

PICKING THROUGH THE DEBRIS



Election 2000

James Allan Evans

It was a strange campaign. The Liberals may have stolen the Alliance's programme but at least they gave them one in return: two-tier health care, an attack on immigration, and a national referendum to make abortion illegal. The Alliance were clearly outmanoeuvred, but the lesson they should take from the experience is that they have to smooth off their rough edges and make some sort of arrangement with the Tories. Until then, the Liberal machine rules over all, restrained by hardly any checks or balances.

Étrange campagne que celle de l'automne 2000. Les libéraux ont peut-être volé à l'Alliance son programme, mais le moins que l'on puisse dire est qu'ils lui en ont fourni un en retour : système de santé à deux vitesses, opposition à l'immigration, référendum pancanadien visant à rendre illégal l'avortement. De toute évidence, l'Alliance a été prise de court. De cette expérience, elle devrait conclure à la nécessité d'arrondir les angles de son programme et de négocier une entente quelconque avec les conservateurs. D'ici là, la machine libérale dominera la scène, sans véritable contrôle ni contre-pouvoir.

I spent the evening of 26 November, 2000, the day before the federal election, on the *Queen of Nanaimo*, returning from her mainland terminal south of Vancouver at Tsawassen to Mayne Island. The ferry was less than a quarter full. The passengers were veteran customers for the most part and braved the cafeteria cuisine only when the pangs of hunger grew uncompromising.

An Ekos poll published in the *Toronto Star* the day before had predicted a Liberal majority—with remarkable accuracy, as it turned out—and when I recognized, at a nearby table, a seasoned commuter on the ferry, Senator Pat Carney, who lives on Saturna Island, I was tempted to approach her and request a forecast. But the vibrations my antennae sensed indicated that she was in an apolitical mood. So, instead, I picked up a copy of *The Barnacle*, a give-away weekly from Salt Spring Island.

This riding, Saanich-Gulf Islands, is Tommy Douglas' old constituency, but the NDP has fallen on hard times in British Columbia, mostly because of disrepute rubbing off on it from the provincial NDP government, which was led by the incompetent Glen Clark. His rule ended last year when his Attorney-General, Ujjal Dosanjh, revealed that the RCMP were investigating the Premier's role in a casino licensing

scandal, thereby forcing him out as premier and opening the way for ... well, himself to take over. Mr. Dosanjh, whose politics are closer to the federal Liberals' than to the NDP's, enjoyed a brief honeymoon with the voters, but that was already a thing of the past by election day, and none of his short-lived popularity rubbed off on the NDP.

The contest in Saanich-Gulf Islands was between the incumbent Canadian Alliance M. P., Gary Lunn, and his Liberal rival, Karen Knott. For the record there were also a Conservative candidate, a Natural Law hopeful and an amiable Green party nominee named Wally DuTemple, whom I had met earlier at the annual Mayne Island Fall Crafts Fair, where he was cheerfully spreading the Green gospel to a sympathetic audience of potters, artists and weavers. There was also a candidate who stood for nothing in particular.

The Barnacle reported an all-candidates meeting on Salt Spring Island. The Natural Law candidate promised that her party would "launch 10,000 yogic flyers" if elected. Perhaps equally plausibly, the NDP nominee promised reformed health care. Gary Lunn pledged tax cuts, and \$6 billion a year towards paying down the national debt. The Liberal candidate trumped him with even larger tax cuts and also asserted that she objected to the Canadian Alliance's plan to

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close the door on immigration—an objection made remarkable by the fact that the Alliance had no plan to close the door on immigration.

Was there ever a more curious campaign than last November's? The Canadian Alliance had an untried leader and an inchoate set of political ideas, and as the campaign wore on, it was clear that, so far as the Alliance members themselves knew, their platform differed very little from the Liberals'. Tax cuts? The Chrétien government would cut them sooner than the Alliance. Pay down the national debt? The Liberals would do that, too. Restore the federal budget cuts to health care? The Liberals had already done that. The Alliance's fiscal evangelists made their biggest convert before the election was called, the Liberal Finance Minister. Paul Martin's so-called "mini-budget," unveiled in the House in the dying days of the government, was mostly Canadian Alliance orthodoxy.

