

Commentary

A Schlemiel Is the Elephant in the Room: The Framing of Stéphane Dion

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History will record that Canada's federal election of 2008 began on a sleepy Sunday morning in early September when Prime Minister Stephen Harper visited the Governor General at Rideau Hall to request that Parliament be dissolved and a writ for an election be issued. But in fact, Harper's trip to Rideau Hall should more accurately be seen as the moment when the first phase of the campaign ended and the second phase began.

The first phase started on another Sunday, nearly two years earlier. And it began, not with a prime ministerial visit, but with a TV commercial. The date was February 4, 2007, better known as Super Bowl Sunday, and as millions of football fans across Canada settled in to watch the Indianapolis Colts take on the Chicago Bears, they were greeted by something quite unlike the usual collection of slickly produced ads for beer, cellphones, and soft drinks.

For the first time ever, their football escapism was jolted by an intrusion of reality—a political advertisement. The ad featured a clip from one of the all-candidates debates held during the recently completed Liberal Party leadership campaign. Stéphane Dion was being challenged by his opponent Michael Ignatieff over the Liberal record on the environment. “Stéphane, we didn't get it done,” Ignatieff proclaimed. “We didn't get it done.” “This is unfair,” Dion complained. “Do you think it's easy to set priorities?” The camera cuts to a shot of Ignatieff snickering at Dion's answer. A voice is then heard intoning “Leaders set priorities. Leaders get things done. Stéphane Dion is not a leader.” Then, at a slightly lower volume, and with faster-paced read, viewers heard, “This message brought to you by the Conservative Party in Canada.

No Canadian political party had ever produced advertising to run during the Super Bowl, one of the priciest ad buys of the year. But what was even more remarkable about these ads was that there was no election underway at the time. Stéphane Dion had only been chosen as Liberal leader two months earlier, and though an election was always possible in a minority Parliament, few people expected that the neophyte Liberal leader would take his chances with the electorate anytime soon.

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Building the frame

So what was going on? Why would the Conservatives spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to attack the Liberal leader when an election was not even on the horizon? To understand the answer to that question, you have to understand the art and science of political framing. Few people outside the world of political spin doctoring have heard about framing in its political context, but it is critically important in determining which issues will gain traction with the electorate and which politicians will emerge triumphant on election day. And the Conservative Party's efforts to frame Stéphane Dion as "not a leader," which began on that Super Bowl Sunday in 2007, will long be remembered as a textbook example of successful political framing.

The fundamental idea behind framing is not new. In marketing, it is more commonly known as "branding," and it has been a fixture in the public relations tool kit for decades. In its commercial context, it essentially refers to those things that consumers think of when they think of a particular company or product. Ask people what they think of US automakers today and they will tell you that they are companies that produce big, gas-guzzling cars that consumers do not want to buy, run by a bunch of out-of-touch fat cats who are looking to taxpayers to bail them out of their self-inflicted woes. Ask them what they think of the Toyota brand, and you will receive the opposite response. Neither characterization is completely accurate, but in the marketplace, brands are rarely about fairness or accuracy. However, they are critically important for a company's success. That is why so much of what public relations people do these days involves managing their clients' brands.

The man who is perhaps most responsible for bringing these ideas into the political realm is George Lakoff. For decades he was an obscure but highly respected linguistics professor at the University of California, Berkeley. He was interested in using cognitive linguistics to explore how the brain develops and retains frames. In 2004, Lakoff wrote a book called *Don't Think of an Elephant* that became a bible for political consultants on both sides of the U.S. partisan divide (see also Lakoff, 2004a).

The book's title lies at the core of Lakoff's theory of framing. If he were to ask you to not think of an elephant, you would not be able to do it, because in order to not think of an elephant, you have to think of an elephant. Our frame for an elephant is a large mammal with a trunk, floppy ears, and large stubby legs. We have no way of thinking about an elephant that does not involve us evoking that image.

