

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Harper, Trudeau came out front

Like many Canadians obviously in need of finding a real life, I spent a good part of one evening last week watching the first of an as-yet-to-be-determined number of debates among the political leaders.

Having been involved in such debates for longer than I care to remember, my expectations of a major difference being made in the current campaign were justifiably low.

Once in a while a debate makes a huge difference. The Brian Mulroney-John Turner exchange over patronage appointments, for example, vaulted Mulroney well ahead of the Liberal leader and played a major role in his romp to a majority government.

And going way back to Richard Nixon versus John Kennedy, there is no doubt that Nixon's unsettling habit of darting his eyes this way and that contributed to a widespread feeling of unease and helped Kennedy come from behind to squeak out a victory. (Buying Democratic votes in Chicago with the help of the mob also contributed, but that's for another day.)

Anyway, there they were at the debate sponsored by Maclean's Magazine (and ably moderated by columnist Paul Wells): Prime Minister Stephen Harper, NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair, Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau and Green Party Leader Elizabeth May. Before getting into the performance of the main combatants, May's appearance as a ?national? leader on the debate panel annoyed me considerably. Surely a politician should have to earn a spot to make it onto the big stage. Nothing personal about May ? who can say anything she wants in the full knowledge she won't have to act on it ? but a ?national? party with two seats ? one of which was gained by an NDP turncoat ? doesn't deserve a place on the podium. Period.

Another observation: in a pre-debate panel discussion (yes, I know, I really am a political junkie) ? former Liberal leader Bob Rae (and one-time Ontario NDP premier) consistently referred to Trudeau as ?Justin.? So what's the problem, you ask? Well, I don't have any problem with it, other than to point out that in the week leading up to the debate countless stories and commentaries appeared in the mainstream press aimed at Harper for daring to call Trudeau ?Justin.? Apparently if a Liberal does it, it's fine. But if a Tory does, it's showing a lack of respect, don't you know?

While we're on the subject of young Justin, let me just paraphrase one Tory insider who suggested that all Trudeau had to do was show up with his pants on and the media would consider it a success. That is because expectations were extraordinarily low, mainly because he has suffered so often the last couple of years from political foot-in-mouth disease.

This turned out to be a significant factor in the subsequent media coverage of the debate. That's because Trudeau actually handled himself rather well. He didn't score any knockout punches ? but neither did anybody else ? but he sure did a better job than Mulcair who, because of his strong performances in the Commons, was expected to emerge the clear winner of the debate. He didn't.

Most commentators ? and public opinion polls ? figured that it was close between Trudeau and Harper ? some chose Harper, others Trudeau ? for best performance of the evening.

As for Harper, well, he managed to keep his cool and act very prime ministerial despite the fact that for most of the evening it was three against one. While the three others kept insisting that the Canadian economy is a disaster, Harper kept trotting out actual facts to show that while yes, there are problems ? mainly in the oil industry ? our economy is actually out-performing pretty well all the developed countries in the world. That's not something that Harper-haters want to hear, but it's true. And, as a former baseball manager Casey Stengel loved to quip, ?You can look it up.?

And now Mulcair. One of the problems that has plagued him over his many years in politics (some of them as a Liberal in Quebec, by the way) is that he always seemed to be outraged about everything. This debate was particularly important to him because it was an English-language debate. He is certainly a known quantity in Quebec, but in the rest of Canada, not so much.

Clearly his advisors convinced him before the debate that he should put a harness on the anger and appear more reasonable than he is. Not bad advice, really. Except, alas, he overdid it. He came off even debating serious topics as somebody flashing a phony, pasted-on smile. It didn't work for him. If anybody lost ground in the debate it was Mulcair.

But, with more debates coming, and another 10 weeks of campaigning, the fact is, it's far too early to draw any firm conclusions about anything.

