

GLOBE AND MAIL - OPINION

Justin Trudeau bet the electorate would reward him with a majority. Things did not go according to plan

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 20, 2021UPDATED 1 HOUR AGO

Unnecessary, but hardly inconsequential. Largely as expected, and still filled with surprises.

The Election That Should Never Have Been ends with Canada's two leading parties pondering what might have been, and measuring the distance between reach and grasp.

There's an old saying that in war, the best laid plans never survive first contact with the enemy. Once hostilities commenced, Liberals and Conservatives alike discovered that the opponent foiling some of their best laid plans was themselves.

Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau [sent Canadians to the polls early](#), expecting to be rewarded with a majority. Instead, the Liberals discovered that triggering an election in the midst of a pandemic fourth wave had seriously triggered voters.

The resentment was widespread, and it never entirely dissipated. It was made worse by the fact that the most obvious question – why did you call this election? – is one the Liberal brain trust was somehow unprepared to answer. They never found the right words.

The election thus ended as it began, with the other parties tapping into a frustration felt by so many voters, across the political spectrum. As a result, [Mr. Trudeau was returned as prime minister](#), but denied the majority that was his only reason for calling the election.

If the Liberal plan did not entirely survive contact with its own miscalculations, neither did Erin O'Toole's. The [Conservative Leader's](#) daily mantra was "I have a plan/j'ai un plan." And he would hold that plan up in response to every second question, its 160-plus-page heft brandished as proof that he was serious, substantial and ready to govern.

It's a good thing for a party to have a platform. And there were a lot of good things about the progressive conservative [Conservative platform of 2021](#). It was an evolution away from 2015 and 2019, and evolution is what the Conservative Party is going to need to win.

The problem was that some parts of Mr. O'Toole's platform kept right on changing, even after the campaign had started. Presented as a finished edifice, ready for occupancy by a new government, some of its rooms were works in progress.

Take gun control. Mr. O'Toole at first tried to evade and obfuscate as to the exact nature of his plan; when his answers didn't square with the platform's words, the platform was reinterpreted, a rewrite was promised, and then it was rewritten, though not exactly as promised. The back-and-forth ate up several days of campaigning, and at the end of it all, the Conservative gun-control plan was even less clear than at the start.

The Conservative platform was also without costing for the first couple of weeks – a number-free zone. Once costing was released, [just before the official French-language debate](#), the numbers gave the Tory

child-care plans a different hue, with a budget roughly one-10th the size of the Liberal plan, and no ongoing long-term funding for provincial programs.

It was around this time that the Conservatives' rising [poll numbers](#) began to settle and reverse. In response, Mr. O'Toole tried to make his plan less clear cut, writing an open letter to the premier of Quebec, and hinting that perhaps additional funding for child care might still be negotiable.

Liberals always run on the idea that the Conservatives have a hidden agenda, and this much Tory confusion and vacillation didn't exactly make the best counterargument. On abortion, Mr. O'Toole's plan nullified the usual Liberal charges by being crystal clear. It said: "A Conservative government will not support any legislation to regulate abortion." Clear enough. But some other parts of the platform spent the election operating as witnesses for the prosecution.

Though when it came to acting as their own worst enemies, nobody could touch the Greens. Canada's fifth most popular national party, ostensibly all about the environment, instead spent the year tearing itself apart over Israel. Its electoral reward was to become Canada's sixth most popular party, at least as measured by the popular vote.

Two parties ended the night grateful for the election, and their unearned good fortune: The Bloc Québécois and [the People's Party](#).

For the BQ, salvation came in the form of the gift of insult, courtesy of the moderator of the English-language debate. The boost they got saved some BQ seats, and appears to have hurt the Conservatives more than the Liberals.

For the PPC, their move from beyond the fringe to the centre of an angry fringe was entirely due to the calling of a vote in the midst of a pandemic. The result was zero PPC seats, but it did lead to a sapping of Conservative strength in many places, and the loss of some seats that otherwise could have gone Conservative.

Because this was a pandemic election, there are all those special [mail-in ballots](#) still to count. That won't begin until Tuesday, and may not be finished until Wednesday, or later. The final list of members of the House of Commons may yet change in a handful of close races. But the big picture – a Liberal minority, with a party-by-party seat count almost exactly the same as before the election – won't.

The party with the most to cheer, though it isn't much, may be the New Democrats. In the early hours of Tuesday, the NDP appeared to have picked up a couple of seats. In some parts of Western Canada, they further displaced the Liberals as the preferred alternative to the Tories.

For a Liberal government that started the campaign by bidding for a majority and ended it thanking its lucky stars for having retained even a minority, such were the workings of the electoral law of unintended consequences.