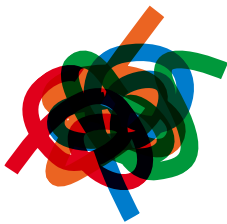


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Richard Nimijean

Electoral reform will test Trudeau's leadership, and his values

IN THE MAY-JUNE 2015 issue of the *Monitor* I argued that because the three major parties were so similar on economic issues, values politics would be a key factor in deciding the outcome of the federal election. I predicted the main question would be whether “Harper’s campaign of fear, flag-waving and defending Canadian interests and values” would win out over the mainstream or pragmatic policies of the NDP and Liberals.

And so it was. Conservative actions and the election results speak for themselves. Their inability to rise in the polls despite an extended campaign—from all accounts designed to drain opposition bank accounts—distracted the party’s messaging away from supposed strong points: prime ministerial leadership, the economy and security. A lengthy campaign also risked destabilization by unforeseen “events.” For example, when the Canadian public burst with compassion for three-year-old refugee Alan Kurdi, found dead on a Turkish beach, the Conservative campaign responded with bilious talk of banning the niqab and opening snitch lines for “barbaric” cultural practices. It was at that point we knew the election was up for grabs.

In the end, the Conservative base remained loyal, comfortable in its conviction only one party is really interested in protecting Canada and Canadians. But the vagaries of the first-past-the-post system were always going to condemn the Conservatives to minority status at best. By mid-campaign, it became apparent the anti-Harper vote was firm.

On election day, enough new voters came out to dislodge the Conservatives—voters who rejected the divisive and mean-spirited thrust of Harper’s campaign and governing style. So why did the Liberals—and not the NDP, who were leading in the polls for some time—benefit from this surge?

The campaign slogans of the Liberals (“Real Change”) and the NDP (“Ready for Change”) both identified the desire of a majority of Canadians for a new government. The proliferation of strategic voting websites and discussions on social media about the fear of splitting the vote showed how serious people were in this conviction: if they had to compromise on a candidate, they did not want their change vote to be for naught.

Clearly, the Liberals profited from their energetic and (let’s be honest) young leader. Unlike the other guys, Trudeau seemed to enjoy campaigning; he connected better with voters, and appeared to embody the progressive platform the Liberals were selling. This, combined with a clear vision of Canadianism (“A Canadian is a Canadian is a Canadian”), secured the values debate for Trudeau.

So why did the NDP drop so suddenly in the polls? One media narrative suggested a key to Trudeau’s victory was a public rejection of the austerity policies inherent in NDP and Conservative vows to balance the budget. Media questioning of the NDP economic platform intensified: how could a party that promised to balance the books afford an expansive program? Meanwhile, Trudeau’s mid-campaign promise that a Liberal government would incur a series of deficits to pay for strategic investments, announced when the NDP doubled down on its balanced-budget pledge, was seen, in

this version of events, as a break from the economic orthodoxy of the other parties. I’m not so sure.

Trudeau’s promise to spend the Canadian economy into shape was popular, but he was careful not to propose a bigger or more activist government. Contrary to how it was framed in the media, this was not an attempt to out-flank Mulcair on the left. For years, many mainstream economists have been urging governments toward deficit-backed stimulus spending. And the NDP offered arguably the more progressive platform on daycare and a number of other issues.

It was more the case that the NDP, by playing the “credible economic managers” card to combat the usual attacks that they were tax-and-spend-socialists, only fed a new media narrative that equated balanced budgets with austerity economics, which in turn contributed to Mulcair losing the change vote. The vision associated with Trudeau was where many voters wanted Canada to be: more socially liberal with a mildly activist government.

Another explanation of what happened to the NDP focused on Mulcair’s strong position in support of a woman’s right to wear the niqab during citizenship ceremonies when the province his party swept in 2011 (Quebec) seemed to hold the opposite view. Here, again, I’m not convinced.

As a Québécois, I’ve never felt the NDP had deep roots in the province. Let’s not forget that Quebec has a long history of switching parties suddenly and in droves: Diefenbaker in ‘58, Mulroney in ‘84, Bouchard in ‘93, and Layton in ‘11. As for the niqab, it might have stimulated Conservative voters, and the Bloc played it up in disturbing ways, but Trudeau was as clear as Mulcair on the issue, notably in his March 2015 speech on liberty to the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada.

I think many Québécois voters were looking for a winner to defeat Harper; issues of policy, whether economic or security-related (e.g., the C-51 anti-terrorism legislation), were secondary. As Greg Lyle argued on TVO’s *The Agenda*, the NDP’s support was drop-

ping in the province before the niqab became such a political hot potato. If that support moved to the Liberals and not the Bloc it was because of the apparent Liberal concern with real economic change, suggested the pollster.

