

Commentary

## The left, divided, opens the door for the Conservatives

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Tom Flanagan has a message New Democrats won't want to hear. In a candid new book called *Harper's Team*, the top Conservative strategist reveals that Jack Layton and company were the key to bringing Stephen Harper - not exactly a Dipper kind of guy - to power.

The Layton decision to attack Paul Martin's Liberals and lay off the Tories in the 2006 campaign was what paved the way, concludes the Calgary academic, a Harper confidant. "No matter how well designed our campaign had been, it would have been hard for us to win if the NDP had not held up its end."

In the previous election in 2004, the Grits won because New Democrats ran to them in the closing days out of fear of a Harper triumph. In 2006, Mr. Flanagan explains, the Layton strategy prevented any such desertion. The NDP increased its seat haul from 19 to 29.

In several prior elections, it was a split on the right between Tories and the Reform factions that helped make Liberal wins possible.

This time, as poetic justice would have it, the splits haunted the left.

And keeping the left divided, writes the Flanner, will be critical to future Conservative wins. Canada, he concedes, is simply not a natural home for the right. "Neither the philosophy of conservatism nor the party brand comes close to commanding majority support." Therefore, he adds, the Conservatives "will win if the other four parties are at each other's throats; they lose if they line up together, particularly if NDP and Green voters swing to the Liberals."

His book, just out, will provide much food for thought for the portsiders. It speaks, for example, to the wisdom of one of the moves Stéphane Dion has made since becoming Liberal leader - his entente cordiale with the Green Party.

Mr. Dion made a pact with Green Leader Elizabeth May not to run a Liberal candidate against her in the Nova Scotia riding where she is seeking a seat. He was slagged by some in his own party, and many in the media, for the unusual

manoeuvre. But the gambit helps make his Liberals the second choice of Green voters, of which there are increasing numbers. Says pollster Nik Nanos: "Political entente with Ms. May will likely pay dividends for the Grits come election time."

The Green Leader and Mr. Dion have not expanded their pact. "But there is a lot of mutual respect and goodwill there," Ms. May said in an interview. Voters are not exactly overjoyed with the Harper minority, she added. "Maybe they'll decide to give Stéphane Dion a minority."

The NDP has eased off its attacks on the Grits since Paul Martin stepped down. In the leadership campaign, Mr. Layton said the Liberals would never elect a man of Mr. Dion's integrity. But that's not the reason the party is laying off, said a Layton spokesman. Given his anemic performance, he said, the targeting isn't necessary.

In Quebec, however, the two parties are at one another's throats. Today, three by-elections in the province are being contested. One sees the NDP and Grits in a high-stakes fight in the Liberal stronghold of Outremont. It represents a great opportunity for an NDP breakthrough in the province where it has long been shut out. Mr. Layton has been working hard in Quebec and has a big name candidate in Thomas Mulcair, a former environment minister in Jean Charest's Liberal government. He was leading in last week's poll over the Liberal, Jocelyn Coulon.

The media have a tendency to read a lot, sometimes too much, into by-elections. This one is being seen as a big test of the Dion leadership. If his candidate loses, it will be interpreted as an ominous sign. In the Quebec ridings outside the island of Montreal, the Conservatives are quickly becoming the alternative to the separatists. If the NDP gets a foothold in Montreal, then the Grits, who used to own the province, could see their urban vote imperilled there as well.

And wouldn't that light up the faces of Tom Flanagan and Stephen Harper. The more the Dippers divvy up the left, the more the door swings open to the right.

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