

COMMENT

ELECTION DEBATES



CHANTAL HÉBERT

Harper enjoys an easy ride

Heated opposition battle lets PM off the hook

If Stephen Harper wins his long-shot bid for a fourth consecutive mandate next month, it will be in no small part because his main opposition rivals were too busy tearing a strip off each other to remind voters of why regime change would be a good idea.

Those dynamics were already in evidence at last week's debate on the economy. Some of the most pointed exchanges of the evening pitted Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau against the NDP's Thomas Mulcair, with Harper watching them go at each other from the sidelines.

With two more players on the ice for the French-language debate Thursday, neither of which is headed for the government side of the House of Commons no matter the outcome of the vote, the opposition battle took centre stage.

Watching it, one might even have been forgiven for sometimes thinking Mulcair was the incumbent with a government record to defend.

Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe set the tone early on when he managed to turn an answer on the use of employment insurance surplus to bring down the federal deficit into an attack on the New Democrat fiscal framework.

Predictably, Mulcair and Trudeau went at each other over whether a simple majority in favour of sovereignty should be enough to trigger negotiations to allow Quebec to leave the federation.

By comparison, Harper, who has been running a government more unpopular in Quebec than any of its predecessors, had one of the easiest rides an incumbent has ever lucked into on a debate podium.

That was probably more than enough for the Conservative leader to have had a good night. Over his near decade in power, Harper has made it his habit to not get in the face of Quebecers unless he absolutely has to.

Using the same technique on the debate set, he delivered his talking points and then essentially stepped back from the fray. It was clear that if Quebecers were going to remember one thing about his debate appearance, Harper wanted it to be his determination to force Muslim women who take the oath of citizenship to unveil.

In an ideal world for the NDP, the debate would have been Mulcair's opportunity to close his deal with Quebec voters. He has held the lead in voting intentions since the election was called and his status as a contender for government nationally depends on the NDP remaining at the front of the Quebec pack.

Time will tell, but he likely did enough to hold Duceppe at bay. The debate was the Bloc leader's first and best opportunity to bring back to the fold the voters who succumbed to the 2011 Orange Wave.

But to shelter his Quebec support from the Bloc, Mulcair had to bring out cards like his support for the single majority rule in a Quebec secession vote.

Quebecers made up the bulk of the audience of the French-language debate, but francophone voters also stand to determine the outcome of the vote in at least a dozen ridings outside the province. In a tight election, those seats could make the difference between government and opposition, between official Opposition and third place.

The voters who live in the francophone areas of Manitoba, eastern and northern Ontario and New Brunswick are, for the most part, viscerally opposed to the sovereigntist agenda. And they did not spend the past few years immersed in a debate over the accommodation of religious minorities.

For them, as for Quebec's English-speaking voters, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms is a big deal. It guarantees they have access to education in their language.

Trudeau's defence of the charter-based rights of Muslim women on the niqab may have rubbed some of his fellow Quebecers the wrong way, as did his insistence that a 50 per cent-plus-1 vote for sovereignty would not be enough to trigger Quebec's separation. But both stances almost certainly resonated in a positive way with minority-language audiences in and outside Quebec.

Chantal Hébert's columns on national affairs appear in Torstar newspapers.

POLITICS

'Sorry, what election?' is soaring high in the polls

NDP have become Liberals, Liberals have become NDP and Conservatives never change



PAUL BENEDETTI

If you've just decided to start paying attention to the federal election campaign, you're in luck.

It's half over, and you haven't really missed much.

So, if you quickly read in, study each party's platforms and all the press coverage, there's still lots of time to be bored stiff before you vote.

But, if you don't have time that — say you badly need to get a haircut — here's the skinny on what's happened in the race to lead the country.

Donald Trump, for reasons that defy all logic, is the front-runner. Oh, wait, no, that's the U.S. Republican Party's presidential nomination race. It's so easy to get confused when you get all your news from Facebook.

Here in Canada, as you may know, we have three "Major Political Parties" and Elizabeth May, but she never gets invited to anything. Apparently, she participated in last week's leader's debate on Twitter, which

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is like saying you played in the NFL — on your Xbox.

Too bad, too, because she's at least as smart as the rest of them (maybe smarter) and she's way funnier than Tom Mulcair.

In any case, how to sum up where we are so far?

In the polls, people say they are "Undecided" which is jargon for, "Sorry, what election?" In survey after survey, each party gets about 30 per cent support with the margin of error among decided voters at plus or minus 3.0 percentage points, 19 times out of 20 every second Sunday in odd months. Interestingly, more than 60 per cent of Canadians polled said they "wanted change" but that number was dismissed after it turned out people thought the pollsters said "sparse change."

Even if you have been paying attention, it's been a confusing campaign for most people. You know, in Canada there was always a nice sense of reliability about the parties: The NDP would call for more spending and higher taxes, the Conservatives would promote fiscal responsibility and lower taxes and the Liberals would find the best looking guy in the room to run right down the middle.

But this year, we have a phenomenon political scientists call, "let's mix up the voters because it's funny."

The NDP have become the Liberals, the Liberals have become the NDP and the Conservatives haven't budged an inch either way — mostly because if they went left they'd be the NDP and if they went any further right, they'd bump into Donald Trump.

Confused? Don't feel bad. I can barely find my car in the morning.

