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From Orange Crush to Orange Crash: The Front-Runner Campaign That Wasn't

L. Ian MacDonald

As many of our readers know, the only thing more painful in politics than losing an election is losing an election that started out as yours to lose. When the federal election was called in August, NDP Leader Tom Mulcair was leading in the polls and seemed to be occupying the electoral sweet spot between disenchantment with Conservative Leader Stephen Harper and doubts about Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau's inexperience. Then, the campaign happened.

On the Sunday after the election call, and three days after the first leaders' debate, NDP senior campaign adviser Brad Lavigne met a friend for brunch at the Café Métropolitain, a favoured hangout of Ottawa's political set.

Sitting in a corner booth by the bar, he stirred his coffee and considered the NDP's front-running status in the polls, which then had the party in the low 30s. The NDP's internal numbers showed the same thing.

"We've never been here before," he said.

Which kind of turned out to be the problem.

Not only had the NDP never been there before, they hadn't expected to be in first place at the outset of the campaign. Nor, as it turned out, did they have a narrative for a 78-day marathon rather than a normal 37-day campaign.

From a nadir of 20 per cent in the polls last fall, the NDP had hoped to grow to the high 20s by the beginning of summer.

Their fortunes began to take a turn for the better over the winter after Tom Mulcair shook up the Office of the Leader of the Opposition, bringing in Alain Gaul, who had been with him in the environment minister's office in Quebec City, to be chief of staff in the OLO. In no time, what had been a dysfunctional OLO became one where decisions were made and things got done.

Mulcair then reached out to two key members of Jack Layton's political entourage to run the NDP campaign. Layton's former chief of staff, Anne McGrath, was brought back as campaign director. And Lavigne, who had been Layton's principal secretary at OLO and previously campaign director in the 2011 Orange Wave election, left his consulting gig at H&K Strategies to become senior adviser in the campaign. Mulcair's announcement of his return, at a Wednesday morning caucus in January, prompted a spontaneous ovation.

By the time of the Broadbent Institute's annual Progress Summit at the end of March, the NDP was on the move. Over drinks at the bar of Ottawa's Delta Centre Hotel, Lavigne and McGrath were very forthcoming about the priorities for the coming campaign.

"The first objective," Lavigne said, "is to hold on to what we've got."

In other words, to finish no worse

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than second in the election, and to hold on to both the OLO and Stornoway. In an expected minority House, this would leave Mulcair and the NDP in the driver's seat in any talks with the Liberals about a working arrangement to defeat a Conservative plurality.

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It was a smart-ass remark about a serious issue—the mission against ISIS in Iraq, later expanded to Syria. The Liberals waffled on both, saying they supported the troops but opposed the mission. In the first parliamentary debate—on the six-month deployment of CF-18s and the presence of 60 elite Joint Task Force “trainers” of Kurdish insurgents in northern Iraq—Trudeau failed to speak in the House. By the time of the second House debate, on expanding the Kuwait-based air mission to Syria and extending it by a year, the Liberals were jammed between Conservative support and NDP opposition.

Then, in the wake of the shooting of two soldiers on Canadian soil last October 20 and 22, the Liberals voted in favour of the Conservative security legislation, Bill C-51, to the great annoyance of progressive voters, who migrated to the NDP. It was

one of Mulcair's finest moments as NDP leader.

And then came the Notley effect. After the surprise election of Rachel Notley and the NDP in Alberta on May 6, the federal NDP had a five-point bump in the polls. The conversation went like this: if the NDP can win in Alberta, they can win anywhere, even Ottawa.

But this proved to be an illusion. Within weeks of the writ on August 2, the Notley effect dissipated and then disappeared, leaving the NDP back in the high 20s, where they had started.

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NDP Leader Tom Mulcair never really found his voice or created a comfort level with voters, who knew Angry Tom, but found Happy Tom inauthentic. NDP Facebook photo.

statement at the Museum of History in Gatineau, with Parliament Hill as a gorgeous backdrop. Then he walked away from the podium without taking any questions, and he looked uncomfortable in doing so. The decision to take no questions was simply an attempt to control the message by staying on it. While Mulcair took no questions, even Stephen Harper was taking five of them in front of Rideau Hall. Later, in Vancouver, Trudeau took as many questions as reporters wanted to ask. Mulcair then took the next day off.

And in the first leaders' debate hosted by *Maclean's*, Angry Tom was replaced by Happy Tom, a weird-looking guy with a smile pasted on his face, even as he was pointing an accusatory finger at his opponents. He looked inauthentic. Even as Trudeau was finding his feet in the first debate as well as four subsequent ones, Mulcair never found his voice.

