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Columnists

September 01, 2005

Voodoo politics

You know it's slow when pollsters start conjuring up leadership contests

PETER MANSBRIDGE

From an end-of-summer reporter's notebook:

• You know things are slow in the polling business when researchers start creating leadership contests where there are none. A survey last week by SES Research Associates for the *Toronto Star* pitted a variety of possible replacements for Paul Martin against each other. Is Martin going somewhere? Have I missed something during the CBC lockout? Those questions aside, there are two things I actually find interesting about the poll results. First, of those touted as potential Martin successors, not one is a current member of the Prime Minister's cabinet. What does that say about the profile achieved, and the abilities of, the men and women whom the PM has chosen to have around him? And second: two of the leading contenders are Frank McKenna and Bob Rae, who both have on their resumé's the job title of premier. (So does Bernard Lord, one of the leading candidates when pollsters ask questions about who could replace Stephen Harper.)

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All right then. With that in mind, hands on your buzzers for this trivia question: who was the last former premier to be successful in his bid for the office of prime minister? The answer doesn't exactly leap to mind, does it? You shouldn't feel bad -- I've seen history majors draw blanks on this one. You have to go back 109 years -- Charles Tupper, the former premier of Nova Scotia, was the country's prime minister for 69 days in 1896. Not that others haven't tried since -- the path to 24 Sussex is littered with the reputations of premiers past. That shouldn't deter Messrs. McKenna, Rae and Lord. Or, for that matter Messrs. Tobin, Charest, Harris and Klein.

- The latest trial balloon floated out of the Liberal pre-campaign war room didn't stay airborne long. It had the election being delayed, perhaps until the spring. The reason: winter elections, with all that snow, are apparently just too difficult. Let's remember the history here: Martin, in the depths of a parliamentary crisis last April, promised the country, in a televised address, that he would call an election within 30 days of the Gomery inquiry's final report. The guarantee anchored a survival strategy that kept his government from being defeated.

Now, with the final report looking like it'll be ready by mid-January, come these sudden rumbles of election delay. I'm not sure how this tactic would have worked, although one senior strategist jokingly suggested to me this possible line for the PM: "I know I promised you an election within 30 days of Gomery, but guess what -- it's too cold to keep that promise." No wonder Martin shot the idea down. Besides, winter campaigns are not unheard of -- in 1980, Liberals and Conservatives bashed each other through the January and February blizzards. Expect a similar situation early in the New Year, unless the government is toppled this fall, which isn't impossible but is unlikely.

- A number of you have been asking me about the CBC lockout. I have no trouble echoing my colleague Mark Starowicz's words in this magazine last week. This is an old battle at the place both of us call home, but it has never played out like this before. As a result, the stakes have never been higher -- the very future of national public broadcasting may hang in the balance. One can only hope both sides fully appreciate that.

Peter Mansbridge is Chief Correspondent of CBC Television News and Anchor of The National.

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