

Stuff Happens: From Duffy to the Refugee Crisis, from the Niqab to the Snitch Line

David McLaughlin

Even the most jaded political observer couldn't argue that this campaign wasn't about something. Yes, it was about change, but events that unfolded during the campaign served to reinforce why it was about change. Breaking news that had nothing to do with the government's ballot question began to lead the daily agenda from the Mike Duffy trial onward, and none of it reflected well on Stephen Harper.

The 2015 election campaign will be noted not just for its result—an historic Liberal party turnaround—but its length. The longest campaign since the 19th century was pretzel-like in its twists and turns. From first to third went the NDP, from third to first went the Liberals, while the Conservatives found themselves first, second, or third at various times in the 78-day writ period.

For parties, election campaigns are battles not just for ballots in the voting box; they are battles for the ballot question itself. The party that sets the ballot question—what most voters are voting on—wins. Any election is a challenge to do so, but 2015 posed particular challenges due to its very length and unpredictability. Framing and retaining the ballot question became significantly more difficult as a host of other issues emerged and dominated the campaign coverage.

Did these issues move votes or did they just make noise?

The ballot question framing was visibly on offer on August 2nd, the day the election was called. Prime Minis-

ter Stephen Harper said the election was about “staying the course” with “proven leadership” on the economy and security. NDP Leader Tom Mulcair presented a “safe change” mantra of more spending with fiscal discipline. Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau mounted his “real change” charge, targeting the middle class, running not just against the Conservatives but the NDP.

The strategic assumptions behind each pitch were obvious and sensible. Mr. Harper, running second, had to keep change from dominating the election discourse, so he would run on his record. Mulcair, running first, sought to consolidate his front-runner position by presenting a safe, un-edgy personality and platform to ward off charges that he and his party were risky or reckless. Trudeau, in third, had to supplant the NDP as the agent of change if his party were to position themselves successfully as the best or only alternative to the Harper Conservatives.

Strategy set, messaging ready, the three leaders and parties made ready to convince Canadians. What could go wrong?

“Events, dear boy, events,” former British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan famously said on what he feared most in politics. His spirit must have haunted this Canadian election. Three outside events—the Duffy trial, the Syrian refugee crisis, and the Niqab debate—came to dominate media coverage of the campaign. They threw off-stride two campaigns—the Conservatives and the NDP—and accrued advantage to only one—the Liberals.

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The timing could not have been worse, to have an election in the midst of the political corruption trial of suspended Conservative Senator Mike Duffy. Actually, it must have been seen as worse to have the election after the mid-August trial dates since a shorter election call would have put the trial before the writ, not after. Instead, Harper found himself in the midst of two weeks of front-page stories headlined by testimony of his former chief of staff, Nigel Wright and former legal advisor, Benjamin Perrin.

Despite some exculpatory testimony from Wright that the prime minister never actually said the words “good to go” on providing a \$90,000 payment to keep Duffy whole on Senate residency expenses he improperly claimed, the legal trial rapidly became a political trial for the Conservatives. Each day, Harper was forced to answer media questions on the latest testimony, questions he could have avoided if not on the campaign trail. With no evidence of direct involvement in the matter, Harper dodged that bullet but soon took a ricochet from new testimony entangling his current chief of staff, Ray Novak, who was stated to have been aware of Wright’s personal cheque to Duffy. This was in direct contradiction to Harper’s contention that no one else in his office knew or was involved in the affair. Novak soon disappeared from the leader’s tour and was sent back to campaign headquarters.

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This was a gift to the opposition. It put the party’s ethics and Harper’s governing style back on top of voters’ minds for a time. Although it was summer and a long ways away from voting day, it made a negative impression on Canadians. He may have avoided legal jeopardy with Wright’s testimony, but Harper was now enmeshed in some political jeopardy.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, the image of a drowned Syrian toddler in the Mediterranean surf spawned millions. It also sparked a vigorous debate amongst Canadians between heart and head. Should we open our doors immedi-

ately to more Syrian refugees fleeing war and barbarity on humanitarian grounds or keep our measured intake process to both ensure security against terrorist infiltration while reminding others to do more on their part?

Canadians mostly wanted both done, at the same time. But two interviews—one by the immigration minister, Chris Alexander, seeking to blame the media for the crisis and Canada’s response and the other by an NDP MP who supposedly handled the Syrian family’s immigration file—galvanized a serious policy issue into an explosive political one.

Alexander’s hapless intervention fuelled the political crisis without adequately explaining either what the Conservative government had been doing or whether it planned to do more. Bad enough, but once a Canadian “connection” to the unfortunate family was identified via the NDP giving the mistaken impression that the government had turned away this same family (it had not), the Conservatives were pummelled as heartless.

It turned out that the government was not far off considered public opinion on its response. But its inability to articulate a “heart and head” message that conveyed compassion with comprehension of what was at stake, hobbled them once more. A Nanos Research tracking poll showed Conservative support dipping in the immediate aftermath of events before climbing back up as it solidified its messaging.

In an election about the economy, security, and change, how did values come to the fore? A court case and an inflammatory party ad made the difference.

The Harper government took a position in 2011 stating that a woman wearing a niqab face veil could not take the oath of citizenship. She must show her face first. Challenging that position under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was Zunera Hishaq, winning in court in March, 2015. Her case then exploded on the election

scene when the federal Court of Appeal overturned the federal government mid-campaign.

At the same time, a volatile Bloc Québécois animated TV ad aimed at the NDP showed a blob of oil from a controversial pipeline morphing into a niqab-wearing woman. Quebec commentators and the country as a whole went into a frenzy.

Mulcair was caught in the squeeze. Defending the right of a woman to wear what she wanted, his party began to drop in support first in Quebec, then in the rest of the country. Losing votes in Quebec meant the NDP would drop in contention elsewhere. It was inevitable that it would then have to cede the mantle of change to the Liberals, which in time it did. By the third week of September, the NDP had trended into a close but clear third place according to Nanos Research. It never recovered. On or about September 24, it began its drop from about 30 to 20 per cent on Election Day.

For the Conservatives, the niqab controversy brought them back into contention in Quebec, improving their seat count from five to 12. But it created a backlash and alienation in other parts of the country that took them off their economic message. Two subsequent statements about banning the niqab in the public service and setting up a “barbaric practices tip line” made the Conservatives seem mean and Islamophobic.

Elections are unpredictable things. Stuff happens, as we saw in this one, especially over a 78-day campaign. **P**

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