

Who won, and what now?

Lyle, Reid and Caplan look back on the leaders' debate performances, and ahead to what they need to do now

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How did the leaders fare in the English-language debate?



Greg Lyle (*former chief of staff for premiers Gary Filmon and Gordon Campbell*): Tonight's debate gave every party something to celebrate, but for me it was more about missed opportunities.

The Conservatives will be happy Stephen Harper came through two nights of four-on-one gang-ups in one piece. As well, the Conservative Leader was more feisty tonight and did better on both the youth crime issue and, especially, culture.

Liberals should be pleased that Stephane Dion got his key points out, particularly on the economy. While he had moments where he was flustered, language was not a fundamental barrier.

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Party leaders trade barbs

For a second consecutive evening, the five federal party leaders sat down to debate the country's future and the troubled economy - and Stephen Harper's governing record - was front and centre.

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New Democrats can celebrate that while Jack Layton seemed staged at some points, he had the very best moment in the debate when he went after Mr. Dion for supporting the Harper government 43 times over the past two-and-a-half years and ended by saying that since Mr. Dion couldn't do his job as opposition leader, he has no business running for Prime Minister. That is a message that might be worth repeating.

Once again, the Greens will be happy just to be on the stage with the major parties. Elizabeth May clearly held her own on the full range of issues in this campaign.

The Bloc Quebecois can enjoy the fact that Gilles Duceppe had two of the funniest lines of the night - the made-in-Canada point and the I'm-not-going-to-be-PM-and-neither-are-three-of-the-four-other-leaders. The second line may even be helpful in solidifying the anti-Conservative vote in Quebec.

That said, there were three big missed opportunities:

Mr. Harper missed his chance to speak to besieged economic voters in the initial economic discussion when he spoke more about stock markets than supermarkets. Even more importantly, he never really pinned down Mr. Dion on the carbon tax and what it would mean for working people.

Mr. Dion missed a huge opportunity to use the culture debate to pin down Mr. Harper on Warren Kinsella's test of whether he really likes this country. It was all about artists, and not about their critical role in telling this country's stories.

And Ms. May was never able to find a moment to create the Gordon Wilson/Sharon Carstairs "this is what is wrong with politics in Canada today" moment. She played by the established rules. That makes no sense when you are a protest party. I also was surprised when she said the first thing she would do as Prime Minister is implement proportional representation. The first thing? In these times?



Scott Reid (*former communications director for Paul Martin*): The inherent disadvantages that the new format imposes on the incumbent leader leave little doubt why the Conservatives fought so hard to keep out Elizabeth May. On the other hand, it makes you wonder why they felt it was wise to extend the economic section.

The English leaders' debate proved more spirited than its French predecessor. And it featured a more spirited performance from the Prime Minister as well.

However, just as his "I will fight and die on a status quo management of the economy" approach failed to win him votes in Quebec on Wednesday night, it likely failed to win him votes in the hurting industrial heartland of Ontario on Thursday. Mr Harper also allowed himself to get tugged off-strategy a number of times. Here's a rule of thumb for the Conservative Leader: When you're saying the words "tar sands," you're doing poorly.

Stephane Dion won the debate in French, according to pollsters. We'll see what the numbers are for his English performance, but I suspect that he surpassed expectations again. Conviction - particularly on the urgency of the economic crisis and the environment - helped bridge the gap posed by his language skills. A game-changing performance? We'll see. But the man on display tonight had to be far more appealing to millions of voters than the bad caricature they had been led to expect.

Jack Layton did well, but it remains to be seen if he connected with or turned away voters. He was a teensy bit too partisan at times, and a bit too show-bizzy.

But he successfully projected his lunch-bucket appeal. So in absolute terms, Mr. Layton succeeded. However, he was expected to do well so the relative success may be less pronounced than NDP faithful might hope.

Elizabeth May also did well, but perhaps not quite as well as expected. She had many good moments. But didn't overtake the discussion at any point in an overwhelming fashion. The question is whether she will increase her vote just by being there and performing well. The answer is probably yes.

Gilles Duceppe? Whatever. He's for reimbursable tax credits. I got that loud and clear.



Gerald Caplan (*former NDP campaign manager*): Maybe it was me, maybe it was them, maybe it was all of us. But I thought that after a fast and even aggressive start, especially from Stephen Harper, tonight's second hour began to drag.

I thought most of the leaders were fading and there was more annoying talk-over as the minutes wound down. Maybe four hours of political debate in 25 hours is more than any of us can be expected to endure.

That said, Mr. Harper did about as well as Wednesday night, taking on all comers in a way that would satisfy not only his base but I'd guess most of the 36 per cent who seem to be sticking with him.

As for Stephane Dion, I feel almost as if I'm kicking a guy already down, which gives me no pleasure. While his English was tolerable, he made you work too hard to understand him, which is a shame because he gave some thoughtful responses. I must also say, no doubt very subjectively, that I cannot help but find him an ineffectual figure, somewhat helpless in his great

earnestness.

Jack Layton, on the other hand, I thought had a very strong night, especially in the first hour when he seemed to dominate. Anyone who thinks the oil companies and banks shouldn't be wallowing in tax breaks knows where to turn. New Democrats will be whooping it up, as they should.

But by far the most impressive participant throughout the evening was Elizabeth May. She cracked the only joke in two long nights - offering to help one of the questioners build his backyard shed. But more important was the unexpected breadth of her knowledge on almost every issue raised, well beyond environmental ones.