And then Mulcair pledged to present balanced budgets, while Trudeau outflanked him on the left by promising three years of deficits, including \$10 billion in each of the first two years of a Liberal government, before returning to balance in 2019.

This was Mulcair's decision to present himself as a fiscal moderate. Or as one adviser put it privately at the time: "We're the NDP, we have to balance the budget."

He was referring to bad memories of NDP deficits in Ontario under Bob Rae, in British Columbia under Mike Harcourt, and even the \$6 billion structural deficit Notley inherited from the ousted Progressive Conservatives in Alberta.

Then came the niqab debate.

After the Federal Court of Appeal ruled that a Muslim woman could wear a niqab during a citizenship ceremony, the Conservatives immediately said they would appeal, and overnight the identity issue hijacked the campaign in Quebec.

For Mulcair, the niqab was a disaster in Quebec, while Trudeau turned it to his advantage in the rest of Canada.

In Montreal on September 23, Mulcair delivered a carefully calibrated speech in which he noted that a veiled woman must reveal herself in private to citizenship officials, and is

thus entitled to wear the niqab at a citizenship ceremony.

The NDP numbers then tanked in Quebec outside Montreal. The niqab issue figured prominently in the two French-language leadership debates on September 24 on Radio-Canada and October 2 on TVA.

The NDP had gone into the campaign in first place, polling in the low 30s, with the Liberals mired in third place in the mid-20s. The story of how they traded places is one for the history books.

First of all, the 78-day campaign played to Trudeau's acknowledged strength—his retail game. He was very good in crowds, endlessly posing for selfies that ended up on Facebook and Twitter. The buzz wasn't just in the room, it was also on social media. It wasn't just his stamina that carried through the marathon campaign; by the end of it, he came to personify generational change.

For the Liberals, Trudeau's deficit position was the differentiator from the NDP on change. In the process, he outflanked the NDP on the left, while Mulcair was positioning a socialist party to the right on the fiscal framework. This was right out of the Kathleen Wynne playbook from the 2014 Ontario election, and it was no accident—the campaign was run by the same people.

Trudeau also inoculated himself on the deficit question simply by saying he would run one. Progressive voters—who had left the Liberals for the NDP over issues such as Trudeau's support of the Conservative security legislation, Bill C-51—returned to the Liberal fold. The size didn't matter. A deficit is a deficit. Period.

For his part, Stephen Harper overplayed his hand on the niqab, especially in English-speaking Canada, where voters recoiled at his musing about banning the niqab in the public service. The Conservative overkill included an announcement by two ministers, Chris Alexander and Kel-

lie Leitch, of a snitch line to report “barbaric cultural practices.” It was the precise moment when Red Tories gave up on this Conservative Party and crossed to the Liberals.

Coming in the 10th and penultimate week of the campaign, it seemed like a kind of tipping point against the Conservatives. By then, a campaign that had been to be about the economy, had been transformed into one about values. The economy was the Conservatives’ signature issue, and the announcement of the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade agreement on October 5 should have played to their strength. But while it was Harper’s best and most prime ministerial moment of the campaign, on what the first George Bush famously called “the vision thing”, it proved to be a one-day story rather than a game changer.

Then came the four-day advance poll over Thanksgiving. Some 3.6 million Cana-

dians voted over the long weekend, many of them as couples and families, having talked turkey around the family dinner table. The advance poll turned out to be nearly 20 per cent of the vote. The final turnout of 17.5 million was 68.4 per cent of eligible voters, up from 61 per cent in 2011 and 58 per cent in 2008. It was the highest turnout since 1993.

And it was Quebec, unexpectedly, that joined Ontario to hand Trudeau his surprise majority. No one saw that coming.

In two years, he has taken the Liberals from third place to government, a remarkable achievement.

Polling in the mid-20s in Quebec as late as the final weekend, the Liberals won 35 per cent of the vote and 40 seats on election day, where most seat projections gave them no more than 20 seats. The NDP meanwhile, was reduced to 25 per cent in Quebec

and only 16 seats. The Conservatives won only 17 per cent, but it was an efficient vote, delivering 12 seats in the 418 Quebec City region, while the Bloc Québécois won 19 per cent and 10 seats.

Call it the mirror effect. Quebecers looked across the Ottawa River, saw what was happening in Ontario, and joined them in electing a Liberal majority.

With 184 seats in the new 338-seat House, Trudeau didn’t just win government, he made history. **P**

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