



As the federal election unfolds, people across the country judge the campaign from their own perspectives. With that in mind, the Post convened a panel of experts to offer their occasional assessments

'We have a genuine set of choices'

THE ETHICIST



Moira McQueen, executive director, Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute; Professor of Christian Ethics, St. Michael's Faculty of Theology.

In the election so far, we have heard little about health care, education, foreign policy and other vital areas. Our politicians are ducking their responsibilities here, evidenced by this week's raft of promises. Granted that election time is "vote-buying" time, but is there a structure in place to finance these promises? Elizabeth May has said she will increase the GST to pay for her party's promises; Stéphane Dion's Green Shift needs to be explained further to most of the electorate; and we are yet to hear fully from Harper and Layton on this.

Voters know the state of the economy, yet we collude with the politicians in allowing ourselves to be swayed by their promises, especially if they will bring individual economic benefit. Politicians need to be leaders by challenging us about setting ethical priorities. For example: Is universal daycare truly a universal priority, equal to universal health care? Few politicians will ask that sort of question, but failure to do so inhibits our ability to get to the root of establishing true priorities. Photo-ops in daycares and kitchens only count for so much.

To hear the politicians, the election is all about the family: jobs, health care, rising fuel costs. These areas are important, but we have further ethical responsibilities, and we deserve to know exactly what the four leaders "promise" in these arenas to allow voters to make responsible choices.

THE TALENT SCOUT



Dave Campbell has been the resident choreographer for television's Canadian Idol for six years.

Stephen Harper and Jack Layton both cranked out the tunes on pianos positioned along the campaign trail last week. I guess this crazy music appreciation/self-humanization is not new, and it all started when Bill Clinton picked up that saxophone years ago. And yes, I am relieved that Stephen Harper's father liked Duke Ellington. (According to his Web site.)

What our candidates don't realize is that it's a quick and slippery slide from the election process to the audition process, and it's fraught with danger and uncertainty. Mr. Harper might want to get a little coaching if he's to continue campaigning in this manner ... but wait! Where will he go for help?

As we go to print, neither the Liberals nor Conservatives have even released a cultural policy. It certainly reflects where music, theatre, radio and television fall on the federal priority list. There are of course larger problems that Canada is facing, but if live performance is the new battleground, the irony is too sweet! The Harper government has certainly not distinguished itself as being arts-friendly. In the past two months alone they have managed to cut more than \$50-million in arts spending.

Maybe the plan is to let our struggling under-funded industries starve and die so that politicians can become the new wandering minstrels! Brace yourself! Phone-in voting is right around the corner!

THE IDEALIST



Marc Chalifoux, executive director of The Dominion Institute, a charitable organization dedicated to increasing knowledge of Canadian history.

Young Canadians are profoundly unimpressed by politics as usual. If an election is merely five planes/trains/buses full of staffers and reporters zooming across the country to stage-managed events designed only for TV clips, then they switch off.

What switches them on is a new kind of campaign, one where they participate rather than just watch. Most of this participation isn't through the traditional channels: door-knocking, phone banking, attending rallies.

Look at the protest surrounding Elizabeth May's exclusion from the televised debates. In the first 24 hours following the consortium's decision, more than 10,000 people, including a large number of young Canadians, signed the Green Party's online petition. They made calls, sent e-mails, made noise. I suspect most probably didn't support the Greens or even plan on watching the debates. They were acting against perceived unfairness.

In this election, the parties are finding ways to close the gulf that has grown between them and young voters. Canadian parties are moving online: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr. They are importing innovations developed on U.S. campaigns.

Young people now use the Web to get most of their political information. It's not politics as usual, but isn't that the whole point? After all, only 42.2% of eligible first-time voters cast a ballot in the last federal election.

THE IMAGE GUY



Bart Mindszenty, crisis communicator, partner for The Mindszenty & Roberts Communications; advisor, The Empire Club of Canada.

For an election call that should've been anything but a surprise, Stéphane Dion and his team seemed to limp off the starting block with surprising, anguishing slowness. If that was the strategy, well, it worked.

The Harper team roared ever-on-script, full steam ahead, while the NDP with Layton at the helm evoked a sense of answering some divine destiny. The Green underdog anti-vote-option's leader Elizabeth May, celebrating debate inclusion, in one quick photo of having drinks with friends to toast success, managed to look totally un-leaderlike. If it weren't for her age, one would like to label her a party animal.

The Bloc and its dedicated leader, living in a wishful world of solitude, have to focus on Quebec.

