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Opinion by Murray Dobbin

Turning Back Harper: How Best To Vote?

The steady decline of voter turnout means that Canada is now governed by a political party chosen by fewer than one in four eligible voters. The combination of these and other factors effectively disenfranchises 75% of the population.

And that is what Stephen Harper is counting on to squeeze out a majority government with as little as 35% of the votes.

This is not what democracy should look like.

But in the short term of the next month that is what we are faced with.

What if you are an activist who is terrified and depressed at the prospect of a majority government that would allow Stephen Harper to carry out a full Conservative agenda? For you, there seem to be few effective ways to engage.

The fact of Canadian electoral politics is that once the election is called, those not directly involved in party electioneering are turned into spectators. That may be the root of the media's tendency to frame elections as a game. For most Canadians that is exactly how it must appear. And even for most who do get engaged, the process itself is apolitical. Yes, you are free to place 'remember to vote' signs on people's doors. But it's hard not to get the feeling that by the time the election is called, it's too late to do anything substantive to affect the outcome.

50 Key seats

In fact, of course, what actually happens in the next weeks is extremely important and deadly serious.

Everyone who can get out of bed in the morning needs to be involved—and needs to be both principled in their political activity and ruthlessly practical at the same time. That's not an easy task. As people who care deeply about their country, we are taught implicitly to vote for the party that most closely resembles our set of beliefs and convictions. Except that in most of the seats across the country, the outcomes are already decided.

According to number crunchers in the parties, there are fewer than 50 seats where there are real contests. This is where it will be decided whether or not Stephen Harper, a prime minister who disparages his own country, is re-elected.

If there was some super-computer that extrapolated and assessed all our individual values, aspirations, beliefs and convictions and determined the outcome, Harper would have been in history's dustbin already. Two thirds of Canadians consistently express their solid support for all the things that Harper will eliminate if he gets the opportunity. But there isn't such a computer, and without proportional representation, our valiant efforts at voting our principles are undermined or rendered neutral by a crude system designed to favour incumbents and lowered expectations of what is possible.

Indeed, it can be argued that the multi-party system was designed to ensure that genuine democracy, measured by outcomes for ordinary people, could never be achieved. From that perspective it has been extraordinarily successful.

Strategic Voting Makes Sense

But if voting strictly on the basis of your convictions has been rendered ineffective, what about so-called strategic voting? As much as many people want to drive a stake through the heart of this ugly political beast, it will keep coming back to life every time there is an election until we somehow get proportional representation.

The critical, practical flaw in strategic voting is that it assumes perfect knowledge of the history of each riding on the part of voters being asked to follow it. But there is no such thing as perfect knowledge. For example, as happened last time, people will vote Liberal in an NDP riding to stop the Conservatives—even though in that riding the Conservatives have absolutely no chance of getting elected. I

In the worst case scenario, strategic voting can actually have the exact opposite effect: taking votes away from the candidate most able to defeat a Conservative, allowing the Conservative to win.

Yet to be effective, strategic voting need only happen in those relatively small number of swing ridings where the results are not already known. If a campaign could persuade thousands of voters in those 50 ridings to vote strategically, countering the perverse nature of our electoral system, it could determine the outcome of the election.

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That would be principled voting, too, and in terms of actually saving the country, it trumps the lambs-to-the-slaughter strategy of voting your values as if it mattered. Let's not for a moment forget who we are up against—a politician committed to continuing the dismantling of decades of social progress and facilitating the de facto annexation of Canada by the United States.

The NDP's New Message

What does the NDP have to offer this time around? A quick look at Jack Layton's starting gate speech shows some strengths and weaknesses. Two changes could qualify as almost historic; The NDP are talking about the economy. And they are almost exclusively attacking Harper leaving the Liberals alone. These are major departures and welcome changes from the past. Dion is already weak—attacks by the NDP could be politically fatal and almost ensure a Harper victory.

The NDP has historically avoided talking economics because pollsters tell them they aren't trusted on the economy, a self-fulfilling prophecy that has played out for three decades. Attacking corporate tax cuts and introducing green industrial development is a breakthrough for a federal election. Medicare is another key theme but regrettably the NDP have all but abandoned the Afghan conflict and the militarization of Canadian culture—presumably because the 'support our troops' framing of the Conservatives is too difficult to reverse.

Also, they have chosen a cheap populist theme, attacking cell phone, bank and credit-card charges instead of hammering the Conservatives on their dangerous, right-wing deregulation agenda—even though people are still dying as a result of Harper's 'self-regulation' changes to food safety. He's done the same to airline safety.

Greens: How Mainstream?

How about the Greens? Elizabeth May's recent embrace of Blair Wilson, a rejected and controversial Liberal MP from the Lower Mainland, as the party's first Member of Parliament should remind us that the most important quality of any politician is judgement.

And on this one, May comes out looking too much like an opportunist. May says, 'This is indeed historic.... We are a party

whose ideas and policies are now in the mainstream of the public debate.' That's a stretch.

However, Blair Wilson was not elected as a Green and will almost certainly disappear politically on October 14 having never sat as a Green member of Parliament. His likely contribution: he will lose but garner enough votes to elect John Weston, the Conservative who lost by only 1,000 votes last time.

The Greens are not a genuinely national party yet. In many parts of the country they have virtually no riding associations (they have nominated just 115 candidates) but have put up 'virtual' candidates to scoop the federal election financing money.

While May has been effective in attacking Harper on a number of fronts, she insists on breaking a principle she held for many years: that the Green Party should not be trying to elect members but should be forcing other parties to adopt a green agenda. Unlike the Greens in the US, who have a policy of not running against Democrats where they have a chance of winning, May and her party are fielding a complete slate, once again risking electing Harper Conservatives. That's high risk politics.

Dion's All-Too-Familiar Grits

Harper must be defeated and that won't happen if the Liberals do substantially worse than last time. That's just a blunt fact of political life in this election.

But it's easy to forget what happened when the whole country demonized Brian Mulroney and neglected to see the Liberals for what they were and are: a party of Bay Street. Finance Minister Paul Martin's policies did more damage to the social policy infrastructure and the standard of living of Canadians than anything Mulroney did. As a result, we are still trying to catch up to the real wage level of 1982 and Medicare is threatened like never before.

Dion's affection for the environment aside, the same big business gang still runs the Liberal Party and they will ultimately run any Liberal government, too. ✍

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