

# How elections have changed & for the worse [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

In half a century of observing and reporting elections, I cannot remember one so lacking in big ideas and so degraded by naked attempts to buy votes as this one is. Nor can I remember one launched and dominated by a completely false charge - that the Gomery report on the sponsorship scandal accused the Martin government of corruption. In fact, it cleared the prime minister and his cabinet of any wrongdoing.

George Bush Sr. dismissed big ideas as "the vision thing," and it's true that many of the starry-eyed promises made by politicians never materialize. Take Wilfrid Laurier's vision of Canada owning the 20th century, as just one example. Nevertheless, it is big ideas which lift a campaign beyond a crass bidding war for votes, and engage the voters' better instincts.

Conservative Leader John Diefenbaker, in winning both the 1957 and 1958 campaigns, had a "vision of the North." He proposed to transform Canada by developing the potential of the vast, empty North, and it caught the imagination of southern voters.

By 1963, most of the country had had more than enough of Diefenbaker, an ineffective prime minister, and Liberal Leader Lester Pearson was ready with his own vision, "co-operative federalism." Canadians were just awakening to the Quiet Revolution in Quebec which seemed to threaten the unity of the country, and Pearson, a former diplomat who won the Nobel Peace Prize for persuading the UN to accept the idea of peacekeeping, seemed just the man to work out a new deal with those restless French Canadians, as they were called then.

Pierre Trudeau, in 1968, famously promised a just society, leaving it to the voters to fill in their own hopes. His own interpretation was that it meant promoting equality of opportunity by giving the most help to those who were the most disadvantaged - including French-speaking Canadians. The new tool would be a department of regional expansion, which he created later with indifferent results. But he also warned voters, in a speech not much reported or remembered, to be wary of politicians' promises; even if honestly made, history showed that most governments were soon confronted by unforeseen events, even crises, which became their priority. He advised voters to choose a leader not on the basis of promises but on which candidate, in their estimation, would respond as they would hope to coming events.

Trudeau proved to be a good prophet: While he was promising a just society, the new and puzzling economic phenomenon of "stagflation" - a stagnant economy in which prices continued to rise - was emerging in Canada, and the measures he took raised unemployment, which many people thought was far from just. He barely won the next election.

Looking back, it appears that the age of national politics based on national leaders with big ideas chosen by national conventions was slowly dying. Politics were becoming increasingly regional and driven by special interests. With four parties in the Commons, governments were elected by some 40% of the voters after campaigns crafted by professionals to appeal to a variety of interest groups, developed from focus groups, market tested by pollsters, and sold to voters by TV advertising. The job of the leader was not to think big, but to stick to the message handed to him.

Jean Chretien was not a man of ideas and vision. He managed the country well until, when confronted by the referendum crisis in Quebec in 1995, he panicked. His instinct was not to prevail in the battle of ideas with separatists, but to manage opinion from behind the scenes.

Paul Martin's problem is that he has had too many ideas: National day care, a whole new deal with the aboriginal peoples, pacts with the provinces to reorganize medicare and education, and more, most of which are still on paper. Now he must run on a confused record because he has no big new ideas to offer.

Meanwhile, the Conservative leader, Stephen Harper, offers separate benefits tailored to appeal to every imaginable interest group. He's even promising to pay families with small children \$100 a month; he calls it aid to day care. Martin's father, Paul Sr., called it the family allowance when he invented it as welfare minister 50 years ago, and Mulroney scrapped it because he thought it was an inefficient way to aid the needy. And then there is the negative advertising...

It's a discouraging election, and voters might do well to ignore the promises and support the leader they consider best able to cope with the difficult times ahead. There are always difficult times.

- reprinted from CBC Viewpoint

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