Others polls point to this being a countrywide feeling. EKOS asked Canadians between October 8 and 12 what the most important factor was in deciding their vote: 47% said they would vote for the party that reflected their values; 63% valued an active government. "It was pretty clear that the values vision that Justin Trudeau and the Liberals were offering up, backed up with an accounting framework that says we actually are going to find the money to do this, is what won this election for them," said EKOS President Frank Graves in November.

So in the end, the two change slogans were not simply twists on words: they signalled to Canadians how the parties read the mood of the electorate. The NDP wanted to present an image of a competent government that was progressive. The Liberals gambled that Canadians wanted something more than a nice version of the Harper government. With their new majority, the question now becomes how committed the Liberals actually are to "real change."

On election night, several observers said Justin Trudeau's victory, and all the talk of "sunny ways," reminded them of father Pierre's comeback victory in the 1980 election. To me it looked more like 1993, when centrists and the centre-left felt a similar euphoria at having wiped the Progressive Conservatives off the electoral map. Things will be better, a friend told me back then. Justin Trudeau's "sunny ways" was an updated version of Jean Chrétien's "Vive le Canada."

There are other interesting parallels: Chrétien said he'd cancel the "Cadillac helicopters," Trudeau won't buy F-35s. Both promised strategic investment in infrastructure to address structural weakness in the economy and fight stagnation. In 1993, the Liberal "red book" laid out a vision of a more progressive Canada. In 2015, Paul Martin Jr. reassured Canadians the new Liber-

al plan made sense economically and socially. So while Trudeau couldn't beat Harper on perceptions of being a good economic manager, Martin could—an asset the Liberals used to their full advantage.

However, remember that less than two years after the 1993 election we were hearing about debt walls and New Zealand, with the *Wall Street Journal* referring to Canada as an "an honorary member of the Third World." This led to the full-blown implementation of a neoliberal agenda and some of the harshest austerity budgets we have ever seen. Despite a much different economic situation, with much lower levels of national debt, is it too extreme or too soon to predict that something similar could take place under a Trudeau majority?

The backtracking has already started. In its first month in power, the Liberals lowered expectations about Canada's climate change targets and then largely adopted the Harper government's strategy of fronting provincial efforts to lower emissions, while improving Canada's reputation, during the Paris climate talks. On November 20, Finance Minister Bill Morneau announced he'd looked at the books and—surprise, surprise—there is less money available than the previous gang let on.

Following the election, *Rabble.ca* columnist Duncan Cameron cogently argued the Liberals are as committed to balancing the budget and restricted borrowing as the parties they beat at the polls, meaning "the Trudeau government has adopted a conservative vision that limits, voluntarily, the ability of government to help out, when what is needed is bold policies that create good jobs."

This should all be a reminder that economic ideology matters; it still informs what governments do. But in our era of branded politics, the communication of what that ideology means is just as critical. For the Liberals, a successful campaign based on "real change" will lead to disillusionment if their policies ultimately reflect the neoliberal status quo.

For the NDP, it is not enough to claim to be progressive. The party needs to square its genuine belief in a more progressive society with the economics required to get Canada there. Values matter to voters, but these too emerge from policy, which are a reflection of ideology. Mulcair discovered this the hard way. The party's debate over campaign strategy and the way forward will determine if the NDP can again become a major force in federal politics.

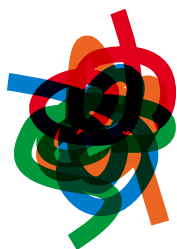
Trudeau, on the other hand, needs to learn from Obama's mistakes. To be fair, a Canadian prime minister can move things forward more easily than the U.S. president. But Obama lost much of his base by not even signalling that key issues, climate change high among them, were important to him. Only now, late into his second and last term, has the president become more aggressive and progressive. Trudeau will have to decide how much of a progressive he wants to be—in his policy choices and how he communicates them.

As for the Conservatives, while many sympathizers have suggested the party's message was right but the tone was not, others criticized the Harper government for its preoccupation with strategy and hyper-partisanship over advancing a small-c conservative agenda. It was always going to be a fine line for the Conservatives, since moving too far in either direction—too focused on winning, too conservative—could put an end to the dream of replacing the Liberals as Canada's dominant political party.

In fact, in the current electoral system, there is little incentive for any party to adopt a more ideological position. How Trudeau handles electoral reform—he stated this would be the last election held under the first-past-the-post system—will therefore be key. Will he use majority government to advance his preferred option of a ranked-ballot system? (According to University of Calgary political scientist Paul Fairie, this would have produced an even larger Liberal majority in October.) Or will Trudeau compromise and go with the NDP's preference for proportional representation?