Having appropriated all of the Alliance platform that would sell, Jean Chrétien exercised a power which prime ministers have usurped from the Governor-General and dissolved Parliament. Stockwell Day who had won the Alliance leadership only on July 8th, and been an MP in Ottawa for just a month, found himself in an election, facing one of the most skilful politicians Canada has ever produced. We must go back to Sir John A. Macdonald himself before we encounter the like of Chrétien.

But the Liberals were square traders in one way. They may have appropriated the parts of Stockwell Day's platform with the most voter appeal, but they were happy to provide him with a substitute. The Alliance might not relish the platform it was assigned, but the Liberal *politburo* ignored any protest. The Liberals said the Alliance wanted a two-tier, American-style health care system. Day insisted he did not, but the Liberals knew better. Day was for referendums on questions proposed by an unspecified percentage of the electorate, which in the Liberals' interpretation, meant a referendum on abortion. And, as mentioned, the Liberal candidate for Saanich-Gulf Islands informed us that the Canadian Alliance would choke off immigration. The proof of all this was to be found in a secret Alliance agenda which the Liberals had divined by a special Liberal voodoo.

The Liberal offensive eventually even broadened into a wholesale onslaught on Stockwell Day's religion. The Pentecostal Church is growing fast in Canada but it is not one of the easeful

Christian denominations. Hedy Fry, Secretary of State for Multiculturalism went so far as to charge, a week and a half before the vote, that Stockwell Day's belief that "Jesus Christ is the Lord of the whole universe" was an insult to all Moslems, Sikhs, Buddhists, etc. When Roman Catholic and Muslim leaders in British Columbia joined the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada to protest, Ms. Fry indicated that Day planned to force his religion on all Canadians. This imminent peril of forced conversion to the Pentecostal Church evidently was what had required her to speak out!

I listened, aghast, to Ms. Fry's outburst of bigotry on CBC television, and I was even more astonished when she walked out on Jason Moscovitz as he pointed out that she was violating Canadian political custom by traducing a candidate's personal religious beliefs. I spent the next half hour trying to translate the libretto of Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus* into something that met the standards of Ms. Fry's political correctness. "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" could become "[Bleep] of [bleep] and [bleep] of [bleep]." But what of the last syllable of *Hallelujah*? The Hebrew "Yahweh" is the same deity that Welsh Methodists invoke in the hymn "Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah," and thus "Jah" could claim bicultural status. But better be safe. "Hallelu[bleep]" it is.

Of all the unseemly aspects of the election, the Liberal effort to smear Mr. Day for his religious beliefs was the most disturbing. The Liberals mined a vein of intolerance that runs through any multicultural society, but in recent decades has been left buried by Canadian politicians. But the Liberals clearly sensed, deep in the Canadian psyche, a potentially useful antagonism between Catholic and Protestant, between the comfortable pew and the evangelical churches, between Christians and Jews—indeed, among all religionists, whether Sikhs, Moslems, Buddhists, Jews or Christians. And they used it relentlessly. Elinor Caplan, speaking in a Toronto riding with a large number of Jewish voters, accused the Alliance of being a party of Holocaust deniers, forgetting for the moment that Canada's foremost Holocaust denier, Ernst Zundel, had been a Liberal, and had, in fact, run for the leadership of the party when Jean Chrétien was still a young politician.

For any Canadian who imagines that Canada is the "Peaceable Kingdom," a gentler, more tolerant brand of North American society than our southern neighbour, the differing treatment of religion in the two countries' recent election campaigns is humbling, if not humiliating. Though

Sen. Joseph Lieberman, Al Gore's vice-presidential candidate, refrained from campaigning on the Jewish Sabbath no one ridiculed him. But Stockwell Day encountered no such forbearance when he respected the Pentecostal Sunday; quite the contrary, here that sort of thing was taken as evidence of his intolerant extremism. For Torontonians with ancestral memories of the Toronto Sundays of a half century ago, there were perhaps some grounds for apprehension. But hardly for Hedy Fry.

