

# TACTIX ELECTION WATCH

January 11, 2006

*Welcome to the third edition of the TACTIX 2006 Election Watch. We will be producing Election Watch periodically to offer our analysis of key campaign issues and developments. As always, we welcome your comments.*

## 1. Change, For A Change

Of all the dynamics that might arise during an election campaign, the most difficult for incumbent election strategists to combat is 'it's time for a change.' After holding office for over a dozen years and winning four successive federal elections, overcoming the 'time for a change' thematic has always been the Liberals' Achilles' heel this time around. Once the desire for change takes root amongst the electorate, the only way to tear that root from the ground is to mercilessly attack the designated agent of change and hope that something sticks. Or, get lucky and have scandal sully the change agent.

As the campaign enters the home stretch, the Liberals have, not for want of trying, been unable to find the right key to fighting the change dynamic. They have tried:

(a) *A Hidden Agenda* – The Conservatives removed this arrow from the Liberal quiver at the outset of the election campaign, defining their agenda with daily policy announcements. Moreover,

Conservative leader Stephen Harper confronted head on one of

his Party's potential social policy weaknesses by asserting on Day One of the campaign that a government he led would not trigger the notwithstanding clause to roll back same sex marriage. Further, to the chagrin of the Liberals, the discordant, off-message notes played by Conservative supporters in 2004 have been silent.

(b) *Competing Visions* – Prime Minister Martin has tried painting a picture of a deep divide between a Liberal and a Conservative Canada, based on a sharply different value set underlying each Party. Indeed, this was the thesis of Mr. Martin's January 3<sup>rd</sup> speech in Winnipeg, launching the Liberals' post-holiday phase campaign. The Conservative campaign has, however, day-by-day, carefully planted a policy platform moving that Party closer to the political middle ground traditionally occupied by Liberals.

(c) *The Economy is Strong* – The Liberals have tied Canada's admirable fiscal and economic record relative to other G8 countries to successive Liberal governments over the past

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decade, and particularly to the work of Mr. Martin when he was Finance Minister. However, a strong economy appears to have a neutral effect on this campaign and is insufficient by itself to stem a desire for change.

- (d) *Return to Deficits* – The Liberals have attempted to portray the Conservative platform as one that would return Canada to budgetary deficits. Successive Liberal government underestimations of budget surpluses have, however, softened that Party’s credibility on fiscal forecasting. Moreover, the government’s Fall 2005 fiscal and economic update provided estimates of significant budget surpluses for the next five years, making those surpluses a ‘free good’ for all opposition Parties to spend.

In short, the Conservative campaign has stuck to a very deliberate game plan and appears to have been aimed from the outset at anticipating Liberal strategy and ‘bulletproofing’ its leader from attack.

Undaunted and with little to lose, the Liberal campaign is playing the ‘fear card’ (the horizontal axis outside Quebec identified in our December 6<sup>th</sup> *Election Watch*), trying to demonize Mr. Harper and hoping for a repeat of the dying days of the 2004 campaign when Liberals who had been ‘sitting on their hands’ and NDP supporters who were determined to block a Conservative government

turned the tide in favour of Prime Minister Martin. And the attacks will feature a new dimension – they will also be aimed at ‘the Harper team’, asking Canadians to think about who would sit in a Conservative cabinet.

## **2. “If I had a Rocket Launcher”**

The lyrics of iconic Canadian singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn came to mind when a news release issued by the RCMP on December 28, 2005 advised that they had launched a criminal investigation regarding a possible breach of security or illegal transfer of information in advance of the government’s announcement of changes to the taxation of dividends and income trusts. News of the criminal investigation fired a rocket into the middle of the Liberal Party of Canada’s election campaign strategy.

Launched between Christmas and New Year’s Day, during a ‘quiet’ week of the campaign and therefore destined to have little competition for top line election news coverage, the RCMP investigation has had perceptibly strong rippling effects on the election. It knocked the Liberals off their game plan, putting them on the defensive precisely when their strategy was to shift their campaign into high gear. News of the criminal investigation also pointed directly to the Liberals’ weak underbelly of questionable ethical behaviour. Furthermore, it raised questions about Liberal competence to govern. It is not a coincidence that Conservative Party momentum grew markedly in the immediate aftermath, all across

the country and most interestingly in the Province of Québec. Even if no criminal charges are laid (which will not be known until well after the January 23<sup>rd</sup> vote), there can be no doubt the RCMP income trusts investigation was a seminal event in this campaign.

### **3. Getting to Know Minorities**

Yet another obstacle in the way of a fifth Liberal government is the fact that more Canadians now have some experience with a minority Parliament. At times ugly, mean-spirited and dysfunctional, the first minority government in Ottawa in twenty-five years demonstrated nevertheless that the governing party has a governor imposed on its activities. For example, the Martin Government was forced to negotiate some of the terms of its minority Speech from the Throne delivered on October 5, 2004, and tabled a revised Budget in the Spring of 2005 reflecting a negotiated arrangement with the New Democratic Party to secure NDP support in non-confidence votes.

Confident that a minority Parliament would impose similar constraints on a Harper-led government, some voters otherwise inclined to use their vote strategically to prevent a Conservative victory could be unmoved by Liberal predictions of disaster. Thus, we may not see a repeat of June 2004 voter reaction. This is precisely what NDP leader Jack Layton is praying for to avoid being marginalized on election day.

### **4. Revisiting Québec's Election Fault Lines**

In the inaugural edition of *Election Watch* we stated that the critical election fault lines in Québec fell along two axes: the sponsorship axis and the national unity axis. These fault lines continue to define the campaign in Québec. However, an interesting and unexpected twist emerged as the campaign entered its final two weeks – the Conservative Party became a live option. Liberal strategy to develop a stark, Liberal versus Bloc “referendum election” in Québec is failing to take root. The block of voters we identified as potential Conservative supporters, i.e., those angered by the revelations of the Gomery Inquiry but responsive to the national unity message, have stepped forward to be counted.