Watching each wannabe PM zip and zap across the country, it's hard not to admire the devilishly disciplined Tory machine. Led by a man who comes across as focused, controlling and determined, garbed in a sweater befitting your average huggable softy.

Meanwhile, the truly cuddly Grit leader's emphatic self-righteous indignations come across more like a limp caricature of ineffective anger.

Despite our ill-disguised efforts to emulate ugly U.S. election tactics, we have a genuine set of ballot box choices. And that alone assures our democracy will always prevail.

Huggable Harper's art flop

THE IMAGE GUY



Bart Mindszenty, crisis communicator, partner with The Mindszenty & Roberts Communications

Seems the higher the elected office sought, the more brutal and hard hitting the contest becomes. Opponents, advocacy groups, media, and disenchanted fellow party members manage to maul candidates with amazing regularity and often-painful impact.

The past days we've heard the outcry from the artistic and cultural communities about Stephen Harper's intent to reduce funding for their professions and passions. Despite the sweater to make him look like a huggable softy, our experience to date does not include many concrete examples of his commitment to Canadian arts and letters and other allegedly "soft" expenditures. So not only is it natural for the creative community to sound alarm bells, but their protestations will resonate with more voters precisely because the guy in the sweater may indeed execute the expressed intent.

Meanwhile, as the NDP and Liberals disavow any possible collaboration (at least for now), Stéphane Dion has an unenviable challenge. Given the national shift to fear of economic chaos in Canada, he must stay true as possible to his huge environmental/carbon tax commitment while shifting to get respect for economic insight and prowess.

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THE TALENT SCOUT



Dave Campbell has been the resident choreographer for TV show *Canadian Idol* for six years

As the talent scout, I see quiet times ahead as our real talent may soon have to leave the country to find work, and we certainly won't be producing much of interest here.

Mr. Harper seems convinced artists are an elite bunch sitting around at galas, waiting for their grant cheque to arrive. In my 23 years working in Canada, I been to very few galas, and I've never received a grant. The arts and culture sector of our economy is not a bunch of bohemian welfare cases as it is being portrayed. It is a huge population of dedicated professionals who bring a Canadian perspective through whatever media they may consume including TV, radio, books, newspapers, or film.

THE IDEALIST



Marc Chalifoux is executive director of The Dominion Institute

Transforming young Canadians into engaged voters requires creative thinking. So here are two cheers to more vibrant democracy!

The first goes to the NDP, who launched The Orange Room (www.orangeroom.ca), arguably the most advanced Web portal of any Canadian political party. Hopefully, other parties will follow suit, as their online efforts have so far been too timid and frugal. The second goes to Culture en péril, a five-minute video featuring Québec artists released this week on YouTube. While the clip itself is not perfect, its message about the importance of funding for the arts has captured the public imagination more than any party photo-op or TV ad.

THE ETHICIST



Moira McQueen is executive director of the Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute

This week, Stephen Harper promises to "get tough on crime," threatening to incarcerate teenagers convicted of serious crime practically for life. He's doffed his gentle blue cardigan, and the gloves are on. This kind of "hard" approach to crime usually comes from south of the border. It may win votes, but he has to show us the evidence that his approach works. Despite revealing that redneck tendency, the Conservative leader continues to pursue different sectors of society to win their votes. Clearly, he is the pace setter, while the others just react. True, Stéphane Dion made some welcome promises this week to remedy our cities' crumbling infrastructure, as well as regarding housing, health care and help for aboriginals, together with a detailed financial plan. He vowed that not only will the Green Shift be revenue neutral, but that, under the Liberals, Canada would never be in deficit. Considering the potential impact in Canada of the financial crises in the United States, this seems rash and imprudent. This week saw Elizabeth May at pyjama parties on her cross-Canada train trip. More environmentally friendly, but also taking longer to engage with the public. While politically unwise, at least she is taking an ethical stance in practising what she preaches in how she travels.

Magic or deception?

THE ETHICIST



Moira McQueen, executive director of the Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute

This week words like "bloodbath" have been tossed around because of the U.S. economic disasters. Despite initially taking the tack that Canada's economy is as safe as houses (!), Stephen Harper has begun to focus on the economy, and is not as blithe about the broader financial picture as before.

During the English-language TV debate, the other leaders constantly berated Harper for not caring about the economy, despite his protests that Canada is coping fairly well. Not that the others could crow: The downturn makes their shopping list of promises unrealistic.

