

Fear and loathing in the election

Conservatives and Liberals are demonizing their opposition

BY JANE SEYD, NORTH SHORE NEWS APRIL 15, 2011

WHETHER it's the prospect of a diabolical union with Quebec separatists or a Stephen Harper bent on ideologically driven rack and ruin, both major parties in the federal election have a political bogeyman they're hoping to use to shore up their support with voters.

The fear factor is a time-honoured tradition in political campaigns, said Doug McArthur, professor of public policy at Simon Fraser University. The idea, he said: "If you can create fear, you scare people from shifting their vote."

For Conservatives, the spectre of a coalition government between the Liberals, NDP and Bloc Québécois has been the favoured scenario to scare voters into casting ballots for the Tories.

Harper has used former Liberal leader Stéphane Dion's attempt at forming a coalition with the other opposition parties to suggest current Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff also has a coalition plot up his sleeve, although Ignatieff has denied that.

Conservatives have painted the idea of a coalition as "basically evil because (Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe) and the NDP are going to cause all sorts of evil things to be brought into the agenda" - from corporate tax hikes to special deals for Quebec, said Lindsay Meredith, a professor of business and political marketing at SFU. The idea is "a coalition can be blackmailed," said Meredith, "because if their demands aren't acquiesced to, they are going to bring down the house."

While informal alliances are common in Canadian minority governments and coalition governments function in other parliamentary democracies, real coalition governments -- where more than one party forms the government and has cabinet seats -- are rare in Canada.

"The question is who are you in a coalition with," said Greg Lyle, a political strategist and pollster with Innovative Research Group, who is polling for McLean's magazine this election. "Among the Tory base, the term 'coalition' brings to mind a leader they didn't like, with a party they hate, to rob them of their win," he said.

Currently, Harper is using the term "to shut down the Liberals within English Canada," said Lyle, by appealing to fears of the Bloc and the NDP. "Right now, it's mobilizing (the Conservative) base, which is probably the most important thing you can do in this election. Odds are, only half the public's going to vote. If you have 38 per cent in the polls, you've got 19 per cent of your voters who are going to be sitting home on election day. If you can get them angry about something . . . then you can get more than half of your vote out."

Of course, the Conservatives aren't the only ones wielding fear as a motivating force in the election.

On the Liberal side of the fence, "the main thing they are attempting to do is suggest that Harper has a secret hidden agenda," that will be unleashed on the unsuspecting public if he wins a majority, said McArthur. He said Liberals are implying serious cuts to health care or social services "driven by some kind of right-wing ideology" will be quick to follow a majority win by Harper.

"The Opposition is saying, 'Be afraid. Be very afraid,'" said Lyle. "The government is saying, 'Hey, you've seen this guy for five years. There's no surprises left.'"

Lyle said to a large degree the election will be decided on whether voters in swing ridings believe "there's no surprises, or believe the Opposition, that there's some really scary surprises."

Playing into that, Liberals are also painting Harper as "totally undemocratic," said Meredith. "They're saying if you thought this guy threw some rules of democratic process out the window now, just wait until he's got a majority."

Ultimately, both parties are counting on fears of the other to motivate voters, said Meredith.

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