And abortion? Last spring Tom Long warned the Canadian Alliance that the party could founder on the question of abortion. So Mr. Day came to the campaign without any official Alliance position on the question. But the Liberals immediately assigned him one. The Alliance secret agenda, the Liberal line claimed, would put abortion back into the *Criminal Code* by referendum. Mr. Day was caught in a cleft stick. The Alliance had inherited its referendum policy from the old Reform Party of Preston Manning, and the new leader could hardly declare specified topics off limits without damaging the populist image of his party. But neither could he explain how referendums would work. Canada has had them before: a national one on conscription in World War II and two Quebec referendums on sovereignty. None of these produced a result that satisfied the protagonists. But the Alliance referendum policy is an unfinished plank in its platform.

The idea is not inherently bad; in fact, it resurrects the basic concept of classical Athenian democracy, which put every bill before a popular assembly. Every bill began with the preamble "It seems good to the Athenian citizens [that such-and-such be done]." Law-making by referendum is a populist notion that divides Canadian government from its counterpart in the United States, whose founders harked back to classical ideas of democracy. But under the Canadian parliamentary system, law-making is a prerogative of Parliament and a referendum result would not automatically become law until Parliament passed legislation to implement it.

In any case, a referendum on whether abortion should be a crime in Canada would probably lose, and, following longstanding Canadian tradition, the losers would not accept defeat.

Shortly before the election, an op-ed article in the *Victoria Times-Colonist* by Dr. Eike-Henner W. Kluge of the University of Victoria added some historical perspective to the abortion question. Dr.

Kluge, who teaches biomedical ethics, was director of ethics and legal affairs for the Canadian Medical Association in 1990, when the Mulroney government introduced Bill C-43 to put abortion back into the *Criminal Code* after the Supreme Court's *Morgentaler* decision had struck down the law that criminalized it. The Conservatives (including Joe Clark), the Liberals (including Jean Chrétien), and the NDP all supported Bill C-43, and all three parties gave every appearance of being incensed when it failed to pass the Senate. Nevertheless they have let that failure stand.

The senators apparently had read the submission of the Canadian Medical Association on abortion with close attention—it had argued that doctors didn't want to decide what was permissible and what was outlawed—and had roused themselves sufficiently to produce a tied vote. Tied votes fail. Unlike Messrs. Chrétien and Clark, Stockwell Day has no history on abortion. During his years in the Alberta government, he made no attempt to restrict funding for it, whatever his personal beliefs were. Dr. Kluge wrote not as an Alliance supporter but as an ethicist who gagged on the hypocrisy of Canadian politicians.

I watched the debate of the political leaders with amused detachment. There was Gilles Duceppe, a terrier, attacking, pausing to present the case for separatism, and then returning to the attack. There was Joe Clark, the Hamlet of Canadian politics, who has mastered the creative use of his jowls for transforming banal remarks into profound sentiments. And there was Stockwell Day, fresh-faced, addressing Chrétien as "sir," like an eager schoolboy putting his case to a cynical old headmaster. And there was the master politician himself, a stoney-faced veteran, impervious to assaults, sticking to his script, unmoved by any protest from the tyro heading Her Majesty's Opposition.

In a desperate attempt to repudiate the health care platform which the Liberal politburo had assigned him, Stockwell Day waved a hand-made placard with "No 2-Tier health care" scrawled on it in magic marker. It was no use. When Mr. Chrétien got his 30 seconds at the end to sum up his position, he reassigned "two-tier" health care to the Canadian Alliance. The Liberals had cracked the code of the Alliance "secret agenda," and it revealed that the Alliance wanted "two tier," no matter what Stockwell Day's diminutive placard sign said. For the Liberals, of course, any health care system with the label "two tier" was anathema.

