

Courting the Minority Vote:

The Master Craftsmen North and South of the 49th Parallel!

It was evident back in May 2011 when President Obama raised a pint of Guinness at the Ollie Hayes pub in the Irish village of Moneygall – hometown of his great-great-great grandfather – that the 2012 presidential election campaign had begun in earnest. It bears an eerie resemblance to Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada, head covered in a cream silk headscarf, paying obeisance at the Keshgarh Sahib Gurdwara in the city of Chandigarh in northern India earlier this month.

Both men are acutely aware that elections can only be won by engineering the political ground game to perfection, that no matter how rosy or grim the economic outlook, the economy is only one factor – and not always the determining one – in winning elections. This is where politics trumps economics and with accelerating demographic shifts will become more evident in future elections.

In the 2012 presidential election, the non-white share of the electorate had risen to 28 percent, large enough to be the deciding factor as to who was to occupy the White House for the next four years. Surprisingly, the Republicans and Governor Romney were at best ambivalent of this demographic scenario, sparing no effort to constantly appeal to their traditional “base” which was secure anyway, but expending precious little time and resources to woo Hispanic, African American and Asian voters. It was an electoral debacle waiting to happen and so it did. To add insult to injury, Paul Ryan could not help to carry his home state of Wisconsin, a swing state, which leaves one wondering as to how many votes he attracted for the Romney-Ryan ticket by having his name on it. Having Florida’s youthful Hispanic senator Marco Rubio as his running mate may still not have won Romney the election, but the odds are that he would have won Florida and at least have a fighting chance of winning the swing states of Virginia, Colorado and Nevada with their large Hispanic populations. No one has seriously discussed the implications of an African American on the Republican ticket, but it would have at least dented Obama’s landslide African American vote. As it turned out, despite the economy and despite losing the white vote, Obama’s landslide win of the non-white and Jewish votes returned him handily to the White House for a second term.

The Liberal Party has long been known as Canada’s natural governing party. Their leaders, Wilfrid Laurier, MacKenzie King, Louis St. Laurent, Pierre Trudeau and Jean Chretien, each won successive majorities and served long periods as prime minister. Brian Mulroney had served nine years as prime minister between Trudeau and Chretien, but that was the longest stint by a Conservative since Robert Borden was prime minister from 1911 until 1920. By the time the Liberals elected Paul Martin, followed by Bill Graham, Stephane Dion and then Michael Ignatieff

in quick succession to lead, the party was running out of ideas and had become politically inept with no clear vision or foresight. They were no match for the Conservatives under Stephen Harper, who after heading two minority governments following the elections of 2006 and 2008 won a decisive majority in the 2011 elections, relegating the Liberals to third place with the left leaning New Democratic Party returning as the official opposition for the first time. The growing Chinese and Indo-Canadian ethnic vote had shaped Harper's victory to a large extent and with it a significant turnover of once safe Liberal seats to the Conservatives in vote-rich Southern Ontario with its large immigrant population base. Liberal Prime Minister Lester Pearson had opened the doors of Canada to non-white immigrants in the 1960s and since then they have generally been counted by the Liberals as natural supporters. Increasing disillusionment with the Liberals in recent years, however, together with an effective ground game by the Conservatives crafted by Jason Kenney, Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, and Prime Minister Harper's determined push for closer trade and bilateral relations with China and India had made the difference.

Back at the Irish pub last year, while Obama was busy impressing the residents of Moneygall, indeed all of Ireland, he was in fact reaching out to Irish Americans. It is difficult to say exactly what impact this gesture across the ocean might have had on domestic voters, but it clearly couldn't have hurt. The economy was not getting any better, so something special had to be done if he was to overcome this headwind and win re-election. I have always felt that all the talk about Obama being the first black (or African American) president is not entirely accurate. He is, after all, a person of mixed race, half-white and half-black as we all know, so reinforcing that kindred connection with some of his distant relatives on his mother's side makes perfect sense. If it touches a soft spot in the hearts and minds of undecided Irish American voters, so much the better. It is these sublime messages in which he excels, which makes him the master craftsman that he is. The likeability factor so often touted as one of Obama's strengths didn't happen by accident. It has been nourished and cultured to refinement since his early days as a social worker in Chicago and is now an unshakeable part of his personality.

North of the border, Prime Minister Harper's astute political calculations and uncanny ability in being able to read ethnic voter perceptions has finally given him the majority he so desperately sought and which had twice, in 2006 and 2008, eluded him. Having taken the immigrant population of Canada for granted, the Liberals seem to be oblivious of the fact that many immigrants come from very socially conservative countries when compared to Canada. If Harper can offer a compelling case as to why he is better for the Canadian economy in addition to subtly conveying that he is more in tune with the socially conservative values of immigrants, it is game over for the Liberals. After all, it is in the middle ground of the political spectrum where most elections are won and lost in Canada and Harper seems to be successfully squeezing the Liberals out of that coveted space.

The Republicans have much to learn from Obama and Harper if they wish to regain the White House. One place to start would be to attract conservative leaning Hispanics and African Americans into the rank and file of the party by including their priorities and aspirations in the party's platform. This should not be too difficult a task for the party of Abraham Lincoln, but to succeed they will have to keep the far right in check!

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