

Celebrating the oh so very bearable lightness of being Harperless

More to the Story

By Ben Bennett

As this column goes to the printer, there are approximately 82 days left of Justin Trudeau's honeymoon with Canadians, but I wouldn't be surprised to see an extension of the goodwill, given the success of the courtship.

His first actions as prime minister-designate on a number of the big files are certainly a step in the right direction. Inviting Elizabeth May to join him in Paris for the climate change conference later this month was a stroke of genius.

With a large caucus to manage, he could not of course appoint the Green Party Leader as minister of the environment as some would have had him do. Yes, she'd be great, and a lot of folks would be cheering. But the message that would have sent to his 180-odd fellow MPs would have put him in a very difficult spot. Instead, the new prime minister has appointed Catherine McKenna, a newcomer to federal politics whose resume suggest many good qualities but not much environmental experience. She is no stranger however to international negotiations and this should stand her in good stead in Paris. The logical choice for the environment file, Stephan Dion, is our new foreign affairs minister.

You could almost feel the collective sigh of relief that the majority of Canadians uttered when it was clear Stephen Harper was history. Even in Guelph, where most of us seem to vote for the person rather than the party, the desire to make absolutely sure there was no chance of a Tory victory here saw an unprecedented vote count for the Liberals. This came at the expense of the NDP and Greens, who both fielded excellent candidates and in the case of the Greens, mounted a huge campaign to support their man.

Clearly, the final surge of the red wave came as a surprise to everyone, even to the local Liberal campaign. What else can explain its decision to go negative, first against the Tories, and then later against the Greens and the NDP? It was such a contrast from their leader's positive campaign style. Were they hearing things at the door that suggested that it was not going to be a cakewalk in Guelph? Whatever that was, it changed in the final week. Either way, someone made the decision to run attack ads, and I am sure for many people this added a sour note to the sweetness of the ultimate victory.

The sighs of relief over the end of the Harper era were likely heard across the world. Whatever reputation Mr. Harper may have had as a money-manager (rightly or wrongly), the edge that seemed to dominate his actions on the domestic front were echoed abroad. Canada's reputation as a nice guy has taken a major hit in the past 10 years. Mr. Trudeau's election sends a signal that those days are over and now it is our chance to rebuild on the goodwill that is still out there for the maple leaf.

If Mr. Trudeau follows up on his commitment that this was the last first-past-the-post election, strategic voting should become a thing of the past. Let's hope so. People really should have the confidence to vote for who they want rather than go to their second choice. It's like voting with one hand tied behind your back. Like so many other files, Mr. Trudeau will be closely watched to see progress on electoral reform.

He seems to favour a ranked ballot, and as the party in the centre, why wouldn't he? Most non-Liberals would probably mark that party as their second choice. Contrast that with Tories, who almost no-one would show as their second choice. It would be better for the NDP and the Greens than the current system but I imagine they'd prefer a version of actual proportional representation instead. We'll get more into this another time.

With this new gender-balanced cabinet announced, the speculation is already under way about who got in because they were female. It seems to me we haven't seen these questions raised when the same principle was applied to ensure regional, language and racial representation in the seats seen behind the prime minister during Question Period. (Mr. Harper had some real bozos in his cabinet, and most of them were men.)

I rest my case.

(Ben Bennett's past columns can be found at www.bbc.guelph.org.)

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