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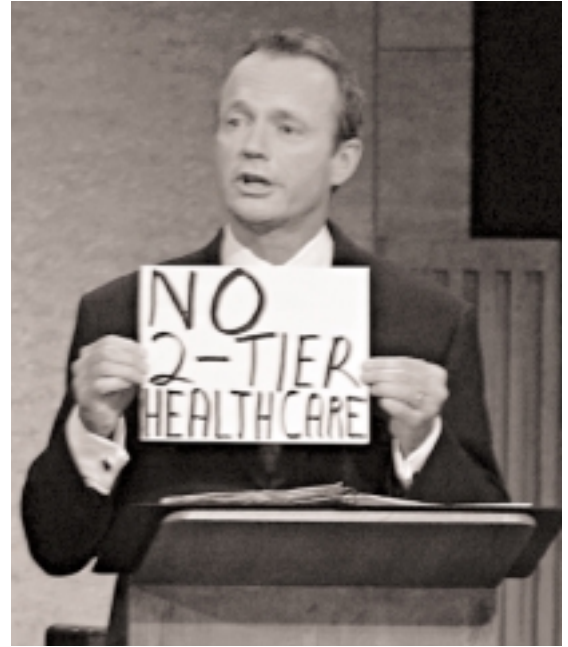
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At the end of October, a woman named Sharon Singh was brought from the town of Sooke on Vancouver Island to the Vancouver General Hospital for transplant surgery. In 1984 she had contracted Hepatitis-C from a blood transfusion, and her only hope of survival was a liver transplant. Twenty minutes before the surgery was to begin, it was cancelled. No beds were available in Vancouver General's intensive care unit, and a frantic search turned up none elsewhere in the system. The liver went to a patient in Alberta and Mrs. Singh returned home to continue her wait. Time for her was running out.

Mrs. Singh's plight was reported on the evening news, and British Columbia premier Ujjal Dosanjh was interviewed, looking, as always, professorial. He promised to look into the case and took the opportunity to indicate how fortunate British Columbians were not to have Stockwell Day's "two-tier" health system. His point seemed to be that if Mrs. Singh were to die under a "one-tier" system, she and her mourning family could at least take comfort from the fact that they had avoided the horror of Stockwell Day's "two-tier" health plan.

But what was this "two-tier" health system which Mrs. Singh was so fortunate to avoid? The CBC and the *National Post* did us a service by trying to get the five parties to define what they meant by it. What the Canadian Alliance meant was clear. It was the system which we find in Britain, where there is a National Health system, as under-funded as its Canadian counterpart, and alongside it a private health system for those who can pay and want to separate themselves from *hoi polloi*. This is the system favoured by a failed candidate for the Canadian Alliance leadership, Dr. Keith Martin, M.P. for Esquimalt-Juan de Fuca (who easily kept his seat in this election). But Stockwell Day himself is on record, many times, as opposing it.

For the other parties, the difference apparently came down to user fees. Joe Clark had a hernia operation at the private Schulich Hospital outside Toronto, but that was all right, he asserted: he paid only what he would have paid in a public hospital. Still, he did not endorse private hospitals. The odd one, like the Schulich Hospital, he considered acceptable, but he would not want a series of them so them anybody at all could have the same service he'd had. For the Liberals, "two-tier" health was whatever the Canadian Alliance wanted, but exactly what it was, and how it differed from what we already have, remained unclear. In British Columbia, Workers'



CP Archive (Tom Hanson)

It didn't work

Compensation Board patients already jump the queues for medical treatment, apparently legally. Liberal suspicion seemed to centre on private clinics. They singled out Alberta's Bill 11, which allows private clinics to operate overnight facilities, even though the bill clearly states that "two-tier" health care is illegal. Quebec, it turns out, already has at least one clinic offering MRI scans for a fee, while another is planned near Ottawa, for the convenience of members of parliament and their families. The *National Post* ran a story reporting that Alan Rock admitted Canada already had "two-tier" health care, and Rock held a news conference to deny it. Private clinics allowed queue-jumping, he said, and queue-jumping would not do.

But Mr. Rock muddled the issue. It is one thing to queue for radiation therapy, for instance, quite another to queue for an MRI scan. An MRI scan is not a treatment; it is a diagnostic tool. The patients who queue for MRI's are not units of humanity with identical needs. For some, diagnosis is vitally urgent, for others not, but until the diagnosis is made, a doctor cannot tell which is which. I know of one Vancouver doctor who tells patients with suspected brain tumours that they have two choices. They can join the queue in British Columbia or they can go to a private clinic just south of the 49th parallel where they can get an MRI scan right away for US\$1200. Most opt for the clinic across the US border.