That is because, in Lakoff's view, our brains are hard-wired to think in terms of frames and metaphors. They physically exist within our brains and cannot be erased. Lakoff believes that about 98% of thought is unconscious. This means that really successful political leaders are those who are able to reach voters on an emotional rather than an intellectual level. They can tap into our unconscious emotions through the use of frames and metaphors. This is what Barack Obama understood better than any of his Democratic or Republican opponents in the 2008 presidential campaign. He was able to ride the two amorphous frames of hope and change all the way to the White House.

According to Lakoff, Ronald Reagan was another American politician who benefited from tapping into frames that the electorate itself may not even have been able to articulate. Most Americans disagreed with Reagan's policies, but voted for him because the language he spoke was the language of family, hard work, and patriotism. And in espousing those values, he evoked a vision of American self-reliance and independence that had largely disappeared in the real world.

But frames are often not about the real world. After a decade of being beaten down by scandal and military misadventure, Americans were prepared to continue to suspend reality when it came to Ronald Reagan. The "great communicator" managed to preserve his reputation for honesty and straight shooting, even as his administration became ever more deeply embroiled in scandal (Lakoff, 2004a).

Other politicians have not been so fortunate. Once a frame has been established, it can be very difficult to change. It took Joe Clark decades of meritorious public service before he could successfully lose the "Joe Who?" frame pinned on him by a newspaper headline the day after his surprise victory at the Conservative Party convention in 1976. Jean Chrétien remained "the little guy from Shawinigan" long after he had left his small-town roots behind. Paul Martin never could escape the damning "Mr. Dithers" frame hung on him by a writer from *The Economist*. And now, the Conservatives are hoping lightening will strike twice. They've launched a fresh series of pre-election ads against the new Liberal leader, Michael Ignatieff, trying to frame him as an intellectual dilettante who is "only in it for himself," and "just visiting."

"Frame development," Lakoff has written, "takes time and work." "The truth alone will not set you free. It has to be framed correctly" (2004, p. n.a.). And that is why it is so important to be the first to get your frame established. "Frame yourself," the political spin doctors like to say, "or others will establish the frame for you."

Framing Dion

This is precisely what happened in that Conservative Party Super Bowl ad. Although often referred to in the press as an "attack ad," it should more accurately be thought of as a "frame ad." When Stéphane Dion won the Liberal leadership in December 2006, he was as frameless a political leader as Canadians had seen in a long time. Most Canadians had no idea who he was. He won the leadership largely because his two main opponents, Michael Ignatieff and Bob Rae, had some negative frames of their own that they could not overcome. Rae was a failed socialist Ontario premier, Ignatieff an ivory-tower, globe-trotting, Bush-loving war hawk out of touch with regular people. Dion was a tweedy academic who seemed decent enough, and who cared a lot about the environment, but beyond that, the public had little sense of who he was.

Dion's lack of public profile provided a golden opportunity for Conservative Party strategists. Their coffers brimming with cash, their opponents broke and divided and already weakened by the corruption frame imposed on them by the sponsorship scandal, the Conservatives saw a small window of opportunity to fill the vacuum and hang an unflattering frame around Dion's neck.

Enter Karl Rove

But to frame the new Liberal leader in a negative light, they first had to diminish Dion's credibility on the environment, an issue where Dion seemed more attuned to Canadian public opinion than Stephen Harper. For that, the Conservatives turned to the Republican Party playbook written by George W. Bush's political guru, Karl Rove.

The conventional wisdom in politics has always been that you play to your candidate's strengths, not their weakness. You try to avoid calling attention to those areas where your opponent might be holding the upper hand. Many Americans worried that Ronald Reagan was too militaristic, that he would be more likely to lead America into war. So his advisors would never show him in the company of soldiers, and they eschewed photo ops on military bases or aircraft carriers.

But that was old-school politics, and Karl Rove had a different idea. You do not sidestep around your candidates' vulnerabilities; you confront them head-on. You do not attack your opponent's weak points; you attack his strengths.

The 2004 presidential campaign pitted John Kerry, a decorated Vietnam war hero, against George Bush, a man who never saw combat and was largely a no-show during his stint with the Texas Air National Guard. Most political strategists would have avoided calling attention to Kerry's war record, because it would invite comparisons to Bush's record that would inevitably be unflattering.