If this dynamic holds true to form on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, it will have important longer-term implications for Canada. First, it could provide much-needed Québec Cabinet prospects to a Harper-led government, should the Conservative Party form the next administration. Second, it may well deny Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe his coveted psychological shot-in-the-arm election-day scenario – votes for a Québec separatist party surpassing the 50 per cent mark for the first time. Third, it alters the political landscape in Québec for the next federal election. Like a skilled billiards player who sets up the next shot with each preceding shot, the outcome of this election helps set up the dynamic of the next campaign in

the crucial Québec electoral battleground where future majorities can be won or lost.

## 5. Random Observations

### *(a) Whatever Happened to the Policy Door Stoppers?*

In September 1993 the then-leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, the Right Honourable Jean Chrétien, released *Creating Opportunity – The Liberal Plan for Canada*. What became known colloquially as *The Liberal Red Book* was clutched enthusiastically and affectionately by Mr. Chrétien at every campaign stop in the ensuing federal election campaign that year. Catching the wave ridden to success by Mr. Chrétien, the then-leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, former Premier Mike Harris, released *The Common Sense Revolution* in May 1994, a full year before the June 1995 Ontario election.

Putting forward a comprehensive, cohesive election policy platform well out in front of a campaign was a unique political strategy at that time, used to great effect and repeated by successive federal Liberal campaigns. Prevailing wisdom before *The Liberal Red Book* was what were known as ‘gainesburgers’, releasing bite-sized, single issue policy pronouncements throughout the course of an election campaign.

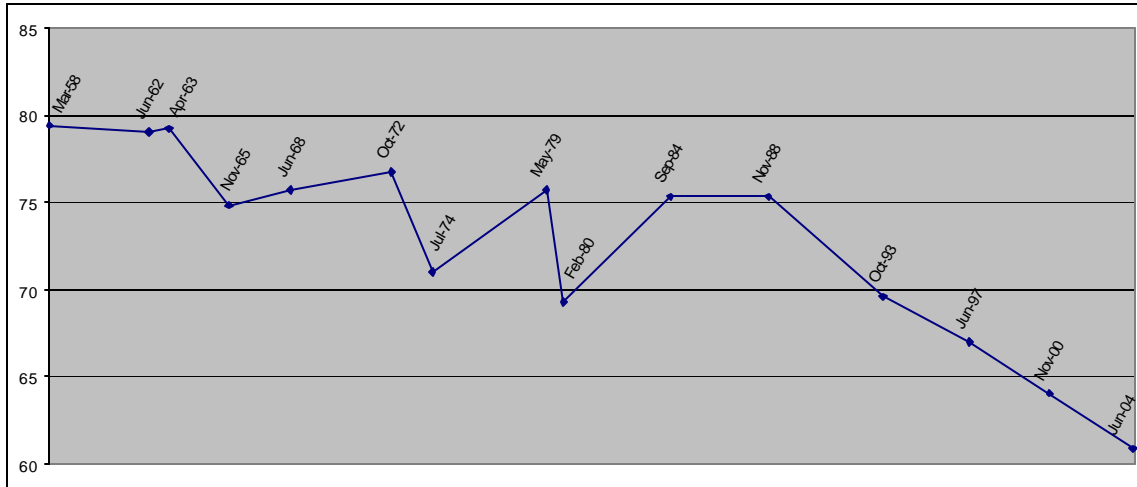
In 2006 we appear to have come full circle. We cannot fail to notice the absence of Blue Books and Red Books being officially released with less than two weeks to go in the campaign. The Conservative strategy to release one-a-day policy positions is going back-to-the-future.

### *(b) Declining Voter Turnout - It Ain't the Lousy Weather*

Election 2006 is the ninth federal election campaign held in the winter (defined as election day in December through March). We examined voter turnout for every federal election since 1867 to see if the prospect of casting a ballot in the dead of a Canadian winter has had a discernible negative impact on voter turnout. It did not. We are pleased to report that Canadians are a hearty lot.

With the high water mark of voter turnout being 79.4 percent in the March 31, 1958 election that returned Prime Minister Diefenbaker with a majority, the average voter turnout for all federal elections is 70.7 per cent. As the graph below shows, while there was a significant dip in February 1980 (the most recent winter election) when turnout was 69.3 per cent, or marginally below the average, the steady decline in voter turnout since November 1988 demonstrates there is something other than cold and inclement weather at work in turning Canadians away from the ballot booth.

**% Voter Turnout – Federal Elections From 1958-2004**



(c) *“Mom, Please Send Money!”*

Money has always been an indispensable part of politics. Money is needed to hire staff, fund research, purchase supplies and a myriad of other uses required to operate effective, modern political parties. The political financing legislation (Bill C-24) which came into force on January 1, 2004 provides a critically important financial floor to all major national parties. This law guarantees \$1.75 per vote to each registered political party receiving at least two per cent of the number of valid votes cast nationally. The following table shows what the five national parties eligible for public funding would

receive based on the June 2004 election results:

**Public Financing – 2004 Results**

PARTY	VOTES	FUNDING
Liberal	4,982,220	\$8.7M
Conservative	4,019,498	\$7.03M
NDP	2,127,403	\$3.7M
Bloc	1,680,109	\$2.9M
Green	582,247	\$1.01M

For the Green Party, receiving \$1 million represents a vital foundation in its efforts to build support over the longer term. And for the Bloc Québécois, a guaranteed \$2.9 million from Canadian taxpayers is icing on the cake.

**If you have any questions or comments regarding Tactix Election Watch please contact us at:**

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