Here's the short form: Thomas Mulcair is promising subsidized daycare, senior care, infrastructure spending AND a balanced

budget. He's also promising to fly everyone in Canada to Cuba for the weekend with two complimentary mojitos included.

Justin Trudeau apparently found an old NDP playbook and is promising deficits for three years, huge infrastructure spending, tax cuts for the middle class and "complimentary canoe rides" for 16 lucky ladies to be chosen in a nation-wide raffle.

Luckily, Prime Minister Harper is keeping things clear for Canadians. As usual, the Tories are promising lower taxes and cheques he will deliver directly to your home after which he will stay for a bit and play the piano.

As for the economy, Harper is telling Canadians we're "the envy of the entire world" — or at least of Greece.

In last week's Leader's Debate on the Economy, which as many as 27 Canadians watched in its entirety, the most important issues was complex shifts in the macroeconomics of the country and the colour of the leader's tie. Here, Mulcair was the clear winner, sporting a purple tie that many analysts felt "was actually more interesting than any of the candidates." As for the lack of NDP-orange in his tie, one expert noted (and I am not making this up) that "Mr. Mulcair's tie did have a hint of orange — a pattern of flowerlike circles with orange centres." Thank goodness, I was really worried there for a minute.

I think in the end, the real answer actually is in the sound bites. Someone "isn't ready to lead," someone is "ready to lead" but they're not sure where, and someone is "ready to leave".

You just have to decide which one is which.

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THE DAILY DAD

Life is in the small pleasures, the simple moments

I talk to Zak. I ask for his day, his whole life, to be blessed. I rub his tummy



THOMAS FROESE

MUKONO, UGANDA — Our dog, Zak, is a fine-looking German shepherd with a deep bark and a good name. (I mean, if your name is all you can ever fully own, surely that's true for dogs too.)

He's wary of strangers and, I suspect, would give his life if called to. He has a funny relationship with his food, never uses his doghouse, (preferring our back door), and loves rolling in the morning dew.

He's patient with us, his family, with me, his master, even as he must wonder where I go for so long. But I'm back from my family's annual Canadian stay. And now, back from his morning run, Zak is happy as ever.

Sure, he's exercised by others here when I'm in Hamilton, but it's not the same. At least I'd like to think that Zak thinks this. Judging by his smiling eyes, his panting, his long, dripping tongue, it must be true. He's content.

The sun has just risen. We're on the front lawn, under royal palms, trees I planted after arriving here 10 years ago. They were as tall as me. Now they're 40 feet high, full of birds and other life, well-soaked in Uganda's rain and sunshine, casting shadows that mark time and cool Zak.

Near the trees are a pair of soccer nets, a gift for my son, also 10, also grown greatly, even as his sisters have. This is our yard, a space we all enjoy, where Zak guards attentively even when the cats saunter and lope past him.

As I often do, I talk to Zak. I ask for his day, his whole life, to be blessed. I rub his tummy.

Maybe you've heard them too, those sad regrets, laments echoing from people who've chosen one diversion or another for entire lifetimes.



Zak at his home in Uganda, East Africa, where he's content with his watch-dog duties as part of the Froese family.

PHOTO BY THOMAS FROESE

He responds with that quiet dog talk, unaware (I'm assuming) that dogs in Africa don't always have it easy. (A nearby American friend buried his shepherd in his front yard — it was poisoned — digging at night to hide the worst from his children.)

There are monkeys around and, for now, Zak doesn't care. But the truth is he's chased a monkey or two. He gets himself all turned around in the nearby expanse of bush, his beautiful, black coat full of burs, his keen eyes half-blinded by other crap he runs through, unwilling, and, I suppose, unable to find home.

I know Zak well, though, and love him, and, of course, always go and find him.

So while I appreciate Zak's good name and faithfulness, I learn more from his monkey-chasing ways. Because who doesn't run after the odd monkey, distractions that have little to do with the good life? I do.

Then, like Zak, I hear my master call my name. In my quieter moments (quiet moments are easier to find in Africa), sometimes I even hear warnings. Maybe you've heard them too, those sad regrets, laments echoing from people who've chased one diversion or another for entire lifetimes.

I wish I'd had the courage to live true to myself, not just what others expected. Or, I wish I hadn't worked so hard. Or, I wish I'd kept in touch with friends. Or, I wish I'd have reflected more. Or, I wish I'd have

done more to leave something behind. Or, simply, I wish I'd allowed myself to be happier.

Life, real life, is in the small pleasures. The simple moments. The empty spaces. This is what Zak seems to say, even while he's now sleeping.

This is Zak, son of Zeke, born at a medical-mission hours away in the middle of Uganda's bumpy nowhere, fittingly-enough on my wife's and my wedding anniversary. During public addresses, I especially like to introduce him in the family photo — "This is Zak, a good Mennonite dog, you see, wearing his black."

So when my family's African adventure eventually ends, will Zak move with us to Canada? Or will Zak, the good dog, be just as happy in his great African space and sunshine and guard duties for others in this home?

I try not to worry about such because tomorrow, you know, always brings enough worries of its own. Today, though, I have brought Zak to Canada. Here, for you. Isn't he something? A dog with something to say. To anyone with the time to listen.

Read Thomas Froese at www.thomasfroese.com and www.dailydad.net. Learn of his family's work in East Africa at www.savethemothers.org

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