

THE FEDERAL ELECTION: THE STRATEGISTS: A panel of election-savvy experts weight in on the issues and questions arising from the campaign trail

## How did the launch of the various campaigns go and what did we learn about each campaign by their first step?

GREG LYLE , PETER DONOLO , GOLDY HYDER , JOY MACPHAIL AND SCOTT REID  
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GREG LYLE

### Innovative Research Group Inc.

No party got a clean start to this campaign, but no one ever does.

The Tories are probably the happiest. The launch day went well as Stephen Harper clearly established ballot questions in both English Canada - what leader can you trust to manage Canada in these difficult economic times? - and Quebec - which party is best able to deliver results for Quebec?

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However, the 6 a.m. briefing is not working as planned. The idea is a great one - if you are first in the day you can drive the news cycle. But that means you have to offer a more compelling news story than the ones the reporters bring with them. Yesterday the Tory news hit had controversy but no new substance, which allowed the media to pursue other topics.

The Liberals' first 24 hours were also mixed. Stéphane Dion delivered several scathing attacks in English that beat expectations on performance and reassured his party that he is willing and able to mix it up with Mr. Harper. However, it is not yet clear what the Liberal ballot question will be and Mr. Dion's key media clips were defensive. Mr. Dion needs to more clearly define a choice for which he is the answer.

The NDP also clearly defined its message - do you want a party that cares about kitchen tables or boardroom tables? However, what does that have to do with the oil sands? The oil sands might work for the anti-corporate side, but the NDP needs compelling messages and pictures that show the kitchen-table side of the equation. The focus on Mr. Layton is smart given the recent polls showing Mr. Layton edging out Mr. Dion on best PM.

*Greg Lyle is managing director of Innovative Research Group Inc., a national opinion research firm.*

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### PETER DONOLO

#### The Strategic Counsel

Stephen Harper wants to neatly reverse the dynamic from the last election; this time, *he* is stability and the Liberals are the scary risk - in his version, anyway.

By talking about the risks of the "experiment" of the Dion Green Shift, he also de-emphasizes the risk of electing him with a majority government.

How successful was that opening gambit? Quite. Served up with lots of corn about what a committed family man he is, he channelled more Ward Cleaver than Dirty Harry.

Perhaps Stéphane Dion was trying to come across as prime ministerial (one of his perceived leadership deficits) by holding his opening speech in front of the impressive oak doors in the foyer of the House of Commons. Problem is, it came across as just another parliamentary media scrum.

He wants to be the leader of the stop-Harper brigade, but he abdicated that role to Jack Layton yesterday, who gave a hearty partisan appeal in front of a cheering partisan crowd. Mr. Dion's event later in the day wasn't bad in terms of energy level. But his techno-babble about trading his plane's carbon emissions or providing Canadians with calculators to measure their own carbon footprints just underlined the wonk-unbound fears that Mr. Harper raised.

If Mr. Dion is going to check Mr. Harper's current advantage, he needs to become the default champion of those who oppose Mr. Harper's brand of Conservatism - not let Mr. Layton lunge for that mantle. Yesterday was not any auspicious start.

*Peter Donolo is a partner with The Strategic Counsel.*

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## **GOLDY HYDER**

### **Hill & Knowlton**

Location matters. Where one starts and finishes a campaign can be very telling about the overall campaign strategy to win seats. Campaign 2008 is no different and there were some obvious choices and some surprises.

Not surprisingly, the Conservative campaign kicked off, not just in Quebec, but in Quebec City where the party is seeking to grow. Nor should it be a surprise that the party sought to demonstrate national reach by shifting to British Columbia, where there are seats for the Conservatives to reclaim or win anew.

With separatist sentiment on the wane, the only way the Bloc campaign would have surprised anyone is if it launched its campaign outside of Quebec.

The surprise choices were the ones made by the NDP and Liberal campaigns.

