

Liberal Minority 1972-74: Lessons Learned

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The 1972 near defeat of Pierre Trudeau was a surprise to all, not least to the Prime Minister, who hitherto had only experienced victory in his Mount Royal seat in 1965, the Leadership Convention in April 1968, and the election-coronation in the heady days of Trudeaumania in June 1968. But the government's popularity had begun to slip in 1971 as the new phenomenon of stagflation eroded the economy and the Prime Minister's personal popularity slipped as a consequence with many Canadians seeing him as aloof to their daily concerns especially over unemployment, even as they gave him high marks for his leadership ability. Yet despite these omens the government went into the fall 1972 campaign seemingly unperturbed as Cabinet continued to meet regularly on Wednesday, the two co-chairpersons of the campaign were both ministers (who, finding that their own seats were in danger, departed mid-campaign for home leaving no one really in charge of the campaign), the platform consisted of pledges to continue government policies (so, in effect, no platform at all), and the theme of the campaign was "A Dialogue with Canadians" reinforcing the image of an out-of-touch government interested in debating but not doing while the advertising centered on "The Land is Strong" slogan. All this at a time when unemployment had jumped to 7 percent, inflation was increasing and worry, not optimism, was the prevailing mood. This perfect storm of government complacency amidst rising anxiety produced a shocking result on October 30, 1972. From the heights of Trudeaumania in 1968, when the Liberal party won 155 seats, on October 30, 1972, total Liberal seats fell to 109, with the popular vote also declining 7 percent from 45.5 to 38.5 percent. Only Quebec held, with 56 seats and nearly 49 percent of the vote. In English-speaking Canada the Conservatives had a plurality of the vote in every province and increased their seats from 72 in 1968 to 107 only four years later. Indeed on election night the two main parties were tied in seats with recounts the next day seeing one Conservative seat going Liberal and another to the NDP making the final count Liberal 109, Conservatives 107, NDP 31, Creditiste 15 and Independents 2. In one seat in Ontario the Conservatives had led by a 100 on election night but on the recount Liberal Norm Cafik won by 4 votes (and the Conservatives did not even bother to send a scrutineer!). Just four votes gave Pierre Trudeau a chance to redeem himself and his government. He did so by making the following changes:

1] A realistic assessment of what had gone wrong.

Trudeau quite simply transformed himself and his government by avoiding self-delusion. He told an audience in Saskatchewan in December of 1972 that "We got an awful shellacking from the Canadian people" and made a series of changes to reflect that fact. He consulted widely on what had gone wrong -- with Caucus, Ministers, and a host of private meetings with influential party members. He changed his public image from that of the rational philosopher king to an engaged leader fighting for his job and beliefs by initially appearing contrite for the mistakes made so that Canadians could see that he realized voters had sent him a message. This was the theme for the first six months of the minority government. Then he showed them that he wanted to continue as Prime Minister by getting down in the electoral and Parliamentary pit and taking on all contenders. On election night October 30 I was in the riding of York Simcoe with my friend John Roberts, who had just been defeated as a MP, as Mr. Trudeau came on television. I think many of the Liberals in the room wondered if he would stay on to fight or simply walk away, so ingrained was the image of the man of detached reason. To show that he was committed to a major change in approach he made significant changes to his personal staff and to the Cabinet, in

general responding to the demand for more experienced and politically-astute advisors and Ministers. By mid-1973 polls showed that a majority of Canadians believed Trudeau had changed his personality so the strategy of redefining his image to correct the damaging assessment evident in the 1972 campaign had been successful.

2] The Primacy of House Management.

With only a two seat plurality over the Conservatives, management of the House, Caucus and the Cabinet became the overriding priority. The key figure in addressing this need was Allan J. MacEachen who had already experienced four minority governments: two while in Opposition during John Diefenbaker's tenure as PM and two under Lester Pearson as PM. As House Leader, MacEachen became the most important member of Cabinet next to the Finance Minister John Turner. The House Leader, Whip and Chairs of Parliamentary Committees are crucial appointments. In a minority Parliament information flow and daily deal-making decide both the fate of legislation and the continued existence of the government itself. MacEachen was given a wide mandate to negotiate with the leadership of the NDP and his assessment of the situation in the House had a major impact on the content and scheduling of government legislation. MacEachen's first priority was to ensure that the government existed for at least a year to preclude the possibility that the Governor General might call on the Conservatives to form a government if the Liberals were defeated in the House. After a year the convention was that, if his government was defeated, the Prime Minister could advise the Governor General to hold an election instead. Conversely the Conservatives were keen to defeat the government as soon as they could. To implement this strategy MacEachen began the new session of the House with an announcement that government defeats on routine bills would not be considered "matters of non-confidence". The January 1973 Speech from the Throne contained many commitments favoured by the NDP, including a the Foreign Investment Review Agency, commitments on old age pensions and family allowances, and an Election Expenses bill. MacEachen had many private meetings with David Lewis, leader of the NDP, to determine the NDP's bottom line and almost daily meetings with Stanley Knowles, the NDP House Leader, to assess the mood of the NDP caucus. The NDP caucus, in fact frequently debated how long the party could afford to support the Trudeau Liberals with Western NDP members anxious for an election but Ontario NDP members much more cautious.