Harper has been the most ethically responsible in his economic platform, apart from his phony "anti-elitist" stance, which has cost him dearly in Quebec. The turbulent economic situation means that all the leaders now have a duty to reassure voters they have a solid financial plan.

If Stéphane Dion continues to propose a carbon tax, that will surely be political suicide, even though his is potentially the most ethically based path to environmental progress.

Elizabeth May used the word "lie" in the French-language debate on Wednesday night in challenging Harper's policies. He refused to react to what he called "personal attacks." It is more than personal, though. Political platforms, policies and promises are in the public realm, and all those who make them should be accountable.

Danny Williams' complaint in his ABC campaign has justification: The Newfoundland Premier has an ethical and, of course, political point. A promise is a promise. Politicians may not always be able to implement them, but they must mean what they say, or have a reasonable explanation or defaulting. Otherwise, not only the young will wonder why vote.

As the election enters its final week, the Post's panel of experts assesses the campaign from their own perspectives

THE TALENT SCOUT



Dave Campbell, choreographer, Canadian Idol

My first job out of theatre school was "magician's assistant," so I appreciate the "sleight of hand" of the Harper campaign. Illusion depends on speed, distraction, glamour! Perhaps a name like "Harper the Magnificent." Instead, the highly uninspiring "we're better off with Harper." At least the handle "Team Dion" has panache, and Dion himself is smart enough to let professionals be his opening act.

Jack Layton's got great stage presence, and since he doesn't have to worry about ever living up to a single campaign promise.... But back to the magic act! How could we possibly be "better off with Harper" when he has managed to wipe out the entire Liberal surplus he inherited? What fabulous audacity!

I can't however accept that a man so arrogant does anything by accident. I have to assume that he set up the arts community to look like needy bad guys (votes he never could have won), then, he set them up against those feeling tough times. (recently unemployed GM workers perhaps) where there was at least a slim chance of his copping a vote or two.

If he pulls a majority out of a hat, then I will mourn, but will have no choice but to applaud the skill.

THE IDEALIST



Marc Chalfoux, executive director, The Dominion Institute

It's common in Ottawa to see politicians from opposing parties having a laugh together over dinner or drinks. Yet the public rarely get a glimpse of these friendly truces. That's why the most memorable part of this week's debates, in my view, wasn't a knock-out punch but a pat on the back.

During the French debate, a clever voter asked the leaders to name one good thing about the opponent seated on their left. Here's what was learned: Harper liked working with Layton, who applauded Dion's honesty, who noted Duceppe's sincerity, who lauded May's commitment to the environment, who acknowledged Harper's love of his family. The smiles felt almost genuine, even if they all managed to slip in a subtle jab.

The media love to focus on politicians going negative. It makes for better sound bites. But defining one's opponents in the eyes of the electorate is only half of a campaigner's job. Going negative is never the whole script, so it shouldn't be the whole story.

Wednesday's question also gave party leaders a chance to remind voters that they are opponents, not enemies. In a democracy, that distinction is vitally important. While they may not share the same views, they do share a commitment to public service.

THE IMAGE GUY



Bart Mindszenty, crisis communicator, partner The Mindszenty & Roberts Communications

Watching the English spectacle of our four erstwhile self-proclaimed protagonists in pursuit of power circle and nip and bite and claw and slash at the self-proclaimed huggable claimant to the office of Prime Minister is rather like watching wolves circling a fox disguised as a sacrificial lamb.

One almost feels some sympathy for Stephen Harper. Almost. He jiggles and joggles and skirts around some solid questions while pouncing on other ever-moving openings that offer him a quick one-two jab. Only thing that really is troublesome: his face and tonality — both pretty devoid of intensity and emotion. Likewise, his eyes spend more time latching onto the moderator and sweeping a space on the table than looking his opponents in the eye, or even very often the camera.

Elizabeth May is feisty and uses good hand and head gestures to underscore her points, while Gilles Duceppe's messages are magnified by his wide-eyed glare. Jack Layton is on his game: His eye contact, head movements, hand gestures, vocal modulations all help show him as seemingly caring, intense and incredulous of Harper mostly and Stéphane Dion sometimes. But it feels overdone.

Perhaps Dion knows this is a make-it-or-break-it 120 minutes for his party and his political future. So he works his accusations with a cautious effort to enunciate clearly, displays his best efforts at anger, and looks as sincere as he's ever looked. But bless his intelligent and caring heart ... Dion simply isn't gifted with the charismatic political magic touch.

Neither is Harper, but his edge is the totally cold, unemotional, lofty aloofness worthy of a leader in troubled times who has a vision that at least he likes a lot.