

POLL-DRIVEN POLITICS — THE ROLE OF PUBLIC OPINION IN CANADA

David Herle



“The role public opinion research plays in guiding governmental communications is often dismissed as partisan and not necessarily in the public interest,” writes David Herle, who begs to differ. As the former pollster to the federal finance ministry in the 1990s, Herle’s polls and focus groups shaped support for balancing the budget and creating the fiscal dividend. Other policies, he writes, “can be sacrificed because (Ottawa) couldn’t talk about them to Canadians in a way that made sense to them.” He also identifies five rules of current Canadian public opinion: Canadian social values, transparent governance, activism rather than retrenchment in government, and the enduring regionalism and evolving views of the Canadian federation.

« On néglige souvent le rôle de la recherche sur l’opinion publique dans les communications gouvernementales au prétexte qu’il s’agit d’un travail partisan qui n’est pas nécessairement d’intérêt public », écrit David Herle, dont l’avis est tout autre. Enquêteur au ministère fédéral des Finances dans les années 1990, il y a dirigé des sondages et des groupes témoins qui ont favorisé l’appui populaire à l’équilibre puis aux surplus budgétaires. Il déplore qu’Ottawa doive sacrifier certaines politiques par incapacité de les expliquer en termes clairs à la population. Et il définit cinq constantes de l’opinion publique du pays : valeurs sociales canadiennes, transparence de la gestion de l’État, activisme plutôt que repli gouvernemental, persistance du régionalisme et perception changeante de la fédération.

I have been in the public opinion research business for the past 14 years. My firm was the official pollster of the Liberal Party of Canada from 2003 to 2007. And from 1993 to 2003, I had the great opportunity to work closely with a number of government departments and ministers at the federal and provincial levels.

Let me first deal with the role of polling in government. Essentially, governments use research for the following unique reasons:

- to assess the acceptability or support levels for various policy options
- to learn how to best communicate a policy idea
- to understand the policy priorities of the population
- to determine which of their policies to accentuate, and which to hide under a bushel

There are implications for each of these, all of which have been the subjects of many academic studies. All I can usefully add is the perspective that my personal experiences has given me.

The idea that polling is influential in government decisions is almost universally derided as a negative. It is said to

be the sign of an unprincipled government, like a weather vane reflecting the impulses of the masses. Sometimes the money spent on it becomes a news item, and it is always characterized as a waste. It is the antithesis of strong leadership that does what it knows to be right, no matter what pressures come from the public.

I can’t agree with any of that, and I find it anti-democratic.

First, governments rarely decide fundamental policy directions on the basis of polling. Those decisions are made by the prime minister and his or her cabinet, in my experience, based on what they believe are the necessary issues to address and advice from civil servants

However, once the policy direction is set, there is a myriad of choices that need to be made in the implementation of that policy. I see nothing wrong with the public’s preferences being reflected in that decision-making. If it is not clear which option would be more effective at meeting the policy goal, why shouldn’t the government know which option the public would prefer? Canadians regularly say they

want more, not less input into these kinds of decisions.

On the occasions where polling forces the government to change direction on a major policy issue, it is generally the result of such a strong consensus of opinion that it would be anti-democratic, not to mention politically suicidal, not to address it.

For example, Prime Minister Harper's recent conversion on the subject of global warming is certainly the result of strong pressure from Canadians, as reflected in government polling. So the Prime Minister was poll-driven. Is anybody suggesting that he should have ignored those polls? Would that have been a better result for Canadians?

For many years, ministers in the Chrétien and Martin governments gritted their teeth about increasing health transfers to the provinces. They hated cutting cheques to the provinces. They did it because the public's concern about health care dwarfed every other issue. Again, should those governments have ignored public opinion and refused to provide provincial governments with more money for health care? When that level of consensus exists, under most circumstances, I would argue that the government should pay attention.

There are cases where governments do disregard dire warnings from the pollsters. And those tend to be on the core priorities of the government or the Prime Minister.