Canada needs a new way to vote, an added benefit of which would be to put an end to punditry's calls for a united left (preceded, as these were, by calls to unite the right). Such calls are byproducts of an electoral system that favours concentrated vote-targeting and the dilution of coherent ideological stands. Under either of the electoral systems on the table, it is reasonable to assume clear ideological positions geared to attracting supporters will become more important in future elections than strategic considerations played out over hundreds of ridings.

Just as with economic ideology and how it is communicated, Trudeau's decision on electoral reform will speak volumes about what type of leader he really is and wants to be. **M**



John Akpata

There are just and unjust ways to legalize marijuana

“BECAUSE IT’S 2015.” The definitive mic-drop political punctuation. So easy to execute when perfectly placed. I have finished speaking, and no one else shall speak after me. The new “Just Watch Me.” I love it.

For the past two years, in my political world, marijuana activists have endorsed Justin Trudeau as the way to legalize marijuana in Canada. Vote Liberal, no matter what, and they are going to legalize. That was the message, loud and clear. Only the Conservatives were against marijuana. All other parties said

“legalize” or “decriminalize.” Running as a candidate for the Marijuana Party, as I did again in 2015 in Ottawa Centre, seemed a moot point to others. During the campaign the only question people had for me was “Why run at all?”

Marijuana prohibition is the political football in that much-loved Peanuts sketch. Charlie Brown is at the ready, with Justin Trudeau teeing up his life affirming kick. The ball has been pulled away before by prime ministers John Turner, Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin. Stephen Harper brought in mandatory minimums at the criminal end, and tried to sabotage Health Canada's licensing system at the medicinal end. The Harper regime was out of step with what is going on in the rest of the world.

In 2001, Portugal decriminalized heroin, cocaine and cannabis. It remains a crime to profit from the sale or distribution of illegal drugs, but the user was not criminalized for possession. If a person is found with less than a 10-day supply, they must meet a three-person Commission for the Dissuasion of Drug Addiction, usually made up of a lawyer, a doctor and a social worker. The commission will recommend treatment, a minor fine or, as in most cases, no penalty at all.

In 1990, 1% of the Portuguese population was addicted to heroin. Portugal now has the lowest addiction rate of illegal drugs in all of Europe. After 14 decriminalized years, overall rates of drug use, drug addiction, drug overdose, HIV and accidental death have all gone down. Following Portugal's lead, the governments of Spain and Italy have also decriminalized. Copenhagen's city government announced in 2014 the beginning of a three-year pilot project to test whether municipalities could take over the growing and distribution of cannabis. In 2015, Ireland also announced it would decriminalize based on the Portugal model.

In December of 2013, Uruguay became the first country to legalize marijuana. Citizens there are allowed to grow six plants at home, and can participate in private grow clubs if they want to grow more. All sales must go through government-run dispensaries, while consumers, who are restricted to purchas-

ing 40 grams per month, must register with a health ministry database. In order to undercut organized crime, the price of marijuana is kept at the equivalent of \$1 per gram.

On February 6, 2015, the 70th anniversary of the birth of Nesta Robert Marley, Jamaica decriminalized ganja. Possession of 56 grams (two ounces) can result in a fine of \$5, but no arrest or criminal record. Citizens may grow five plants at home, and adult Rastafarians may use ganja for sacramental purposes for the first time in history. Foreigners that have a prescription or licence for medicinal marijuana will be able to get a permit that allows them to purchase two ounces of local medicinal marijuana to be used during their stay. Although the infrastructure and policies in Jamaica are unclear, there is a Cannabis Commercial and Medicinal Task Force hammering out the details.

And of course there is the United States of America. Already 17 states have medicinal marijuana. Oregon, Alaska, Washington, D.C. and Colorado have all embraced recreational marijuana at the state level. Let's thank Washington first.

In 2013, D.C. police arrested 1,215 people for marijuana possession, more than 90% of them black even though Blacks use marijuana at the same rate as anybody else. It became a civil rights issue, with activists pushing for decriminalization in July of 2014 before switching their demands to legalization. In 2014, D.C. Police arrested seven people for drug possession.

Colorado followed this example and fully embraced recreational marijuana. In 2014, Colorado, a state with a population of just under 5.5 million, collected US\$44 million in tax revenue from marijuana. As of 2015, Colorado brings in roughly US\$10 million per month from a marijuana tax—more than comes in from alcohol sales.

Canada's illegal marijuana industry has been valued at over \$7 billion annually, with some estimating \$21 billion. Twenty per cent of Canadians admit they have used marijuana in the past year; more than 30% say they would use it if legalized. Police in Canada re-