And it was not only the NDP who received attention in 72-74. The main plank in the 1972 Conservative platform was a promise to index the tax system so that governments would not receive an automatic increase in revenues as individual incomes rose because of inflation. In February 1973 John Turner incorporated this idea in his budget holus bolus: this is one of the most significant outcomes of the 72-74 period as previously governments had always received a windfall as people moved into different brackets because of inflation. Future efforts to balance the budget were constrained by Liberal adoption of this Conservative idea. In addition, as MacEachen negotiated with the NDP so too did John Turner negotiate with the Conservatives. Turner had promised corporate tax cuts but this was anathema to the NDP. So Turner received a commitment from the Conservatives to support at least this measure in the Liberal program. On a case by case basis the Liberal government tested the waters and negotiated the substance of every bill. On legislation to limit election spending committees were given wide leeway to improve the bill.

MacEachen and Turner used carrots to entice the opposition parties but hardball was not entirely forgotten. The Liberals introduced a motion to reaffirm language policy knowing this would divide the Conservatives (16 Conservatives voted against), once again hurting that party's chances in Quebec. To keep his own side animated and to better understand concerns the Prime Minister now frequently

invited Ministers and Members to dine with him at 24 Sussex, a rare occurrence in the first government, and Joyce Fairburn, a Senior Member of the PMO staff, had the informal mandate to keep the PM informed about birthdays, anniversaries, and objectives and problems of caucus members. Joyce was a one person internal radar line warning the leader on caucus problems and priorities. With all these tactics and appropriate personnel in play MacEachen achieved the goal of sailing the Trudeau government through its first year when it didn't want an election. Then, by the spring of 1974 when the Prime Minister's popularity was up, MacEachen, Turner and Trudeau met to devise a budget that the party could run on but which the NDP could no longer support. With the same care they had applied in meeting NDP needs in the budget of February 1973, they now put in some NDP poison pills in the Budget of May 1974. The House defeated the budget and the Liberal party got the election date of its choosing.

3] Attention to the Liberal Party, Using All the Talents

Changes on the election readiness front for the Liberal party were as dramatic as the Prime Minister's change to gunslinger from philosopher king. The Leader appointed Keith Davey to be Campaign Chair thereby ensuring an energetic, experienced hands-on-Chair fully in charge. No more dialogues with the electorate! Davey in turn brought in Martin Goldfarb as pollster and reorganized advertising to come under a new body, Red Leaf, which brought together the best talent from several agencies rather than relying upon one firm as in the past. Now when the PM travelled he would meet in every community with Liberal party activists as part of the daily itinerary. Local party members and community leaders, who had not been called on in years, now received an invitation to lunch or coffee with the Prime Minister. Trudeau also wrote a personal letter to every local riding president asking for ideas and reports on fundraising, party recruitment etc. Presidents who did not reply received a follow up letter to show the PM was serious. Mr. Trudeau even began to regularly attend Executive board meetings of the provincial parties especially in Ontario. And Young Liberals, and provincial party executives, as well as the National Executive were often invited to 24 Sussex for lunch or dinner thereby giving party members access to the Leader unknown in the pre-1972 era. Enhanced duties for regional political ministers also ensued. The regional political Minister was a point of contact for party members and regional interests to have their case made in Ottawa. Political Ministers were now given responsibility for visiting assigned ridings on a regular basis with reports made to the leader. This was another way to open up communication with influential party and activists who had felt excluded in the 68-72 period. Full time organizers were hired to work in swing ridings too. The government also formed a 15-member communications committee made up of senior officials of the National Liberal Office, the Campaign Chairs, and Cabinet and caucus members with expertise in media to advise the Prime Minister and Ministers on how best to communicate policy, especially with regional nuances.

4] The Regional Dimension.

In 1972 the Liberal party won only four seats in BC, none in Alberta, one in Saskatchewan and two in Manitoba. A significant gesture had to be made to the West to show that this region would not be forgotten despite the paucity of seats. The Trudeau government responded in an innovative way though the eventual policy results were meagre. The Prime Minister and many members of the Cabinet met with the Premiers of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba in July 1973 in Calgary to discuss western diversification at the Western Economic Opportunities Conference (WEOC). Never before had the Federal government called a meeting with a subset of Premiers. Cooperation among the

Premiers in preparing for the meeting went so well that it led to the annual Western Premiers conference and the meeting itself was symbolic that a New West had arrived on the scene with the dynamic Conservative Premier of Alberta, Peter Lougheed, the centre of much attention. Hopes for continuing cooperation, however were soon dashed with the October 1973 OPEC crisis which saw a doubling in the price of oil resulting in difficult negotiations and tensions with Alberta. Energy disputes rather than federal-provincial cooperation became the order of the day. But the WEOC idea was a bold one and ever since there have been calls for a WEOC Two as well as similar WEOC-like conferences for Atlantic Canada and the North.

In 1974 Pierre Trudeau completed his political comeback, as remarkable in its own way as his decline had been spectacular in 1972. He won a majority government with 141 seats with a total vote of 43.2 percent just below his winning percentage in 1968. This time he won eight seats in British Columbia and three in Saskatchewan, although the Liberals were again shut out again in Alberta. Trudeau, in the minority Parliament of 1972-74, had demonstrated that he could play the game of politics with the best of them by transforming his image, his office, his government and his approach to The Liberal Party. When chided about dropping his originality as a philosopher king by becoming a more conventional politician in his second government he replied: "You know, if I wanted to be right rather than prime minister I would have stayed in university".