

Canada Up for Grabs

Montebello proved 'deep integration' should be a big election issue

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Stephen Harper's behaviour around the NAFTA leaders' Security and Prosperity Partnership [summit](#) was politically reckless, and he will pay a price for it. The summit was really about the deep integration of Canada with the United States, a major concern to anyone concerned about Canada's sovereignty, our ability to manage our borders and regulate trade and corporate behaviour.

Harper's dismissal of the demonstrators outside the Montebello summit as "sad" and his condescending rejection of critics from every opposition party leaves the impression that Mr. Harper thinks he is a monarch, not a minority prime minister.

Even worse, Stockwell Day's outrageous fabrication after the Sûreté du Québec admitted sending agents among the demonstrators: "They were being encouraged to throw rocks.... That's the irony of this. Because they were not engaging in violence, it was noted that they were probably not protesters. I think that's a bit of an indictment against the violent protesters."

There was no violence, no rock-throwing at the site of the incident — not even the police make this claim.

But if Day and Harper believe they can continue to portray the SPP as the jelly-bean initiative, they may be in for a nasty surprise. All the opposition parties have taken a critical stand on the SPP and deep integration in general. The NDP has been leading the charge for months, and successfully flushed out the government on the issue of energy security by forcing SPP hearings in the International Trade Committee. New Westminster MP Peter Julian has been digging up dirt on the process for over a year, and has identified a massive deregulation effort involving some 300 public policy areas. Leader Jack Layton is making speeches across the country on the issue.

Orchard's bounty

On the Friday before the summit, the Liberals got in the game in a major way with a 14-page position paper — courtesy, I expect, of anti-free trader David Orchard. Orchard was the low-key kingmaker at the Liberal leadership convention, delivering the win to Stéphane Dion with his 100-plus delegates. The Liberal position paper, called "Strong and Free: The Liberal Blueprint for the North American Leaders Summit," takes extreme liberties with the truth when it claims the Liberal conception of the SPP "was one all Canadians could embrace." In fact, Paul Martin's version of the SPP (he initiated it at the first summit in 2005) was every bit as insidious and secretive as Harper's. Nonetheless, Dion has now staked out a new position: demanding complete transparency in the process, identifying the Afghan war as

part of the SPP agenda and reiterating the party's position that the mission end in 2009, calling for water exports to be taken off the table, and demanding the return of Canadian Omar Khadr from Guantanamo. The energy issue — the massive, Kyoto-killing tar sands expansion — however, was conspicuously absent.

The Green party's Elizabeth May also has a lot riding on the deep integration issue, having stated several times that it will be the core of the party's next election platform. The Greens held a counter-summit in Ottawa, with their U.S. counterpart also taking a stand against the SPP. The party is focusing much of its attention on the North American Competitiveness Council — the body of 35 corporate CEOs (the U.S. gets 15, Canada and the Mexico 10 each) that has been formally established as the only non-government body making recommendations to the three governments.

Even the Bloc has taken a critical stand, a reversal of the sovereigntist position on free trade and NAFTA.

How the opposition parties decide to play the SPP and its critical component parts — the environment, energy security, Afghanistan, the militarization of Canadian culture, water exports and the relentless corporatism of the process — in the next election remains to be seen. The Bloc has already threatened to try to bring down the government over Afghanistan. The NDP is extremely well placed to take the issue on, but seems reluctant to make it the centrepiece of their electoral vision. The Green party's intentions are good, but they have almost no resources to carry them out. And the Liberals always run from the left, so their "strong and free" document is likely to suffer the same fate as other such promises (like Paul Martin's Red Book), even if does end up in their platform.

Creating traction

Despite these positive signs, if the opposition parties believe deep integration has little traction, they will drop it as an issue. So it will be up to the social and environmental movements and organized labour to make deep integration and the SPP the central issue of the next election. That it should be the central issue seems obvious. There is no better time to reverse 20 years of Americanization of Canada. We will likely still have George Bush as U.S. president, a gift to Canadian nationalists. The U.S. itself is in rapid decline by most measures, and Canadians' alarm over global warming creates a perfect context for challenging the power of oil companies to determine Canadian public policy.

The Montebello summit, and the unprecedented exposé of police provocateurs, marked the end of the secrecy phase of deep integration. The parallel with the fight against the Free Trade Agreement of Brian Mulroney is striking. Following years of secrecy, Mulroney and his Bay Street cronies finally had to come out in the open and defend the substance of the deal — and they almost lost the 1988 election. But the NDP got it wrong that time and Mulroney walked away with the spoils. This time the stakes are even higher. Everyone will have to get it right or we really will lose the country.

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