

Thinking Critically About Sport In The 2008 Election

As the 2008 federal election came to a close, I couldn't help but pause for a moment of critical reflection and to think about how much has changed since the election in 2000 that also followed a high profile Olympic Games.

Yes, there are the changes in the national sport system that I've written about in this space on previous occasions – a sport policy for Canada, new legislation, federal investment more than doubled, tax credits, bilateral agreements with provinces, bids entered and won, Vancouver 2010 pending and Pan Am 2015 on track, Canadian Sport for Life, municipal sport strategies where they never existed before, technical leadership from the Podium consortium, the new ParticipACTION, and, of course, Coaches of Canada itself. No doubt, you can add to this list.

But the changes that I'm thinking about are political changes, the kind of changes that take place inside Canada's political parties. In fact, these are the kind of changes that can only take place inside political parties, the institutions where policy options are measured and negotiated amongst the party faithful and party brass, and where agreement and communication potential means that new proposals find a place in campaign platforms.

Just 8 years ago, sport was nowhere to be seen in a campaign platform. With luck, sport would be ceremoniously lumped together with a handful of catch-phrases and then tossed into a convoluted "all of the above" policy statement which, really, meant nothing at all.

This year we saw something completely different take place. Each of the national parties leapt into the sporting stage with their shiniest of sport options for voters to consider.

The Conservative campaign team packaged their sport platform below a photo of the Prime Minister walking his son into a hockey rink. The main plank came in the form of a fully refundable tax credit for low-income families who pay for registering their kids in a sport program. They added a dash of their impressive track record and some moral support for recreation and elite sport. But the politics of it all said: "For us, tax measures for individuals are the way to tackle sport participation rates."

Now the Liberals, they took a different path altogether seemingly trying hard to differentiate their plan from their blue rivals. Their leader, Stéphane Dion, decided that rather than a photo op in front of the rink, he'd promise to build them. He put out a 10-year plan and \$3 billion of federal largesse directed at sport facilities. His sporting politics implied: "No consumer tax breaks for us, we're in the community infrastructure business for the long term."

What about the NDP? With absolutely no history of turning to sport as part of their campaign message, the NDP decided to shoot for the moon. Maybe that's an easy shot to take when the prospect of holding power is slim to none. Nonetheless, this campaign saw the NDP step out with a brand new commitment on sport – to invest 1% of health spending on sport and physical activity. That's about \$500m per year and a great big jump up the

sport policy ladder. It seemed to me that Mr. Layton and his team tried to engage parents by saying, "Sport is part of our family agenda and we'll be there with you to gain the benefits through new programs and facilities. Say good-bye to the idea that sport is a luxury good of the upper crust; sport now takes a significant place in our plan."

As for the Greens and the Bloc, well, they took a deep dive into the sport pool too. Wrapping their sport proposals around the values of sustainability and common culture, respectively, the Greens and the Bloc propose to position sport as part of a belief system. The former sees how active living can help Canada get to where it needs to be before we overcook the planet while the latter sees how sport can play a role in its nationalist agenda. It's as if they want to hold up sport and say: "See this, it's an important political symbol for what we believe."

Taken together, the message is that sport has arrived as a mature policy priority. No, it doesn't hold the stature of foreign policy or economic proposals. But it is something that each party needs to know about, and to know what it thinks about it. Sport has newfound political currency, you might say, and that means Canadians have begun to trade in it and to determine where the value exists.

Maybe this is because sport is something that Canadians do think about, differently. And because they do, that means sport is something to debate and to deliberate over. Not just when coaches get together to plan their future or when athletes set their performance goals. But also, now that we're here in 2008, when the country gets together to think critically about its future and to elect those who'll deliver on Canada's gameplan.