



Green Party Leader Elizabeth May writes that contrary to voter apathy and even suppression, “where Greens succeed, voter turnout soars.” House of Commons photo

The Issue in 2015: Democracy’s Declining Health

Elizabeth May

In an impassioned plea for reform, Green Party Leader Elizabeth May argues that the major issue of the 2015 federal election should be not climate change or energy diversification but the sorry state of our democracy. From our first-past-the-post electoral system to low voter turnout to our all-powerful PMO to the circus of question period, May argues that Canadian democracy is in desperate need of an overhaul. And, P.S.: Her participation in campaign debates is part of it.

I predict that 2015 will be the year of the Green. Dismiss it as wishful thinking, but no national media coverage anticipated that I would win a federal seat in Saanich-Gulf Islands, nor that Andrew Weaver would win a provincial British Columbia riding in Oak Bay-Gordon Head, nor that David Coon would win a seat making the New Brunswick Greens the third party in that province.

Recent Green wins in municipal races on Vancouver Island have begun to get some attention, but, for the most part,

stories noting that Greens are rising in the polls tend to be attached to questions about “blips” and “parked votes.” It will dawn on political pundits slowly that Green votes are actually being cast to elect Green representatives.

We still face a near-hysteria against voting Green from NDP and Liberal supporters who strangely seem to think those parties are sufficiently aligned with Greens that we should just wither and die. Of course, if the NDP and Liberals had ever put the climate crisis ahead of their narrowest short-term political advantage, Stephen Harper could never have formed a minority parliament in 2006, nor in 2008. (In fairness, a caveat: Stéphane Dion did try, but the NDP reaction to any cooperation with Greens was swift and vicious). The preoccupation about “vote splitting” relies on tapping into voter fear and anxiety so effectively that the thinking process becomes paralyzed.

Thinking it through, it would be obvious that the real problem is not how many people voted Green in recent elections, but the terribly large number of people who did not vote at all (in 2011, this was 10 times as many as those who voted Green.) The single largest voting bloc in the last few elections has been the 40 per cent of electors who opted to stay home. That number exceeds those who actually chose to mark an X next to the name of a Conservative candidate—39.6 per cent of the 60 per cent who voted—or approximately 24 per cent of those with the right to vote. Our problem is not vote-splitting; our problem is vote abandoning.

Empirical support for this argument comes from the fact that in constituencies where Greens succeed, voter turnout soars. In 2011, in Saanich Gulf Islands, we had nearly the highest voter turnout in Canada: just shy of 75 per cent (only PEI ridings were higher). In 2013, when Weaver became the first Green MLA in B.C., Oak Bay-Gordon Head had the highest voter turnout in B.C. And in New Brunswick, when

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Coon’s victory made NB Greens an officially recognized party in that province, Fredericton South had over 70 per cent turnout. In other words, Greens don’t win when the voting public is turned off, disgusted or cynical. Greens win when voters are turned on, hopeful and inspired.

When the media and the larger parties succeeded in excluding a Green voice in the 2011 debates, our vote plummeted and Harper got his coveted majority. The Green Party went to Federal Court to argue that the public interest and fairness in the use of the public airwaves demanded our inclusion in the debates. Our argument was rejected by a then-little known Federal Court judge—Marc Nadon.

What turns voters off voting?

The nastiness and *ad hominem* attacks of question period contribute to voter disgust and reduced voter turnout. I believe this is the motive of those in PMO who script the contemptuous responses for question period. To be clear, these responses are not merely contemptuous of the questioner; such “answers” are contemptuous of Parliament.

Our perverse and archaic voting system—“First-Past-the-Post” (FPTP)—the winner-take-all variety of distortion of the wishes of the electorate, contributes to this malaise. Belief in the effectiveness of a vote begins to wane when the majority of votes in riding after riding is essentially discarded once the “winning” candidate has rung up a minority of the total—putting him (or her) over the top.

While looking at the evidence of recent elections, it should be noted that in the election in which the Green Party won the most votes (nearly one million in 2008) the Harper Conservatives were held to a minority. When the media and the larger parties succeeded in excluding a Green voice in the 2011 debates, our vote plummeted and Harper got his coveted majority. The Green Party went to Federal Court to argue that the public interest and fairness in the use of the public airwaves demanded our inclusion in the debates. Our argument was rejected by a then-little known Federal Court judge—Marc Nadon.

