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Breakthrough Green vote in London North Centre; Dion's green Liberal breakthrough ~ Patrick Brown

Green Party leader Elizabeth May finished a strong second in the November 27 London North Centre federal by-election, capturing 25.8% of the vote and trailing Liberal Glen Pearson by only 9.1%. The Ontario by-election demonstrated that the Green Party platform and May's style of leadership appeal to a substantial number of London voters.

This Green breakthrough in a Liberal stronghold (the seat has been Liberal for 18 years) has had an immediate and significant impact on the national political scene; the green message being sent by the electorate may have been a factor in Stephane Dion's win as new Liberal leader at their December 2 Convention.

Leadership candidate Dion was Environment Minister in the Martin government and a strong supporter of Kyoto. His leadership campaign heavily emphasized environmental issues, particularly climate change. London elected MP Glen Pearson, had endorsed Dion in the Liberal leadership race. Dion visited London during the election.

Election Results

In London North Centre, it's hardly surprising that the by-election was won by Liberal Glen Pearson; longtime Liberal MP Joe Fontana was an institution (he had resigned to pursue a bid for London's mayor). Pearson garnered 13,285 votes, some 34.9% of those cast. What was interesting was that winner Pearson endorsed planks of the Green Party platform in his campaign.

May finished a remarkably strong second, with 9,845 votes. Her 25.8% showing beat the Conservative candidate, former mayor Dianne Haskett, by 518 votes, and the NDP's Megan Walker by 4,480 votes.

Compared to the January 2006 general election, the Green Party took votes from all the other parties; the Green share of the vote quintupled from 5.4% to 25.8%; the Liberals share was cut from 40.1% to 34.9%; the Conservatives dropped from 29.9% to 23.8%, and the NDP dropped from 23.7% to 14.1%.

The Green Party did particularly well in the southeastern part of the riding, which was formerly NDP dominated; and at polls at the University of Western Ontario.

First Past The Post & Strategic Voting

But with first-past-the-post voting, the rule for federal

elections, some voters still found themselves thinking strategically. One voter said he was afraid that the 'small-liberal' vote would be split between Pearson, May, and Walker, and that a vote for May wouldn't have been enough to make sure she won, but would have been enough to help Haskett win. So he voted for Pearson.

'We Are Electable'

Said May, the day after the election: 'We are electable. We have a full party. The Green Party really has arrived. We can be taken seriously as a credible political alternative.'

According to reports, May easily won the all-candidates debates; one observer said '...May crushed them all. Sharp, funny, great concrete examples when answering questions.'

May does not live in London, and has not yet announced a decision as to where she will run in the next federal election, expected in the spring. But accused of being an interloper, she told a London audience, 'I'm not a parachute candidate; I arrived by train.'

During the campaign, both the Liberals and the NDP had given clear signs of recognizing the Green Party threat. Liberal candidate Pearson was quoted on November 16: 'I have spoken to Elizabeth May and I am adopting some of the Green Party platform.' Sensing trouble, the NDP put out a last-ditch flyer just prior to the vote: 'Thinking of voting for the Green Party ... think carefully.'

The Green Party vote share in London was the highest ever in a federal election. The previous best was in 2004, when Andrew Lewis won 16.7% of the vote in Saanich-Gulf Islands.

Commenting on Stephane Dion's Liberal leadership victory, Lewis wondered 'if the Dion win is part of the London by-election fall out; Liberals are waking up to the green movement and Dion had the best green platform.'

The *Toronto Star* commented: 'When the voters of London North Centre handed the Liberals a victory and second place to the Green Party, they were telegraphing a message about what works at the polls: a combination of Liberal humility and strong environmentalism.'

Liberal Jump in Polling May Reflect Higher Profile of Environmental Issues

The increasing importance of environmental issues to

Canadians has been highlighted in polls taken before and after the Liberal leadership convention.

In October, a 'Strategic Counsel' nation-wide poll, carried out for the *Globe & Mail* and CTV, gave both the Liberals and Conservatives 32% of the vote, with the NDP 14%, the Bloc 11%, and the Greens 9%.

Immediately following Dion's election as leader, a new 'Strategic Counsel' poll yielded: Liberals 37%, Conservatives 31%, NDP 14%, Bloc 11%, Greens 7%. The Liberals apparently gained five points from the October poll!

Going Green

What all this polling might indicate is that the presence of the Green Party has indicated the importance of environmental issues to Canada's electorate to the point that the Liberals and

the NDP are starting to adopt Green policy as their own, and as a clear means of differentiating their policies from those of the Conservatives.

Dion's 'three pillars' of economic development, social justice, and environmental sustainability clearly owe a lot to the Green Party platform. Said one Green Party commentator: 'What a profound effect we are having, yet still without a seat in parliament.' (The Greens Party polled 650,000 votes in last January's federal election.)

And Justin Trudeau, commenting on the crowd of Dion supporters at the Liberal convention with their bright green scarves and T-shirts, remarked, 'Looks like the Green Party to me.' 