On medicare, the election campaign made

murky thinkers of us all and for that the Liberal strategy must take most of the blame. The squeeze on the health care budget began with the Mulroney government, but it was the Liberals who tightened the pressure, reducing the federal contribution to health care to a mere 11 per cent of the total cost. The provinces, whose budgets were also under pressure, were forced to cut costs. Ottawa defended the *Canada Health Act* with fulminations, directing special malevolence towards Ralph Klein, Alberta's premier, but it offered no new money and had no new ideas. It made no effort to examine the health care systems of countries such as France, Germany or even the "two-tier" system of the United Kingdom, where National Health patients are now being contracted out to private hospitals which have empty beds. The Liberals created a health care crisis and then, on the eve of the election, restored part of the money they had cut and with breathtaking political brilliance used the crisis they had created to get re-elected.

In fact, in spite of all the bluster, there is not a great deal wrong with the health services of the provinces and territories which extra money and intelligent planning cannot repair. A week before the election Sharon Singh was summoned back to Vancouver General Hospital and got her liver transplant. The media reported that the operation was a success and then promptly forgot about her.

In the end, one can only marvel at the smooth operation of the Liberal machine. The last days of the campaign were dominated by the Shawinigan scandal. Jean Chrétien, like any ordinary MP, had lent a helping hand to a friend in his riding, Yvon Duhaime, who happened to have a criminal record. Duhaime had purchased the Auberge Grand-Mère in Shawinigan in which Chrétien himself had a financial interest. Duhaime needed a loan of \$615,000 from the Business Development Bank, but the bank considered Duhaime a bad risk—correctly, as it turned out. A little lobbying, a meeting with the bank director at 22 Sussex Drive and Duhaime got his loan. He defaulted, the bank tried to foreclose and the bank director lost his job. Mr. Chrétien had taken his duties as an MP exceedingly seriously. Indeed, it looked like a scandal. At last the election had an issue: the prime minister's integrity.

As an evangelical Christian, Stockwell Day had believed at the start of the campaign that no man was so sinful as to be incapable of redemption, but after a couple weeks on the campaign trail, the suspicion seems to have grown on him

that the Liberals were an exception. Both he and Joe Clark, who, if he has learned nothing else in politics, has developed an instinct for the jugular, smelled corruption and leaped upon it.

But unlike the amateurish Glen Clark, Jean Chrétien had an ethics commissioner appointed by himself and responsible to himself. Having received letters of complaint from Stockwell Day and Joe Clark, Mr. Chrétien's ethics commissioner replied promptly and in magisterial tones. Except for the government leader in the Senate, all cabinet members are also MP's, he pointed out, and "they do not lose their responsibility to represent the interests of their constituents merely because they are now ministers and members of the cabinet." His verdict was, in effect, that the deal in Shawinigan had a healthy, parliamentary smell to it. The prime minister was only doing his duty as an MP when he helped Mr. Duhaime. Mr. Chrétien pronounced himself a traduced innocent and demanded an apology.

At the end of the day, the scandal did not matter. TV coverage does not begin in British Columbia until the polls close at seven o'clock, and by that time, the count was nearly over in the Maritime provinces and well underway in Quebec. Even so there were some moments of suspense. In Vancouver Centre, Hedy Fry may have lost her reputation for integrity but she kept her seat. In Vancouver South-Burnaby, Fisheries Minister Herb Dhaliwal was re-elected, though the Canadian Alliance and the Conservative vote taken together totalled more than he received. Mr. Dhaliwal had intimated in the last days of the campaign that once the Liberals won the election, the Prime Minister would soon make way for Paul Martin. Mr. Dhaliwal has never been known for independent thinking, and hence it can be assumed that these hints had his leader's *nihil obstat*. Mr. Dhaliwal now presumably will forget them. On Vancouver Island, the sole Liberal winner was David Anderson, unloved but respected, whose demise as member for Victoria had been too hastily predicted. In Calgary Centre, Joe Clark won his seat with the help of a coalition of Liberal and NDP voters who wanted to check the Canadian Alliance. In Ontario, where Stockwell Day had spent more time campaigning than in all the rest of Canada, the Alliance took only two seats. The failure was devastating—and instructive. Ontario had stood guard against the wild men from the west.

