



Senior Adviser Gerald Butts and Campaign Co-Chair Katie Telford aboard the campaign plane with Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau. Both played a major role in Trudeau's winning campaign. Adam Scotti photo

# How the Liberals Did It: Building a Surprise Majority

Susan Delacourt

*A frequent refrain after upset electoral victories is that the winner was “underestimated”. In Justin Trudeau’s case, the word hangs like a banner over his famously well-coiffed and, apparently, politically ingenious head. Veteran columnist and author Susan Delacourt explains how the team Trudeau led adeptly built a historic win on October 19 from the ground up, heedless of short-term distractions and undeniably aided by the low expectations of their opponents.*

The heavy wooden front doors of the Langevin Building, shut down for construction throughout Canada’s 42nd election, were finally reopened on October 20, the day after Canadians voted for a massive change in government.

The next day, Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau breezed through those doors on his way to have a chat with Stephen Harper, the man he was replacing as prime minister.

Their conversation was reportedly cordial and helpful. This, however, was a departure for Harper and many others, who have spent the past few years failing to see Trudeau on the doorstep of power. Trudeau may well have taken Harper's job because he was so often underestimated—and no one can say they weren't warned.

"I was an opponent of his dad who was a tough, able guy. The apple, I'm sure, doesn't fall too far from the tree. There's a lot of steel in this," former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney said in an interview with CTV's *Power Play* in the fall of 2012, before Trudeau had even become Liberal leader.

"People should not underestimate him in any way. I think they'll turn out to be disappointed if they do. He's got a lot of the requirements for leadership and who knows if it catches on? If he can do it, it will be a big success story."

We are all familiar by now with the metaphor of the boxing match between Trudeau and Patrick Brazeau in 2012, and how the "lightweight" Liberal was underestimated as a serious fighter. What's remarkable is the way in which the metaphor sunk into the Canadian political class, but never the lessons of it.

New Prime Minister Justin Trudeau didn't sneak through the back door to power. There were many warnings that he had big plans for himself and his party, which all fell into place quite nicely for them on October 19, with a solid, Liberal-red majority governing Canada for the next four years. Now, in the immediate aftermath of the victory, it's worth looking back to see where his opponents might have seen this coming, if they had been watching for the right things.

During his leadership campaign in late 2012 and early 2013, Trudeau's team was criticized for its "no-policy policy." Trudeau, however, made no apolo-

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gies for putting organization over policy pronouncements. "My emphasis right now...is on organization," Trudeau told a crowd at Western University in February 2013. "It is on building the capacity to be relevant in every single riding across the country, folding people back, not just into the Liberal party, but actually into the political process."

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Political process stories are not big-headline makers. But Trudeau and his team were serious about rebuilding the organization from the ground up, from the moment he entered the leadership campaign. While the leader plunged into the crowds who came out to see him, his people were collecting names and contact information to feed into the Liberal database. Largely under the oversight of Trudeau's old friend, Tom Pitfield, the Liberals got very serious about digital organization and the science of building a modern campaign. As the crowds

around Trudeau grew, so too did the database—a perfect marriage between celebrity and cold, hard calculation.

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All of this was the detail work that Liberals were talking about in their famous "hope and hard work" slogan. But it was more than a platitude. Back in the summer, when it looked like the party was tumbling in the opinion polls, Telford and Trudeau's chief adviser, Gerald Butts, remained confident that the New Democrats' high poll numbers were merely up in the air, and not matched with the strength the Liberals had built on the ground. In September, Telford and Butts were quietly assuring people that in the party's close tracking of 200-plus ridings, "the underlying numbers are moving in the right direction."

By then, they were boasting that Liberals had knocked on five million doors—real, on-the-ground contact. Rather than panic, they stayed serene. It turns out Telford and Butts were correct; once again, and it was a mistake to underestimate all the organizational spade work that Liberals had done on the ground.

Liberals were also called delusional, repeatedly, in their aspirations for a majority. No party had ever pulled off a come-

back from third to first. Yet the Trudeau team had their eyes on that prize for more than a year before the Oct. 19 vote.

At a summer caucus meeting in Edmonton in 2014, people laughed when Trudeau and his advisers produced a strategy called the “path through 170”—a detailed plan to build a majority victory in all regions of the country, including Alberta. Critics scoffed that the Liberals would have trouble winning any seats west of the Ontario-Manitoba border. When the results were finally in on Oct. 19, 2015, Liberals held 30 seats in B.C., Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Yukon.

As for a big bulk of those 154 seats east of Manitoba, Conservatives were also sure that Trudeau was making a big strategic mistake by relying on so much help from Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne. Not only was Trudeau borrowing some of her staff for the campaign, but he was also following the blueprint that delivered her surprise victory in 2014—campaigning to the left of the New Democrats.

It was no accident that David Herle, architect of that Wynne victory, was also a key adviser in Trudeau’s camp. And sure enough, much of the narrative of the federal campaign was an echo of the story in Ontario—the Conservatives pushed to the hard right, NDP to the mushy, confusing middle. Harper’s decision to campaign with the Ford brothers in the final week, and Thomas Mulcair’s over-cautious avoidance of deficits in his platform put the Liberals’ rivals exactly where the Trudeau team wanted them.

It’s worth a look at this quote from Herle in a 2014 post-election analysis of Wynne’s campaign victory: “You can design a strategy... but you can never really hope your opponents will play their parts as well as they did,” Herle told *The Globe and Mail*. “We spent a lot of time thinking about how to suck these people into

this trap. We didn’t expect them to walk into it.”

The same could well be said in the aftermath of the 2015 victory for the Trudeau Liberals. Had the Conservatives or New Democrats looked more closely at the lessons from Ontario, they might have seen how it made sense for Trudeau and Wynne to appear as allies in the election. Wynne, like Trudeau, was underestimated too. And the repeat of the Ontario strategy worked again.

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**A**ny examination of the Liberal election victory has to take notice of the advertising war. Many smart people were predicting that Trudeau would be done in by the Conservatives’ “Just Not Ready” ads, especially as the campaign began and the phrase began emerging robotically from voters’ lips. Once again, it looked like another Liberal leader had been felled by the Conservatives’ advertising colossus.

But a funny thing happened along the election trail. First, the Liberals took the risk of repeating the allegation in a rebuttal ad, featuring Trudeau saying, “I’m ready.” The extra-long election campaign not only gave Trudeau a chance to learn and improve his game, notably on the TV debates; it also made voters more

weary of the negative ads.

By the time the end of the election loomed in mid-October, Trudeau and his team staged a massive rally in Brampton, with more than 7,000 people crowded into a stadium, to hear a powerful “better is always possible” speech from the Liberal leader.

That was the moment in which the Liberals truly captured that precious electoral commodity of momentum, with vivid visuals. Clips from the rally were quickly turned into an ad, which had the feel of the famous Molson “I Am Canadian” ad of the 1990s, or, going farther back, Ronald Reagan’s “Morning in America” ad. Liberals had nailed the hard-work part of their slogan by this point in the campaign—this was the picture of hope.

Still, despite the scent of victory around the Liberals on Election Day, pre-vote polls were being cautious. A majority seemed a slight possibility—which quickly turned into a definite probability as the polls closed and early results started to pour in from Quebec, Ontario and the Prairies.

In the end, it was probably fitting that the majority took so many people by surprise the night of October 19. Trudeau had been underestimated—again. And as Mulroney long-ago predicted, it was a “big success story.” **P**

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