But Rove, using front groups like Swift Boat Veterans for Truth and the echo chamber provided by right-wing radio talk shows and the blogosphere, was able to raise questions about the veracity of Kerry's accomplishments in Vietnam. The accusations were almost entirely unfounded, but simply by raising them, Rove succeeded in shifting the focus of attention away from Bush's military service record and on to Kerry's, thereby neutralizing any advantage the Massachusetts senator had on that issue. Kerry spent the last month of the 2004 campaign trying to prove he really was a war hero. Nobody was talking about Bush's military record. Mission accomplished!

And shifting attention is precisely what the Conservatives had to do with Stéphane Dion and the environment. He had been ahead of the curve on climate change, while Stephen Harper had long expressed doubts about whether the issue was even real. But rather than let Dion own the environment issue, to frame himself as an environmental hero, the Conservatives sought to take the issue away from him, to put him on the defensive, by attacking his record on greenhouse gases while a member of the Liberal cabinet. Though he had been minister of the environment for only 18 months, he would carry the can for 13 years of Liberal "inaction" on climate change. On this important issue, he would be the man who "didn't get it done." He would have to spend precious media time defending his record on the issue, leaving Harper's decade-long litany of climate change denial largely ignored.

"Not a leader"

And forcing Dion to defend his environmental record dovetailed nicely with the second objective of the Super Bowl ad: to frame Stéphane Dion as a weak leader. Just as we could not think of an elephant without thinking of an elephant, we would never be able to think of the Liberal leader without thinking of that

pathetic whine about how hard it is to set priorities. The visual image would be the Liberal leader forever frozen in a confused, feckless shrug (Figure 1). Contrast that to Stephen Harper, who during the 2006 campaign had talked about his “five priorities” and practically nothing else, and the appeal of the leadership frame for Conservative strategists is easy to understand.

Figure 1: “Not a leader” (the Dion shrug)



Source: <http://www.gloriakovach.ca/Other/PublishingImages/20071019-subpage-Dion.jpg>

Of course, no frame can persist in the public mind unless it bears some relationship to the truth. Frames may often be unfair, but they have to be based on something real in order to resonate. Joe Clark really was an unknown quantity with the national electorate, Paul Martin really did dither, and Jean Chrétien did embody a small-town sensibility, at least initially.

But Stéphane Dion was largely a blank slate. When the Conservatives chose to hang the “not a leader” frame on him, he had been party leader for less than 60 days, hardly enough time to establish his leadership bona fides. There was still time for Dion to successfully counteract the negative frame by displaying tough, determined leadership as Leader of the Opposition. Instead, he spent much of his first year reinforcing the frame: huffing and puffing about how Conservative policies were ruining the country, then meekly standing up in the Commons to vote in favour of those same policies in order to avoid an election that most Liberals recognized the party could not win.

The Conservatives took a gamble on Stéphane Dion on Super Bowl Sunday 2007. They bet he would give an Oscar-worthy performance in the role of the weak leader they had cast him in. And by Sunday, September 7, 2008, it appeared that gamble had paid off handsomely. No wonder the Harper team looked so confident that day at Rideau Hall.

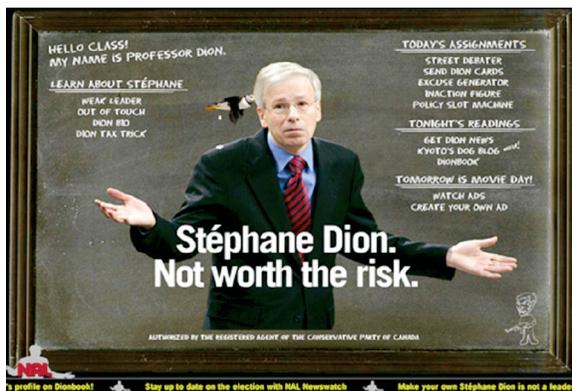
Re-framing Dion

So when the second, “official” phase of the campaign began, it was largely more of the same. There would be differences, of course. In the first phase, the Conservatives had the field all to themselves. Party spending in a pre-election period is not regulated in Canada. And the Conservatives could afford to spend money on Super Bowl ads to brand Stéphane Dion, knowing that the Liberals could not respond with a counter-branding strategy of their own.