Mr. Chrétien will be prime minister for the next four years if he wants, and when in the fullness of time he does retire, the leadership will

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probably go to a younger man than Paul Martin. The Conservatives clung to official party status by their fingernails. One defection to the Alliance, and they will lose it. In Quebec, fugitive Conservatives helped give the Liberals a comfortable majority of the popular vote. According to the wisdom of the chattering classes, the Clarity Bill should have damaged the Liberals. Instead, if anything, it seems to have helped them. Or was it the promise of a couple of bridges in Montreal and bad weather on election day which forced the Bloc Québécois to a draw, in spite of the reportedly perfect campaign of Gilles Duceppe?

For Alliance supporters, the election made one verdict clear. They cannot ever form a government of Canada unless they arrange a union with what is left of the Progressive Conservatives. To do that, they will have to lose some of their rough edges. A union will not automatically transfer what is left of the Conservative vote to a new Alliance-PC amalgamation. If Conservative loyalists in Ontario see an Alliance-PC party simply as a western protest group in a new disguise, they could as easily shift their support to the Liberals. *Pace* Hedy Fry, Canadians are perfectly willing to respect Stockwell Day's religious beliefs, just as they respect a Sikh's right to wear his turban or a Jew's right to observe his Sabbath, but they will not tolerate him if he is perceived as a zealot from the Great Unwashed, preaching western alienation and hellfire. Very little of the mud thrown at Jean Chrétien stuck, but all of the mud thrown at Stockwell Day did.

Alliance leaders will have to read *Alberta Report* less and watch the CBC more. They will have to abandon those tenets they have imported from the extreme right in the United States, for the extreme right has no constituency here. The National Rifle Association owns no voting bloc in Canada. The Liberal demonization of Alberta in this election was a contemptible ploy, but it worked, and whenever necessary, the Liberal machine will use the ploy again. If a "divide and rule" policy could keep the Roman Empire stuck together for centuries, it should keep the Liberal party in office for a few more terms.

What Joe Clark does with his rump of twelve Conservatives will be decisive. His platform was mainly ridiculous, and after two years of his leadership, his party was still unready for the election. But in the campaign he showed the instincts of a seasoned politician, and he could provide the leavening the Alliance needs. If he throws in his lot with the Alliance and if Stockwell Day makes

room for him, then we may have a political party (why not simply call them "the Conservatives"?) that is a credible alternative to the ruling Liberals. Otherwise we shall have just one national party, opposed by a collection of regional rumps, and eventually the ties that hold the federation together will unravel. A lot therefore depends on Mr. Clark. No one doubts his integrity, but there is no sign that he has developed into anything more than the stubborn but indecisive and limited politician he always was. On the day after the election he was quoted as saying that he had run a good campaign and hence deserved the unqualified support of his tiny caucus. But there are no good or bad campaigns in elections. There are only winning or losing ones, and Joe Clark's "my way or the highway" mode of leadership is not likely to work any better with his new caucus than it did in the past.

I asked a friend I met in the little Mayne Island Mall what she thought of the election. She made a grimace and said, "I don't know. I didn't like any of them." She belongs to a large minority group that is growing in size. Voter turnout in this election was the lowest since Confederation.

Something clearly has gone wrong in the realm. Canadian politics is coming to resemble Mexico's before the election of Vicente Fox. The prime minister can decide when elections take place. He can dispense patronage at will. He appoints senators and Supreme Court justices and the Governor-General. He can reward supporters with great dollops of the taxpayers' money. Even the CBC seldom forgets who its paymaster is (though for the most part its coverage of the campaign was admirable). In practice, if not yet in theory, the checks and balances which an American president encounters every day have disappeared from our government. To be sure, the Alliance campaign at times resembled the Charge of the Light Brigade, and Stockwell Day may have been a flawed leader, but, sent up against a presidential prime minister at the peak of an economic boom, could anyone else have changed the verdict of this unwanted election?

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