I am told that when the Mulroney cabinet approved the GST they knew the government would almost certainly be defeated over it. However, the government knew that Canadian business could not compete under free trade unless they replaced the manufacturer's sales tax with a value-added tax. It has been reported that Mr. Trudeau ignored the pleas of his pollster Martin Goldfarb and his advisers as he spent the last weeks of the losing 1979 election campaigning on the need to patriate the Constitution — an issue nobody cared about. But Mr. Trudeau did.

And when I first talked politics with Paul Martin, he spoke passionately about the need to improve the situation of First Nations people. I told him then and I told him when he was prime minister, a sad truth of our country is that there are no votes to be had by helping the First Nations. In fact, it's a vote-loser. And yet, in the dying days of his government he was hosting a First Minister's Conference in Kelowna on a new deal for First Nations people to conclude the work that took up a substantial amount of his time as Prime Minister. And he campaigned passionately on it in the election that followed.

One of the lessons of these anecdotes is that if you are going to do something really unpopular on a point

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of principle, you had better be prepared to be defeated and lose office over it.

The best use of public opinion research in my experience was by the Department of Finance. First of all, there was an extremely collegial and collaborative relationship between the minister's office and the department. Therefore, there were none of the tensions that often emerge when a minister's office and a department have different agendas, and were played out in the research.

In the critical years of 1994-97, David Dodge and the other senior officials at Finance believed that they could only successfully eliminate the deficit — which they considered to be the most urgent and important public policy challenge of the day — if they had broad buy-in from the Canadian people.

Important principles for deficit reduction were derived from public opinion research: more spending cuts than tax increases, but a mixture of the two; the federal government infrastructure itself should bear the greatest share of spending cuts; and every sector of the economy and walk of life should feel the cuts equally. Sometimes a dubious bauble — the special tax on banks — would be added in order to make the package seem fairer.

The research itself was a kind of public consultative exercise, in which respondents were asked to make the very trade-offs and choices that the government was facing. A different media environment allowed the government time to build a consensus through a broad public consultation.

It is important to recall that at the time eliminating the deficit was considered to be impossible. In the 1993 election only the Progressive Conservatives and the Reform Party even promised to try to do it. And nobody thought their promise was credible.

It is not that policy people couldn't figure out how to make the math work. The reason why deficit elimination was considered an intractable problem was because it was impossible politically. No government could possibly survive what eliminating the deficit would take. Jean Chrétien, Paul Martin, David Dodge and the Department of Finance turned that on its ear by not only eliminating the deficit but doing so with enormous public approval and support. Most Canadians felt something important had been accomplished, and it had been done in a fair and equitable way.

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Again, I can't agree. I think it is an integral part of the policy process.

Many departments in Ottawa have a bias against doing polling, or they just don't have a culture that knows



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how to use it. In any event, they try to communicate complex initiatives to the public without a realistic sense of the public's knowledge base, how interested Canadians will be, how much attention they will pay to your communication, or how to make it relevant for the average person's life. They tend to think Canadians have the same information, use the same vocabulary, care about the same things and see everything in the same way as those who work in these departments.

As a consequence, policies that are the result of years of work, that might make a real change for the better, may end up being sacrificed because their creators couldn't talk about them to Canadians in a way that made sense to them, and as a result Canadians opposed the policies. If we get those

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things wrong we erode confidence in public service.

Since the elimination of the deficit, the Department of Finance and the Department of Industry have been convinced that the major challenge facing the economy is productivity. But they have been unwilling to invest the same time and effort into understanding how Canadians think about productivity and adapting to it. Canadians find the concept threatening and insulting, because it seems as if the government or business community is telling them that they don't work hard enough or they aren't smart enough. Policy discussions about productivity generally centre around corporate tax cuts and loosening regulations. Neither of these is high on the public agenda. In fact, most people do not see how those policy items or the productivity agenda in general will have a positive impact on their lives. For Canadians, a true productivity/competi-

tiveness agenda would have education and training at the heart of it.