According to Lakoff, “reframing requires a rewiring of the brain,” and that requires “an investment of time, effort and money” (2004, p. n.a.). The Liberals had neither enough time nor enough money to get the job done. Once the campaign started, the party tried to establish a new frame for their leader. On their website www.thisisdion.ca, you could see Stéphane Dion playing floor hockey (and scoring a goal), hiking, fishing, and skiing. Ironically, all these images were presented inside old-fashioned wooden picture frames.

But it was too little too late. The battle of the frames was over, and in many ways, so too was the election. “Leadership” would be the ballot question for the 2008 election, and as is so often the case with parties and leaders on the Right, leadership was the Conservatives’ strong suit. In power, Stephen Harper had reversed his policies on several significant issues, and his government had proven to be something less than the bastion of openness and accountability that he had boasted it would be. But frame trumped reality in 2008, just as it had with Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, and most Canadians continued to see Harper as a decisive leader who said what he meant and meant what he said.

Figure 2: Puffin poop, a schlemiel, and the poverty of Web 2.0 in Canadian politics



Source: <http://alterwords.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/0909puffinad500big.jpg>

Stéphane the schlemiel

All that remained was to build on the work that had already been done in keeping Stéphane Dion inside the frame the Conservatives had built for him, and

whose validity he had so obligingly affirmed. The next step would be to create a persona for Dion inside that frame. It would not be enough to frame him as “not a leader,” a task once again made easier by the Liberal leader’s lacklustre campaign. He would have to be cast as a clumsy fool, an object of ridicule. This would be Stéphane Dion as the Yiddish comic archetype of the “schlemiel.”

In his book *The Joys of Yiddish*, Leo Rosten (1991) describes the schlemiel as a simpleton. He is unlucky, clumsy and gauche, a social misfit, naïve and gullible, who makes foolish bargains (a carbon tax?). Ruth Wisse, in her book *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, writes, “[T]he Jewish schlemiel is a man who falls below the average human standard but whose defects have been transformed into a source of delight” (1980, p. n.a.).

That’s why it is hard to know whether to laugh at the schlemiel or take pity on him. Who’s a schlemiel? Think about George Costanza on *Seinfeld*. Think about a guy standing in an empty field, a bird flies overhead, and his droppings make a direct hit right on the guy’s shoulder (Figure 2). That’s a schlemiel!

Sound familiar? It should, because early in the campaign, that was precisely the scenario depicted in a controversial ad that appeared on the Conservative Party–sponsored site www.notalleader.ca. The party claimed the ad had been created by an “overactive Web designer” and promptly pulled it off the website, but not before it was seen by hundreds of thousands of people online and on TV, rebroadcast as election news coverage.

That website, which invited users to create all kinds of content that mocked the Liberal leader, was part of the Conservative Party’s strategy to utilize Web 2.0 tools to help the campaign to enable their campaign to reach out to people, specifically young people, who used the Web as their primary source of information. The campaign of 2008 was the first campaign of what has been dubbed the Politics 2.0 era. For the first time, people could easily and cheaply create, share, and distribute content on blogs, social network sites like Facebook, video sharing sites like YouTube, and instant messaging utilities like Twitter.

The use of this social media technology would, its proponents believed, change the political equation forever. No longer would campaigns be run by the political backrooms. The old command-and-control campaign structure was gone forever. Howard Dean, whose quixotic 2004 run for the Democratic presidential nomination in the United States was the first to reveal the potential power of the Internet, has called the Web “the most important tool for redemocratizing the world since Gutenberg invented the printing press” (“Interview with Howard Dean,” 2007).

