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September 17, 2002

Politically, these sure are interesting times

By HARTLEY STEWARD -- Toronto Sun



Those of us who like a little heat with our politics are likely to find the run-up to the next election most interesting. The country hasn't had so much pure politics on the go since the days of Dalton Camp vs. John Diefenbaker.

When I say interesting, be assured I don't mean productive or creative or even moderately beneficial for the country. I don't mean thoughtful or mature or even less childish than normal. I mean interesting.

Take the Liberals, for instance.

The prime minister, determined to outsmart his old rival Paul Martin, has announced he will hang onto the leadership of the party for another 18 months, thus setting off the most obvious, most frenzied unofficial leadership race in party history.

If the prime minister wants a legacy, he'd better create it for himself. His cabinet is too busy politicking for his job to be interested in anything that looks remotely like it might have a decision attached to it. The PM has pretty well rendered his government dysfunctional.

Even with practically a poll a day hitting the newspapers, Jean Chretien can't find one in which he scores even moderately well. Watch for the leadership hopefuls to begin distancing themselves from the old albatross before some of it rubs off on them. Loyalty, schmoyalty, this is the brass ring.

The verbal footwork will be something to hear. These guys are pros and their ambitions are as raw as steak tartare. The brown envelopes will begin arriving in newsrooms soon as they form a circle and turn their guns inward. Get out your helmets, guys.

Terminally boring Tory Leader Joe Clark, enjoying the second-longest retirement in Canadian political history, has made things interesting the only way he really could - by his very leaving.

While some might wonder why anyone would want to lead a party with 14 seats, tied for fourth in the standings, Clark's agonizing departure brings into play some fresh young faces not yet scarred in the political wars or trashed by the national press.

While the Tory shootout will be less deadly than that of the Grits, the prize being so much less, this race also will heat to a boil when Joe actually does hang up his jowls.

It will be fascinating to see if the two 37-year-old friends, Conservative MP Peter McKay and New Brunswick Premier Bernard Lord, both leadership possibles, can keep their toothy smiles lit when the going gets serious and the name-calling begins.

Lord is so fresh-faced, young and exuberant, it's hard to believe no one has punched him in the nose yet.

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As well as new faces and fresh insults, the Tory race appears to be bringing back one of Canada's favourite political games: which provincial leader or former provincial leader shall we draft into the leadership race to save our sorry butts? The old retreat from Ontario or the old retreat from Alberta?

Even the New Democratic Party, which has not been on anyone's radar screen for at least two years, is trying to get some ink and attention with a leadership race of its own. Will the party break new ground with Svend Robinson and elect the first out-of-the-closet gay leader?

Okay, so it's not that interesting.

Most interesting of all, at least to me, is the Canadian Alliance and leader Stephen Harper. The party has let its profile get so low it could walk under Preston Manning without disturbing a policy.

Post-Stockwell Day, Harper has got them all to take their feet out of their mouths and shave the hair on their backs, certainly, but sooner or later the press is going to remember the Alliance is actually the Official Opposition. Someday, someone will have to say something for public consumption.

Then we shall see what Stephen has wrought. I'm betting he'll surprise everyone with a tough, efficient unit which performs well in the House and actually, since Harper is a bit of a wonk, offers up some interesting policy positions.

No one can think of anything the Bloc Quebecois might do that would be of interest to anyone, even themselves. Especially themselves. But on a provincial level, Premier Bernard Landry and the Parti Quebecois are about to happily shoot themselves in the foot.

The party will campaign in next year's Quebec election on the promise that if they are returned to office they will hold a referendum on the province's independence within a year.

Pollsters have been scouring the countryside in search of someone, anyone, who wants a referendum, which makes the premier's decision ... well, interesting. And probably fatal.

Steward appears Tuesdays and Sundays. E-mail:
hartleysteward@canoemail.com

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