One factor that really inhibits the effective use of public opinion research in government is the way media covers research that is publicized under the *Access to Information Act*. Because the results of any poll must be made public within a relatively short period of time, government departments do not want to ask questions that might possibly yield answers that would be embarrassing to the government.

It also means that you can rarely test the actual policy propositions that are under consideration since it is quite possible that the poll would have to be released before the policy had even been to cabinet, in which case the government would be reeling on the defen-

sive. I'm not suggesting that polling shouldn't be subject to access to information, just pointing out that it has an impact on the quality of the information that the government has. Perhaps a longer time frame before release is mandated would strike a better balance.

Modern polling emerged in Canada in the 1960s, when Keith Davey brought Lou Harris, John F. Kennedy's pollster, to Ottawa. Before that governments had to assume they understood public priorities and managed public opinion through their MPs.

One criticism of the use of polling in government comes from those who say it has diminished the role of the member of Parliament. I think it is a fair comment, but I think it has also been a positive thing.

First, no person could possibly replicate through personal consultations the reliable information polling provides. Second, my experience has been that

many MPs either have no idea what people in their riding think or want, or they know but have no interest in reflecting it, which makes taking their advice on public opinion a dubious proposition.

I actually feel less positive about the role of polling in politics than I do about its use in government. I believe in brokerage government. I think the job of government is to find a way to accomplish its objectives in a way that makes as many Canadians as possible comfortable with what it is doing.

I don't believe in "wedge government" — where governments cater exclusively to their support base. I don't see consensus-building or compromise as signs of weakness. Neither do the many women who choose not to follow politics, much less run for elected office, because they see it as a male exercise based on conflict and aggression rather than consensus and collegiality.

However, political campaigns are supposed to be the forum where competing visions and different ideas and objectives are played out. Political parties are made up of people who have very different perspectives and ambitions for Canada. There is a substantial amount of opinion research on members of political parties that allows us to know that there are stark differences between, for instance, the views of the average Liberal delegate to a convention and a Conservative delegate to a convention.

Parties don't run on what their members think, and can't if they want to be successful. They run on what will get them the most votes. It is a strategic marketing exercise rather than a genuine contest of ideas. It drives everybody to blunt their definitions, to shave off the rough edges of their ideas.

The result is that Stéphane Dion wants you to think he's tough on crime. But he doesn't really care that much about that and neither do most Liberal activists. The concept of the Conservative five priorities in the last



The Gazette, Montreal

Paul Martin, with the support of Jean Chrétien, turned conventional thinking “on its ear by not only eliminating the deficit but doing so with enormous public approval and support,” writes David Herle, pollster for the federal finance department during the Martin years there.

election was almost certainly derived from research, as were each of the five priorities themselves. Does anybody think that Stephen Harper got into politics to find a way to preserve the public health care system and reduce wait times within it?

And let’s not forget the NDP’s unwavering commitment to balanced budgets and fiscal responsibility.

It makes people cynical because it is not genuine enough, and people sense that. Canadians know it is not a reflection of what the leader or party are truly about or interested in. And therefore they know it won’t have that much to do with what that party does in government.

It has had a devastating effect on the role of political parties, and they have lost virtually all of their policy function.

Parties can still dig in their heels and get their way on an issue — as the Liberal Party did on missile defence a couple of

years ago — but it rarely happens. Most of what happens in party policy conventions is of little consequence to party election planners. As a result, people who are committed to getting policy action are more likely to work locally or join NGOs, rather than becoming active in a national political party.

The problem is that the professional polling work is so effective, now that it is done this way, it is impossible to imagine it not being done this way. I know, as a campaign chair in two elections who had to decide what kind of advertising to put on the air, where the leader’s tour should go and where we should expend resources, that polling information is invaluable.