She cited facts and figures (not just repeating the same one or two), was able to refer to major documents that underlined her assertions, and had the larger vision to introduce - Hallelujah! - Make Poverty History, Africa and foreign aid (after which Mr. Layton did as well). It's true that Mr. Dion threw in (both nights) references to Darfur, but to my mind literally as throwaways.

Alas, for Ms. May, this performance is unlikely to change her dim election-night prospects. But it will give her and her party new credibility when the post-election shenanigans begin.

How did the leaders' debate performances affect what they need to do for the rest of the campaign?

Reid: This night will change campaign strategies. Mr. Dion's rallying performance will give Liberals some needed encouragement. It will also force a more potent collision between Mr. Layton and Mr. Dion. The centre-left has to shake out or Mr. Harper will skate between them. Mr. Layton is going to start appealing hard to the Liberal voters.

The bottom line is that post-debate it will become increasingly clear that the Conservative dreams of a Quebec-led breakthrough to a majority are dashed. That means the Conservatives can actually be beaten - if the centre and left can collapse. Whether a consolidation will occur in time to stop Mr. Harper or whether four-way vote splits will hand the Conservatives surprise victories is the name of the game.

It seems the Conservative campaign has decided that it will be happy enough with what it's got. Provided there is no significant rally in the Liberal vote, that may be a safe choice. But in 2004, a too-close-to-the-vest final days' strategy hurt Mr. Harper and you can't help but wonder if the same mistake is brewing.

Lyle: I'm going to fly against the general trend in the pundit world and say that I think the Tories are very close to majority, and may be there already. They're doing well where it counts and the Liberals are not. I think they are on the verge of a big win in B.C. and a critical breakthrough in the GTA that may deliver not just 905 seats, but one or two 416 seats. I also see potential gains in Northern Ontario.

The key battle is the Tory/Liberal showdown in English Canada. Mr. Harper did not pin Mr. Dion down on the carbon tax in the debate, but his ads sure are. The Conservatives don't need to change anything in English - their campaign is working. I would argue it would work even better if their ads used contrasts instead of straight negatives, but the polls don't lie.

The problem for the Liberals is they are fighting a four-front English war:

1. The Conservative frontal attack
2. The NDP frontal attack
3. The Green safe alternative
4. The stay-home option that I think we saw in several Liberal by-election losses.

The good news for the Liberals is that Mr. Dion test-drove some messages to rally Liberals that sounded right to me. I particularly like the "I want my Canada back" line. I think that will hit a very responsive chord within the Liberal upper-middle class base in Vancouver and Toronto that could defeat the Liberals by staying home or voting Green. I also like the "do something versus do nothing" contrast. I think that can help stop the bleeding to both the NDP and the Conservatives. The challenge is for the Liberals to show the discipline and effectiveness to get behind those messages and really drive them.

Mr. Layton and the NDP are not going to get the breakthrough they hoped for in Quebec. That race is over. The Bloc has rallied its troops. The NDP might rip one or two seats away from the Liberals on the island of Montreal, but that is it. It does have an opportunity for gains in Vancouver and its suburbs, 416 seats and Northern Ontario. The votes it needs are with the Greens and the Liberals. Like the Conservatives, the New Democrats are already doing the right things to win those voters over. That said, if I were running the NDP campaign, I would want to see how effective the attack was on Mr. Dion's leadership based on his support of the Tories. That looks very powerful to me.

The Greens had their moral victory. My bet is their vote peaks in three days and it is downhill from there.

One last thought. While the Tories have lost their initial momentum in Quebec and Mr. Duceppe has breathed new life into the Bloc, there does still seem room for Tory gains in rural Quebec. We heard nothing from Mr. Harper in the last two days that will help, but we should watch over the weekend or earlier next week for a new Tory gambit to tip those seats their way.

Caplan: In the short run, all will declare victory. But in fact the NDP and Greens may well have a chance to extricate another chunk of the fast-withering Liberal vote. It remains a possibility that the NDP may get a larger vote share than the Liberals.

On the other hand, the night did not change the key dynamic of this election - that Mr. Harper will win handily, and whether he sneaks his elusive majority or not, he will govern for the next several years as if he has a majority. He will do whatever he wants in his lifelong quest for a smaller social state and larger security state.

Why? Because Mr. Dion will certainly be forced to step down, if he hasn't the wit to do so on his own. Mr. Duceppe may well join him, knowing that Mr. Harper helped him pull off his great political comeback, allowing him to leave on a high note. The NDP will be deeply in debt, having gambled a fortune in this campaign, and will be incapable of even muttering the word "campaign" for a long time to come. And Ms. May might have as many as one MP in the next House prepared to vote against the government.

Even though it is clearly a violation of parliamentary conventions, if it's a minority Mr. Harper can stoop once again to labeling every vote a non-confidence vote, since in our system there's no one to slap him down. But really, he'll hardly need to do so. No one will be looking for another fight for the foreseeable future. The Liberals, already a shell of their former selves, are likely to tear themselves apart as Michael Ignatieff and Bob Rae go after whatever carrion is left on the dying bones.

I have no idea how it can ever happen, but unless the more-or-less progressive anti-Harper forces can come together in some form, conservatives who accumulate anywhere between 36-40% of the popular vote will continue to rule this country. Ask Jean Chretien. He won his three majorities exactly this way. Ask Stephen Harper. He recognized the secret of Mr. Chretien's success and is now busily exploiting it.

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