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FP Comment

Peter Foster: Will Orange clash with Green?

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Jack Layton may let carbon policy slide

Monday's election may have been short on issues but it was long on results, mainly a strong affirmation of Stephen Harper's political instincts and economic stewardship. It also leaves Canadian politics looking a bit schizophrenic.

If, as *The Wall Street Journal* suggested, this was “a referendum on limited government,” then limited government won. But does the wildly successful NDP not stand for, if not exactly unlimited, then more and bigger government? In fact, the “Orange Surge” had little or nothing to do with policy. It was all about Jack Layton's charisma — a rare commodity in this campaign — along with the collapse of the Bloc and the implosion of the Liberals. We know what Quebecers were voting against. We're just not sure what they were voting for. Neither, perhaps, were they.



So now it's down to serious business, with both Mr. Harper's vision, and Mr. Layton's strong opposition status, paradoxically confirmed, but it's the majority that counts. The rest is theatre.

Mr. Layton's most difficult immediate job may be to herd all those NDP cool cats that have suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, found themselves called upon to serve in Parliament. Then comes the policy thing.

The NDP's zero-sum, class warfare view that you make the poor richer by making the rich poorer — you comfort the afflicted by afflicting the comfortable — has pretty much run out of steam in a tapped-out, socially medicated, welfare mega-state. Although the party will continue to clamour — pointlessly — for both higher benefits and higher taxes, that leaves them with one major policy issue: the environment in general and catastrophic man-made climate change in particular.

The problem there is that the Conservatives claim — at least for the moment — to agree that climate is a real threat, albeit from strategy rather than conviction, and are committed to major emissions reductions by 2020. Since a big part of that strategy is aimed at the United States, Mr. Harper's majority status is unlikely to persuade him to unleash any skeptical streak. He knows that environmental issues are still dangerous.

The election of Elizabeth May as the single Green party member is less a triumph for her tiny party than a reminder of how minuscule the proportion of the electorate is that supports the radical policies that have come to dominate the policy horizon in recent years. It also confirms why eco radicals have avoided mainstream politics, preferring direct activism.

Since the fall of Communism, the left has decamped en masse to the environment. The new green socialism, like the old variety, is rooted in demonization of capitalism as greedy and short-sighted, only now threatening life on Earth. The scientific support for this claim has always been slim, and is losing weight by the day. Nevertheless, well-funded environmental NGOs have achieved extraordinary power by essentially circumventing the democratic political process and infiltrating themselves directly into policy-making, or bringing the corporate sector to heel by misinformation campaigns.

One of the biggest ENGO campaigns against the Canadian corporate sector — and economic development more generally — is their attack on the oil sands. This has taken the form not merely of wildly exaggerated claims about the development's impact, but campaigns to stop new pipeline systems to carry the oil out of Alberta to the West and Gulf coasts.

ENGOs — despite their own lack of electoral legitimacy — have pulled the faltering mainstream political left in their wake. The NDP has thus promoted bills that would have forced the Harper government to commit economic suicide by meeting the Chrétien Liberals' irresponsible Kyoto commitments. It has proposed a carbon tax that would add somewhere between 5¢ and 10¢ a litre to the price of gasoline. It wants even more subsidies for wind and solar, favours cap and trade, and supports a ban on West coast tanker traffic, which would hold up job-creating oil and gas exports.

Climate policy remains a threat, although it has been wounded by the still-unfolding scandals at the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Mr. Harper's clever climate strategy is to mirror U.S. policy. This is based less on belief in impending catastrophe than in the very valid fear that any country rash enough to cripple its own industrial sector is likely to seek to hobble its trading partners too.

The good news is that support for climate legislation in the United States is collapsing, as it is collapsing among electorates around the world. The bad news, as pointed out in a recent book from the Cato Institute, *Climate Coup*, is that if President Barack Obama wishes to stubbornly pursue cap and tax, and his job-destroying, solar-, wind- and Chevy Volt-driven green industrial strategy, he still has all the power he needs via the Environmental Protection Agency. Mr. Obama thus remains a bigger threat to Canadian jobs than Jack Layton.

Mr. Harper's election is good news for domestic stability and jobs. The faltering of the climate juggernaut is good news for global economic growth. Climate science and policy collapse leaves Mr. Layton with one less issue on which to mount credible opposition. If he is wise, however, he will let the issue die, even if half his platform goes with it. In his post-election speech Monday night, Mr. Layton made no mention of carbon policy. As for the Conservatives, emissions regulation is a part of their platform that they would be all too happy to shed. This is likely to be another area where Mr. Harper's patience pays off.

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