Every once in a while you can see the spark that politics can generate when it breaks out of that managed, predictable mode. One such moment occurred with the selection of Stéphane Dion as Liberal leader. The Liberal post-

convention bubble in support was a product of interest and enthusiasm about the notion of a seemingly very genuine and unpackaged guy overcoming the odds and the party establishment to win. For a while it seemed that maybe politics had changed and things could be different. Turns out that might not be true, but it was a glimpse of the power that something genuine in politics can have.

The professionals in politics are using polling to make the best tactical and strategic decisions at every turn. But in the process, we are managing an ever-declining voter base. Federal politics has never been less relevant to people than it is now. The voter turnout numbers speak for themselves.

In 1988, 75 percent of Canadians cast ballots. By 2004 that percentage had dropped to 61 percent, before rebounding slightly in 2006 to 65 percent. There is great excitement in the media and among pundits whenever support for

one or another party moves three or four points in one direction or another.

Yet the candidate or party that can motivate the 10 to 15 percent of Canadians who have stopped voting probably holds the key to breaking this political deadlock where no party can build a majority coalition.

As the parties all attempt to position themselves, if they are using public opin-

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ion as I suspect they are, they will all be paying attention to the following rules of public opinion. These are the tectonic plates that lie beneath the day-to-day tactics of politics.

Rule 1 — There is a Canadian consensus on social values. Although there remain cleavages on "values" issues and, in particular, rural Canada is different from urban Canada on these issues, Canada is primarily a socially progressive nation and becoming more so.

Concepts like tolerance, diversity, and legal equality are core values that are now central to most people's idea of being Canadian.

In fact, the recent prominence in the US of social conservatism has prompted Canadians to reexamine their belief systems. This has reinforced and driven the evolution toward greater social progressiveness on values.

This is a development that has many causes, not least the essential diversity of the country, but it is primarily driven by the young people and the women of this country.

In 25 years the Charter of Rights and Freedoms has become a central and defining document for the country. Politicians who do not accept this fact are hitching their wagon to a minority and declining opinion base.

Rule 2 — There is a new attitude about ethics, patronage and transparency in government. Canadians are increasingly demanding of their governments and their politicians in this area.

The old "nudge nudge — that's politics" attitude is gone: what was once acceptable is now unacceptable.

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program should have been a shot across everybody's bow. It was far more dramatic than reactions would have been to a similar thing years ago, and it may have brought us close to a "tipping point." We are moving into a new era of ethics in government that will affect many of the ways governments do business. Those politicians who understand that will have a future, and those who do not understand it are not likely to.

This will not only affect politicians, it will also affect business in spades. Business is going to have to find ways to meet these tests consistently as well, and to ensure that there is transparency and accountability in decision-making and in the operation of business. Investors and the general public will demand it.

Less and less deferential all the time, Canadians want to open up the entire system and let some air in.

Rule 3 — The years of anti-government retrenchment are over — Canadians want an activist government. By the early 1990s, Canadians had lost much of their faith in governments as a force for positive change. There was a complete "crisis of competence" in Canadian politics. In that era, one had a difficult time even getting people in focus groups to talk about what the federal government should do.

Now, people have moved from doubting that governments could solve anything and therefore it was better not to try, to demanding that governments act as agents of change.

The first step toward breaking the back of that attitude was, ironically, the elimination of the federal deficit and balancing the budget for the first time in a generation. A whole generation of

Canadians grew up with governments having failed to do what people themselves do every day — manage their money responsibly.

It re-established that governments could be competent. The deficit was a problem that Canadians had come to believe was utterly intractable.

It was also accomplished through a process that met the tests of openness and accountability I referred to earlier. Consultations were extensive. Targets were set openly and with no wiggle room, and they were consistently met or bettered.

Now that fiscal pressures are less problematic and there has been some tax relief, Canadians want governments to start trying to solve problems again. In many instances, people want government to fix problems that are seen to have been created by the fiscal cuts that led to balanced budgets.

