

# THE STONEWOOD PERSPECTIVE

A S T O N E W O O D G R O U P I N C . B U L L E T I N

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## From Guesswork to Assumptions...

*The peculiar way we select our political leaders.*

The Federal Liberal Party will soon elect a new leader. The contest is intriguing as it marks the first instance in many years in which there is no clear favorite among the many contenders. While the process by which party delegates will render their decision is well publicized, the criteria they will use to make that decision is not. Ideology, vision, intellect, and personality are invariably in the mix, as are judgment, discipline, decisiveness and drive. It can even be assumed that 'darker' attributes such as ruthlessness, guile and cunning will play a role as the 'elbows come up' in the corners of political competition. However, assumptions will have to suffice, as a framework or even a useful list of attributes by which to compare candidates is elusive. This is dangerous as guesswork has a tendency to produce all variety of surprises. Consider Canada's two most recent Prime Ministers as illustrations.

### **Exhibit 'A' – Paul Martin**

When Paul Martin wrestled the Liberal Party throne away from his predecessor, most Canadians were reasonably confident of the quality of leader they were gaining. Here was a seasoned politician who had garnered global respect as an effective, deficit-fighting finance minister. A second-generation prime ministerial aspirant, he appeared to be a man of stature, trustworthy, steady, knowledgeable, and credible. He was intimate with the machinations of government and, presumably, would be able to lever this to get things done. It was further comfort to many that he had been a successful business person having transformed moribund Canada Steamship Lines into a shipping powerhouse. Taken together, it seemed a modest, manageable step for Mr. Martin

to ascend from the number two to the number one job of running the nation. Yet upon taking his place on Canada's leadership mantel Mr. Martin had difficulty distinguishing himself in the minds and hearts of Canadians. Often ill at ease and off-balance, he visibly struggled through his tumultuous time in office gaining the unfortunate moniker of 'Mr. Dither' along the way. What happened?

### **Exhibit 'B' – Stephen Harper**

Stephen Harper is also illustrative of how often we are surprised by our new political leaders. During the last election, much of the chatter surrounding the Conservative Party leader centered on his 'nerdy' lack of charisma, his trustworthiness, his political and geographical roots, and the 'hidden' agenda of his party. Questions about Mr. Harper's leadership 'spark' and track record may have hovered above in the context of his handling of a very fractious Conservative party but they were rarely the subject of open discussion. In the end, many Canadians settled for the certainty that he was not Liberal, and as the likely leader of a minority government, could be test-driven with little risk to the nation.

Yet since becoming Prime Minister of that minority government, Stephen Harper has surprised many. He has taken very firm control of his party, tackled highly contentious, lingering issues and stepped confidently onto the international stage. He has sought to reduce government complexity by addressing a few major issues at a time and as political commentator Rex Murphy noted, "He hasn't ducked any of the hard ones". Whether or not one agrees with his politics, it cannot be said that

he has been tentative. With the notable cringing coincidence that two consecutive Prime Ministers consider Tilley Endurables to be fashionable casual attire, the matter of Mr. Harper's charisma has largely faded from the national dialogue. What happened?

### Attributes of Effective Leaders

Selecting effective leaders, in any field, is complex endeavor as evidenced by the casualties paraded daily in the press. Political selection is among the most challenging as it is waged in a multi-dimensional theatre involving activities and behaviors both visible and obscured to the public. Election battles are waged in the air where contestants compete for our hearts and souls with visions, ideas, and dreams of a better future. Our attention turns to attributes such as vision, ideology, intellect and charisma. However, the attributes required to deliver those visions is less discussed, as is how the attributes will interact, and how they will be evaluated in order to select the best candidate.

A comprehensive list of political attributes is not easy to procure. It is a witch's brew of interweaving qualities, some observable, some not, a few more heavily weighted, nobler and commendable than others and all brought to life by the individual. It is a worthwhile effort however as an agreed upon list provides a common language by which to compare and evaluate candidates. Consider the following partial list culled from several respected sources:

- *Vision* or prescience is the ability to know which way to lead. Ideas can change history or the course of a nation and are thus the focus of most elections. As a former US president stated, "Great leaders require a great vision, one that inspires the leader and enables him to inspire the nation. People both love the great leader and hate him; they are seldom indifferent towards him".
- In politics, ideas must be accompanied by the *ability to persuade, galvanize and inspire* people to follow. Ideas must be accompanied by force to make them happen. As someone said, "people are persuaded by reason but moved by emotion. The leader must both persuade them and move them".
- A political leader must be viewed as legitimate. They must have *authority* if they are to persuade

people to follow them. A very recent illustration of this, in a business context, is William Clay Ford Jr. A noted environmentalist and until recently, Chairman and CEO of the Ford Motor Company, Mr. Ford spent five years attempting to mobilize his own corporation to develop hybrid vehicles. To the family heir's great frustration, he was repeatedly stymied, even ignored by a company bureaucracy that referred to him condescendingly as "Jr."