Politics 2.0—Contrasting editions

“The era of the ‘one-way campaign’ is coming to an end,” Dean told *Mother Jones* magazine. “It’s not about communicating our message to you anymore; it’s about listening to you first before we formulate the message” (“Interview with Howard Dean,” 2007). The power of TV, of spin doctors, of marketing and message tracks would all diminish in the era of “open source politics,” according to the true believers of Politics 2.0.

And in the United States in 2008, those true believers helped create the extraordinary online juggernaut that helped propel Barack Obama to the White

House. Obama used the Web for all the traditional campaign functions: raising money, pushing his message, keeping supporters and the press abreast of what the candidate was doing and saying. But the revolutionary aspect of Obama's online operation was not its ability to use social media to talk to its supporters, but its ability to allow them to talk to each other, to form real and virtual communities, to organize outside the framework of the campaign. It was a strategy that helped inspire millions of young people, who had never before been politically engaged, to come into his giant campaign tent. On his campaign website Obama wrote: "I'm asking you to believe. Not just in my ability to bring about real change in Washington. . . . I'm asking you to believe in yours." He was not just running a campaign—he was using the Web to create a political movement.

But if the Obama campaign represented the full maturation of Politics 2.0 (although new technologies will undoubtedly push the frontiers even further in the future), the Canadian campaign of 2008 showed all the signs of teenage awkwardness. There has been plenty of hype about the power of social media to profoundly affect the way politics is practised, but the reality is that despite the Internet, the 2008 election unfolded much like the previous ones.

In the past, only partisans designated by the campaign office could appear on cable news political panels to spin the party line and heap scorn on their opponents. Now, hundreds of political bloggers got to shout online, but without a moderator to remind them not to all speak at once. Not surprisingly, this did not lead to an improvement in the quality of political discourse.

There was little in the Canadian 2008 campaign to indicate that either the parties or their supporters really understood the lessons of the Obama campaign or really believed in open-source politics. All the parties had their requisite Facebook and YouTube pages, and some had even discovered Twitter, but they used these Web 2.0 applications in very traditional ways to push messages out and engage in one-way communications. Allowing partisans to create online negative ads targeted at the Opposition, as the Conservatives did at www.notaleader.ca, hardly fulfills the transformational promise of Politics 2.0.

By and large, Canadian parties failed to understand how the Web could engage people around issues and bring people, especially younger voters, into the political process. Or perhaps they did understand, but decided it was a road they would rather not travel. Obsessive control over the messages and images coming off of the campaign bus has been one of the keys to political success ever since the 1960s, when television began to dominate political coverage. An entire generation of political spin doctors has grown up living in fear of the campaign going "off message"—and believing that solidifying their existing base is easier and less politically risky than trying to expand that base. That mindset will be hard to erase.

Old politics over new

The consequences of politics as usual in Canada were painfully obvious. In the United States, election turnout among first-time voters was the highest since 18-year-olds were given the vote in the 1970s (Rock the Vote, 2008). While in Canada, turnout fell below the already dismal 42 percent recorded in the election of 2006 (*The Star*, 2008). The lesson seems to be that if you give young people a

genuine stake in the system, and they will participate. Treat them like pawns in a cynical game, and they will choose to stay home.

In the end, campaign 2008 in Canada was a triumph of old politics over new. The political spin doctors had once again prevailed. They had skilfully used new and old media, and techniques borrowed from the world of marketing, to lock Stéphane Dion into a frame he could not escape. They had used Web 2.0 tools to create the illusion of openness and inclusiveness, while maintaining the old command-and-control campaign structures and traditional message discipline.

But across the border, a new way of doing politics was arguably emerging, one that will eventually find its way into Canada. Social media does have the power to transform politics in the ways that Howard Dean and others have suggested—and Barack Obama has demonstrated. But the old ways are deeply entrenched, and the ability of political strategists to co-opt these new tools should not be underestimated.

As in the United States, it will likely take a transformational figure to pose a real challenge to the power and influence of the political spin doctors—someone who can convince millions of people who have largely given up on the political system, or were never engaged by it, that they too can have a stake. In Canada, that person has yet to emerge. And in the meantime, it is business as usual.

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