There is a lot of irrationality inspiring “strategic voter” panic.

For the average Canadian, it is counter-intuitive, if not irrational, that parties generally on the same side of the left-right spectrum reserve their harshest attacks for each other. Demonizing the party with the closest policy overlap to your own party is a routine tactic to spike strategic voting panic.

Nevertheless, the kernel of legitimate grievance is attached to the FPTP voting system. No other voting system allows for the election of a majority of seats with a minority of votes. The fear of strategic voting fuels the nastiness of hyper-partisan spin. For the average Canadian, it is counter-intuitive, if not irrational, that parties generally on the same side of the left-right spectrum reserve their harshest attacks for each other. Demonizing the party with the closest policy over-

lap to your own party is a routine tactic to spike strategic voting panic. In the early 1990s, stopping a Conservative from voting Reform was assisted through the two-step plan—threaten that voting Reform will “split the vote” and elect a Liberal, and throw in some attacks on Reform for good measure. Once the right consolidated with the creation of the Conservative Party of Canada in 2003, the NDP and Liberals followed the same plan: threaten the voter and demonize each other. If Canada voted using any form of proportional representation, the tenor of political discourse would be more respectful. The debate could focus on real policy differences—not exaggerated or imagined failings of another party.

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The key issue in the next election should be the declining health of Canadian democracy. We—collectively, all parties—should knock ourselves out to inspire Canadians to understand that every vote counts. We—collectively, all citizens—should demand to know how the invented central agency called “PMO” became the sole decision-maker and enforcer. PMO has centralized power—reducing Parliament to an anachronistic vestige in which MPs engage in pretend debates whose outcomes have been predetermined by PMO. Restoring fundamental principles of our system of government requires first naming them. Core concepts such as that all MPs are equal and that the prime minister is first among equals; that the prime minister reports to Parliament, not the other way around; and that Parliament controls

the public purse have been hijacked by the trend toward presidentializing the role of prime minister. Canadians need to push the leaders of both large opposition parties to commit to dismantling the PMO as an instrument of total control. We need to restore the fundamentals of Westminster Parliamentary democracy. We need to insist that MPs be restored to our constitutional role—representatives of our constituents—not robotic enforcers of the party “brand.”

The Green Party already walks this talk. Our policies prohibit whipped votes. We demand transparency. That’s why I was the first Member of Parliament to post all my expenses on line. The Green Party already limits the powers of a leader through our by-laws. While other leaders can use the threat of withdrawing their signature on the nomination papers, only a super-majority of Green federal council can do that for Greens. And Bruce Hyer and I work for our constituents. We attempt to determine the will of the majority of our voters. We work to be of service. We believe MPs work for their constituents; not for their political party.

To inject these issues into the campaign, the leaders’ debates are critical. Assuming there is any integrity to the process, I will be participating in 2015. Preston Manning was in the 1993 debates even before he had won a seat after the first Reform MP, Deborah Gray, won in a by-election. So, too, were the Progressive Conservatives in the subsequent election debates with only two MPs—as the Green caucus is now. The Bloc Québécois was included when its leader had won a seat as an independent before the party was officially established.

It is in the interest of democracy that I be at the table to raise these issues and press Justin Trudeau and Thomas Mulcair to commit to addressing the democracy deficit. We need to ensure that the next occupant of the Prime Minister’s Office is committed to rejecting the powers consolidated by Stephen Harper. Our system of government is based on the supremacy of Parliament. We have never before

been controlled by an elected dictator. Sure, Jean Chrétien ran a “Friendly Dictatorship” as Jeffrey Simpson’s book was titled. But never in our history has PMO felt empowered to script parliamentary committees and block amendments—even those designed to fix drafting errors. Never before has legislation been drafted knowing that it will likely fail a Charter challenge. We have never passed laws primarily designed to provide slogans in an election campaign. Never before has a PMO harassed and gagged scientists. Should we have confidence that the NDP and the Liberals reject those reins of power?

This must be the key issue in the next election.

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