- Politicians may be *idealists*, yet effective politicians must also be *realists* who deal with what they have.
- Politics is compromise. Standing firm for principle can be political suicide. Yet knowing when to compromise is the process of prioritizing and picking battles in order to win wars. *Judgment* (the ability to make the right decisions) and *instinct* (the ability to understand the context) enable politicians to achieve. It is not enough to know the right thing. The leader must do the right thing. Instinct and judgment may well have been among the defining attributes of former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien. In a recent article, the *Globe and Mail's* Lawrence Martin noted that, "Mr. Chrétien had an intrinsic sense of the country. His reading of it helped him win three elections".
- *Intelligence* is important but in itself never enough. Intelligence also has to be of the concrete, *pragmatic* type not the abstract. Effective politicians need to be able 'to measure consequences rather than construct theories'. They must, almost impossibly, be men or women of thought who also have a *bias for action*.
- Politics is a full contact, hardball sport and effective politicians must be sufficiently *ruthless* to play to win. Nice guys do not appear to finish first in politics. Politicians must have a certain amount of *guile* to hold together the shifting coalitions of often bitterly opposed interest groups. Jean Chrétien once alluded to some of these qualities when he stated, 'the art of politics is walking with your back to the wall, your elbows high, a smile on your face. It is a survival game played under the glare of lights'.
- Politicians also need an *organization* to deliver.

Time is the politician's most precious resource and he or she must be able to *delegate* and use time wisely. The ability to select and lead an effective, efficient, strategic group of complementary team members, and then empower them, is critical. Yet at the same time, leaders must never confuse delegating for abrogating responsibility and thus they must ultimately decide what should be done. *Decisiveness* is quality they are elected to exhibit.

- Politicians must have the *confidence* and *courage* to lead. As Richard Nixon stated, the politician can “follow the polls or have the polls follow him. Polls can be useful in identifying those areas where particular persuasion is required but if a politician sets his or her course by them, they abdicate their responsibilities as leader”.
- *Strong will* and *strong ego* are also critical traits. As was once stated, “a strong leader has to believe in himself if he is to win mastery over the forces he must deal with, if he is to put up with the punishment he must endure, if he is to convince others to believe in him”.
- *Charisma* is an indispensable quality which, “none can explain yet all can recognize”. Charles DeGaulle described it as follows, “certain men have, one might almost say from birth, the quality of exuding authority, as though it were liquid, though it is impossible to say precisely of what it consists”.
- *Grandeur*. The leader must aim very high, “so as to establish his authority over the generality of men who splash in shallow water”.
- While grandeur may be important, politicians must also connect to and be *genuine* with, their constituents. As Winston Churchill famously stated about a failed politician, ‘he would not stoop, he did not conquer’.
- A great leader must have a certain *mystery*, something “which others cannot altogether fathom, which puzzles them, stirs them, and rivets their attention”. It is this quality, perhaps better than any other, which explains the steady stream of books which continue to be devoted to understanding the phenomenon known as Pierre Elliott Trudeau. Similarly, in a recent farewell article, The Economist described Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi as, “a reformer of

the unreformable. During his tenure, Japan's governing apparatus has been transformed, its economy has emerged from years of degenerative decline, and its dealings with the world have been energized and emboldened. For all that though, he remains an enigma”. While such mystery can intrigue it cannot, by itself, attract. For that a politician needs *character*. For some this is moral strength and fortitude, for others it “is the desire and inner power to exert one's will”.

- Politicians must be prepared to pay the price which leadership exacts, including the sacrifices of grueling schedules, personal demands and stress. Thus, *intensity*, *doggedness*, *drive*, and *discipline* become important leadership attributes.

While the majority of politicians will boast a great many of these attributes only a precious few will have the ‘royal jelly’ of greatness. Most will be better defined by a deficit of certain attributes, an overabundance of others or a palpable skewing of the overall mix. Thus it is that brilliant visionaries are usually less lustrous in implementation, backroom operators less adept out front etc etc. Selecting political leaders becomes the art of tradeoffs, of weighing the combination of attributes, skills and experience which will best serve constituents' needs now and into the future. This brings us to the importance of context.

### Importance of Context

Context incorporates the conditions and circumstances in which the leader must perform. It is the state of the nation, its challenges, its issues, the ‘as is’ from which the future will emerge. Context is external to the leader, it constantly changes and cannot be ignored. Context exerts a force which influences the mix, the pitch, the tempo and volume of leadership attributes and experience required to effectively manage it. In this regard, politics differs little from business where turnarounds call for different leadership skills than startups or mature businesses seeking continuity. Paul Martin may well have proven to be the leader Canadians expected him to be had he assumed leadership in conditions and circumstances which were better suited to his experiences and strengths. This applies to many leaders. Even Winston Churchill, who was once described as ‘one of the greatest men of action his nation has ever produced’, was considered far less effective during times when

action was less called for. A consideration of context expands the dialogue from candidates' visions of a better tomorrow to include how that journey will be navigated from here. It also stimulates probing into the extent to which candidates have navigated similar terrains in the past.

### **Conclusion**

The Liberal Party has vivid memories of a young, inexperienced Pierre Elliot Trudeau who, in 1968, came from nowhere and swept the party to a new era of prosperity. While those memories may well tempt the party to make assumptions about how great leaders are found, manufactured, divined, and/or selected, they would be wise to reflect on the lessons of Stephen Harper and Paul Martin and expand the debate beyond ideology, ideas and personality. Selection is always improved when rigor and transparency are applied to the process. In the case of selecting political leaders, where the stakes are so high, a consideration of context and its interaction with a full suite of attributes and skills is a good start in reducing the likelihood of 'surprises' in the future.

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### **About The Author**

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