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BQ SURPRISE EARLY RUNNER IN FRAMING THE BALLOT QUESTION

By PAUL ADAMS

[OTTAWA – September 8, 2008] Who would have thought the Bloc Québécois would get first dibs on how the 2008 election is framed? But they have.

A crucial issue in any election is how the ballot question is eventually “framed” by the media, the parties and the public. Any election is about many things to many different people, of course: leadership, ideology, change, health care, local candidates, the economy, farm policy, the environment, abortion, and so on and so on.

However, at some point, many elections resolve themselves into a dominant media narrative, which is shared to a degree by many members of the public. The dominant “frame” in elections of 1984 and 1993 was about change at the top: whether to “throw the bums out”, in other words. 1988 was about free trade, of course, and the 2006 election ended up being largely about government ethics and accountability.

Almost unconsciously, the media seek a simple frame, or narrative, within which they can situate a variety of stories, in part because it makes their job (and the readers’) easier by reducing distractions and keeping the main story clear.

The parties have a vital interest in which frame the media pick up and run with, of course. That is what they call “framing the ballot box question”. But this year, the media have had trouble in the early running figuring out what that dominant frame should be. The question of whether there should be an early election didn’t have legs. Some tried out the idea that this election is about the economy, but that hasn’t stuck either. Briefly, the election seemed as if it was going to be about leadership, just as the Tories would like: contrasting their guy with the Liberals’.

Remarkably, however, the early front-runner for dominant frame has turned out to be: will Harper’s Conservatives win a majority. I say remarkably because the polls have shifted quite quickly. Two weeks ago, they had the Tories and Liberals in a close race; but last week, the Tories suddenly jumped into majority or near-majority territory, while the Liberals slumped. “Battle begins for elusive majority,” was the headline in *The Globe and Mail* the morning after the election call. The lead article in *La Presse*, using a new poll as evidence, suggested the Conservatives are already likely headed to a majority.

Now let's look at the parties and see how this suits each of them:

The Tories: Nope. They fear that, as in the past two elections, voters who believe Harper may be about to form a majority will pull back in fear of his alleged hidden agenda". Harper keeps claiming he expects no more than a minority – damn the polls. The Conservatives would prefer to talk about "leadership" which they think is a winner for them.

The Liberals: No, not them either. They would benefit from an anti-Tory majority backlash, of course, but as an aspiring party of power, it hardly helps them when the media dismisses their party as possible winners, and takes some sort of Tory victory for granted. They'd like the election to be a referendum on Harper's "dark side" – and the environment, of course.

The New Democrats: Jack Layton wants the election to be about a clash of fundamental values. He is talking about becoming prime minister at the end of all this. In reality of course, the New Democrats have their sights on rallying the now-divided left of centre voters to their cause and displacing the Liberals as the alternative party of power. And if that means a Tory majority for a while, that'd probably be OK with them.

The Greens: It's the environment, stupid.

And so we have the Bloc Quebecois: Gilles Duceppe was the only leader yesterday to talk openly about stopping a Tory majority. In fact, he talked so little about sovereignty (one reference), and so much about Afghanistan, social programs and women's issues, he may be in danger of picking up left-leaning votes in Saskatchewan. For the moment, he is setting himself up as Canada's bulwark against a rampant Conservative majority.

Well done, Gilles!

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