campaign are threefold:

First and most important, the economy has declared itself the core issue of this election cycle. The meltdown on world markets has fuelled lingering fears about lost manufacturing jobs, retirement savings and household security. Campaigns that try to resist this lodestone will regret their lack of strategic agility.

For the Liberals in particular, there is both a challenge and an opportunity in this development. A challenge because it demands they adjust their core message away from the Green Shift and toward economic stewardship. An opportunity because it creates a new potential ballot question. The Conservatives could prove vulnerable if Team Dion can persuade voters that it can be better trusted to manage the nation's finances.

In truth, an even more potent critique about the role of government is within grasp. One that links the Harper government's “it ain't my job” attitude toward the economy with an equally cavalier approach to food safety and inspection. If Mr. Dion can find the voice of those who feel Mr. Harper has failed to protect their well-being – economic and otherwise – then he could get something serious going.

Second, the Conservatives have failed at their first run to surpass the 40 per cent mark. This week's strong, solid start sputtered again and failed to harvest substantial gains. It must be frustrating and no doubt has left the Tories wondering if a majority will again prove elusive. But Mr. Harper's not done. In particular, currents are swirling in Quebec that could deliver him a rich bounty of seats and enhance his appeal to Ontario voters. Mr. Harper has spent a lot of time and

focus on Quebec thus far. Don't expect that to change next week.

Third, the Greens will be in the debate. That may have been a development of the first week, but it generated benefits in the second and, of course, could fundamentally affect the final two. Elizabeth May now commands a more routine and equivalent share of media attention. She is a major party leader. When she steps on that debate stage she will surely alter this election's outcome. Exactly how remains to be seen. But Jack Layton cannot be happy at the slow inch of the Greens into double-digit territory, notwithstanding his strong performance to date.

Four weeks to go. Don't believe everything you read in the polls – a lot has happened already.



Gerald Caplan

(former NDP campaign manager): It's hard to believe that we've already endured 12 days of campaigning and that 24 remain. It feels more like an eternity of non-stop promises, gaffes, propaganda, advertising, panels and blogs. (Everywhere blogs.) Who possibly has the time or inclination to follow all the endless ins and outs, most of them ephemeral if not trivial? Makes me wonder how we possibly survived the old interminable, marathon 60-day federal campaigns, as was the one I ran in 1984. Maybe we didn't.

Personally, I'm pretty confused about my own perceptions and really confused about what ordinary voters might possibly think. Dozens of stories have already gotten their eight-second clip, and not only can't I remember most of them already, I have no idea their impact on sensible people who aren't immersed in this ritual.

Then there are the polls – everywhere, all the time, overwhelming, impossible to absorb. Not a welcome addition to contemporary campaigning.

Yet despite their ubiquity, they are only partially illuminating. Different polls on different days suggest relatively significant discrepancies in how close the Tories are to a majority, how close the Liberals are to the Tories, how close the NDP is to the Liberals and how close the Greens are to a seat. This is all frustrating and hard to understand. It makes it more difficult for pundits to blaviate knowledgeably (as if anyone will remember what we say).

But the polls do seem to show that the reality of two weeks ago has barely changed. So the Conservatives remain well out in front, bumping against but not yet penetrating that 40 per cent area. The Dion crowd remains decisively in second place, way behind the leader but way ahead of the next runner-up, barely able to hang on to 30 per cent, which is just about its core support. The NDP seems unable to hit 20 per cent, its all-time high, but may be closer to 15, also its core vote. The Greens, despite Ms. May's profile and energy, haven't made the breakthrough they've expected and craved. And the Bloc hasn't been able to re-woo its former non-core supporters.

What to do? If this analysis is accurate, all need to change something, but it's not easy to see exactly what. All are doing, after all, what suits them best. So big changes seem unlikely. While waiting for the debates, which could prove to be game-changers (and yes, could prove not to be), here are tiny tips for troubled campaigns:

Stephen Harper: Pray for more self-discipline for yourself and your team. It's not too late to try to fool another two or three per cent of the electorate, but it's getting close.

Stéphane Dion: Don't have your wife stand beside you at every speech, in camera range, doing nothing. What point is that making? It's like Chelsea Clinton with her mother. It's demeaning to any woman, let alone an accomplished and respected intellectual like Dr. Janine Krieger. Mike and Bob si, Janine non.

Jack Layton: Lose those 4 words: "When I'm Prime Minister." Substitute: "Here's what we're going to fight for for Canada." it won't hurt and has the merit of being both true and credible.

Elizabeth May: Use the campaign to enlighten us about what really must be done to meet the crisis of global warming. Tell us that if enormous changes aren't made, sacrifices aren't faced, taxes aren't raised, economic disruption isn't demanded, whole new industries aren't created, my granddaughter is going to face a harsh future. Please don't miss this unusual opportunity to get the big message out. Never mind votes. If you say it, they may come.

Gilles Duceppe: Concede.

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