Indeed, there is a confidence that problems can and should be solved, and Canadians want their governments to do more than just get out of their faces. They want them to aspire to make the country better. This lack of an aspirational vision is a major factor in the Conservatives' inability to capture a really substantial amount of public support.

An essential caveat is the importance that people place on economic management and fiscal responsibility. Deficits at the federal level are a non-starter. Canadians are proud of balanced budgets and think they are an essential part of our economic success.

Rule 4 — Regionalism remains a strong factor in Canadian politics. Regional identity continues to be one

of the most important prisms through which people see government policy and political behaviour.

This may seem like an obvious thing to say, because it has been the case for so long. However, there are many other major cleavages — urban/rural, French/English, gender, age, income — that cross regional lines.

Nonetheless, it is important to understand how people in different regions view the same things differently.

The gun registry is good case in point. The most obvious differences in opinion on this subject were between rural and urban Canada. However, there was also wide difference in the perceptions of the program between urban areas in different regions.

Residents of the major western cities share most values and attitudes with residents of major central Canadian cities, yet they saw this program very differently because their perceptions were shaped by their region, rather than by their status as urbanites.

In the 2004 and 2006 election campaigns the Liberal Party was competing in at least five different campaigns across the country, with different primary opponents and different issues in each. We ran specially tailored advertising in almost every province. It is still the case that outside Ontario, the federal government is often seen as an outside force that does not have that region's best interests at heart. It means that everything the government does has to pass through a barrier of cynicism.

This puts a special onus on the government to find ways to communi-

cate what it is doing, and to do so in a way and a language that makes sense to people in that region.

For public servants, there will be an increasing demand for more consultation and to adopt policy solutions that take into account regional differences in the country.

This leads directly into my next rule.

Rule 5 — Views of the federation are evolving. The fight between “a strong central government,” on one side, and “a community of communities,” on the other side, is over, and both sides won.

Most Canadians have settled on a division of labour between levels of government that is based on what they see as the appropriate roles and competencies.

Program delivery is seen as being best done by provincial or even local governments. They are seen as being better able to manage programs and are thought to have a better sense of what the actual needs are, province by province, community by community.

The cities agenda is coming up into the national agenda for a reason. However, that does not mean that people want or will accept a balkanized Canada. They see it as completely appropriate for the federal government to fund programs in areas of provincial jurisdiction — in fact, most of the things people really care about, such as health care, education, early childhood education and the environment, are outside federal jurisdiction. They would not stand for a federal government that refused to help in those areas. In addition, they want the federal government to demand national

principles and consistent approaches and applications.

Politics in Canada is indeed poll-driven. I have defended the use of polling in government, because I believe that governments should be responsive to public priorities and I believe that government should seek to build consensus among Canadians for their policies. I have lamented the use of polls in politics, despite having utterly relied on them when I was a campaign chair. It works, but it is having a corrosive effect on political parties and on public interest in our politics.

Canadians have shed the defeatist attitude about the possibilities of government they held 15 years ago, but they are becoming increasingly disengaged from our politics.

While most Canadians see an opportunity for public policy that reflects the full spectrum of opinion and ideas that exist in the country they are getting disengaged from a political world that offers too much political management, too much false confrontation, and not enough real discussion of problems and ideas.

Adapted from a presentation to the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Queen's University, March 16, 2007. David Herle, former pollster for the Department of Finance and later for the Liberal Party of Canada, was campaign co-chair for the Liberals in 2004 and 2006. He is now head of the Gandalf Group, a communications consulting firm based in Ottawa.

A major contribution to an important issue, the essays in *The Art of the State III* explore Canada's approaches to recognizing and accommodating diversity, specifically the instruments of shared citizenship, evaluating their capacity to respond to new pressures and concerns. Contributors also offer comparative analyses of the approaches taken by other countries, such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Eastern Europe.



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