The NDP went to Calgary not because it thinks there's a pending breakthrough in Alberta but rather to position itself as the real alternative to the Dion Liberals.

The Liberal launch in the traditionally safe riding of Ottawa South - rather than, say, Ottawa Centre, which is held by the NDP - was an odd choice. Setting aside that Mr. Dion didn't need to fly there, it's hard to understand what message was to be communicated from this location beyond "we need to hold the seats we have." With the other leaders on the move and Mr. Dion grounded, it gives the other parties momentum. When Mr. Dion finally gets off the ground he will be playing catch up.

Of course this is just the beginning and a lot can happen between now and the finish.

*Goldy Hyder is a former chief of staff to Joe Clark and currently senior vice-president with Hill & Knowlton.*

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## **JOY MACPHAIL**

### **OutTV**

Because the election was called on a Sunday at an hour when most of us were still relaxing over our morning coffee, first impressions may have been more kindly to all.

Stephen Harper was stiff and cold but terribly well scripted. His massive advertising campaign portrays him as softer and gentler; that doesn't withstand Mr. Harper's slightly snarky and arrogant delivery at a lectern. However, he didn't annoy me as much as usual.

Jack Layton's campaign launch gives new meaning to edgy and cutting edge. He is going for the gold - the job of prime minister. This major step up seems very credible, which surprised me a bit. After starting in Quebec, he immediately went to the current PM's home riding, in Calgary. Daring and a bit cheeky, but lots of Canadians loved it. I think this message suits Mr. Layton and may be the breakout story in what could be a very routine election.

The bar is set so low for Stéphane Dion that he managed to meet it - barely. No excitement, no campaign jazziness, but I understood what he was saying. Now he needs to get a plane and get out of safe Liberal territory (which is shrinking daily).

Gilles Duceppe can articulate his message with great passion, but it comes across as desperate and irrelevant. Canadians outside of Quebec will stop paying attention to Mr. Duceppe very early on.

Elizabeth May doesn't care who Canadians vote for as long as we pay attention and vote. I don't like supposed leaders who can't embrace leadership. The stakes are too high for naivety.

*Joy MacPhail, leader of the NDP of B.C. in the legislature from 2001 to 2005, is a media commentator and chairperson of OutTV.*

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## **SCOTT REID**

### **Former director of communications**

When was the last time anyone's campaign launch actually affected the outcome of a federal election? Answer: exactly two days ago. Sunday saw four according-to-Hoyle performances from the established party leaders. But it was the energy, sincerity and post-partisan sparkle of Elizabeth May that stood out and mattered most.

She was captivating, quotable and utterly convincing. In a symbolic rejection of practised politics, Ms. May spoke unscripted, and persuasively offered her candidacy as a home to all those turned off by politics. If she successfully assembles a coalition that adds disaffected voters to her environmentalist base, she could become a green Ross Perot - stealing support from others, altering the campaign's core narrative and unpredictably affecting its result. Small wonder Mr. Harper

and Mr. Layton blocked her from the debates.

Mr. Harper and Mr. Dion also had solid - if less spectacular kickoffs. The Conservative Leader was tightly controlled and exhibited his best qualities - intelligence, discipline and clarity. Mr. Dion provided a sound critique of the Conservatives and then offered an intriguing reminder to Quebeckers that he, too, is an ardent nationalist. It was a bold and uncharacteristically personal appeal. It also suggests the Liberals are looking first to Duceppe defectors rather than traditional federalist voters. That could prove risky.

Jack Layton performed less surely, delivering a stock NDP speech rather than the promised new and centrist appeal. He will need to do better. The least memorable effort was by Gilles Duceppe. If he campaigns with the same tired approach we witnessed Sunday, the Bloc will experience significant erosion and that too would affect the election greatly.

Bottom line: Watch Elizabeth May. Politically speaking, she's the most dangerous woman in Canada.

*Scott Reid is a former director of communications for Paul Martin.*

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