



The messengers: Laureen and Stephen Harper at the Calgary Stampede in 2014. Framing the choice of the ballot question is as important in the run-up to the election as during the campaign itself. PMO photo

## Communicating the Writ Stuff: Who'll Be First to Frame the Ballot Question?

Andrew MacDougall

*In this 2015 pre-writ period, Stephen Harper has the advantage of incumbency, Justin Trudeau has to convince voters he can be trusted governing and Tom Mulcair has to try to neutralize them both on substance to compensate for the lack of Mulcairmania brewing. Let the games begin.*

The denizens of official Ottawa often labour under the misapprehension that people across the country pay attention to them to the same degree to which they pay attention to themselves. They don't, of course, but that will begin to change now that the calendar has flipped to 2015 and a federal election is in the offing.

To the average citizen, Ottawa is the place where your taxes go to be squandered, and where politicians go to yell at each other. Concentrating people's minds on the legitimate differences between the political parties and the consequences those differences will have

on their lives can't be done solely in the writ period. Framing the choice in the run-up to the election will be as important, if not more important, than any announcement made on the campaign trail.

Two of the major parties have acted early and decided to frame the looming electoral debate by announcing new policy: Stephen Harper and Thomas Mulcair have drawn clear lines around child care and tax issues. Justin Trudeau has, to date, resisted the urge to join the policy party and has instead been selling himself to Canadian voters, with the promise of substance at a later date.

How to mold this policy and personality clay into a clear choice for Canadian voters? Each party faces different obstacles to victory. What communications challenges do the leaders of the three major parties face?

Let's start with the incumbent. Prime Minister Harper is a known quantity to voters; there is precious little room for re-introduction or re-invention, not that the prime minister would care to do either. He is also a polarizing figure: those who like him, like him a lot, while those who don't, including several public sector unions, will be mounting a vigorous campaign to topple him.

The Conservative base appears to be holding, but many of the voters who supported Harper in 2011 will need some reminding of why they pulled the lever for him and his party in the last go around. Conservative strategists know they need to tap the rich seam of voters who don't care for the prime minister, but respect him, and would choose him if either circumstances, or a poor choice of opponents, dictate it.

**F**or Justin Trudeau, the challenge becomes convincing Canadians that he can be trusted with governing. Trudeau and his advisers have so far crafted a positive introduction that is heavy on fluff and light on the stuff Canadians usually need to hear about before they hand over the keys to the country.

Trudeau will also need to prove that

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he can handle the increased scrutiny of the press. It might not feel like it for Team Trudeau, but the Parliamentary Press Gallery has been fairly docile. That will change now that he shifts from being the leader of the third party in the House of Commons to a potential prime minister. Coping with that scrutiny will take a discipline and quick thinking that hasn't yet been aptly demonstrated.

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And what of Thomas Mulcair? The leader of the opposition is respected for his prosecutorial skill by the Ottawa Gallery and political junkies. The main problem for Mulcair is that he's little known outside of the Parliamentary precinct. The record number of people who voted for the NDP in 2011 did so for many reasons, but outside of the riding of Outremont that reason was likely not Thomas Mulcair.

Mulcair faces a Herculean task. He will have to take a party that is currently lagging at 20 to 25 per cent in the polls, and take it above and beyond the record levels attained in the last election by his more charismatic predecessor, the late Jack Layton. To compound his challenge, he will need to do this against Trudeau, who is also infinitely more charismatic than Layton's opponent, Michael Ignatieff, was.

In short, Mulcair can't expect to out-image or out-charisma Justin Trudeau, and, if NDP electoral history is our guide, out-policy or out-competence Stephen Harper and the

Conservatives. What path can he climb to victory?

**T**his is where incumbency has its advantages.

Using the bully pulpit of government, Prime Minister Harper has successfully re-focused the agenda on substance (i.e. policy), which is his strength versus Justin Trudeau. He will also surely craft a budget that gives him more policy nuggets to front over the coming months. The Prime Minister will now have to find communications opportunities that allow him to play to his strength. As always, these opportunities will come outside of Ottawa, and away from the Parliamentary Press Gallery.

The Prime Minister's Office will instead continue to have the PM participate in a number of moderated question and answer sessions with local chambers of commerce, or economy-focused lobby groups. These opportunities allow him to demonstrate his mastery of the economic brief, i.e. the issue that is likely to be the number one concern for voters.

It would benefit the Prime Minister, however, to also stretch his legs in a series of meaty interviews with the Peter Mansbridges or Bloombergs of the world. Canadians who respect, but don't like him, need to meet him again, and this is where the meeting is most likely to happen. Thoughtful 20-minute interviews on policy and the challenges facing Canada would be an effective platform for Harper to make the case for his re-election. The world in 2015 is an unsteady place, and it would be smart for the PM to talk about that. It would also put pressure on Trudeau to follow suit.

**O**f course, a long-form interview with a serious journalist would also open the door to the main threat to the PM's communications agenda: that which he

cannot control; first and foremost a senator who will soon be in the dock. But these are threats that will surface during the campaign—the opposition parties will see to that—so dealing with it head on before a writ is preferable.

While he should continue to generate buzz through softer platforms, Justin Trudeau will at some point have to make forays into substance. He, too, should do that away from the glare of cynical Ottawa journalists. Once some policy is in place, Trudeau should instead do rounds of interviews with leading outlets in regional markets, supplemented with a heavy diet of third-language press. In addition to getting his message out, this training will help to prepare him for future encounters with the national press.

The benefits are clear. Local reporters, while certainly not pushovers, aren't as process-oriented as journalists who cover politics for a living, and their questions tend, for obvious reasons, to be about substantive local issues. As former U.S. House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill famously said: "All politics is local." Third language media, on the other hand, are more respectful, less confrontational, and are often the primary source of news in their communities. They also represent groups that have fond memories

of Trudeau's father. They are communications no-brainers.

The path for Thomas Mulcair is less clear. There's no Mulcairmania out there waiting to be tapped. Logic would dictate that he be aggressive in courting the press in Quebec. Any national growth can only come after his base in Quebec is solidified. Using Quebec provincial policy as their guide, the NDP have put child care front and centre; Mulcair can only hope that audiences across the country are willing to hear about it.

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In a universe where the press will want to make it Harper vs. Trudeau, his main task will be simply to get noticed. In that sense, he might as well swing for the fences. If he's to be the left's standard-bearer to stop Harper, he'll first need to stop Trudeau. The trouble is, Trudeau's team isn't likely to give Mulcair a platform to take on their guy.

No matter the particular challenges facing a party, a massive problem for all parties will be staying on message. With every gaffe likely to be amplified to distraction during the campaign, parties will be applying an unprecedented amount of control to their live events, and relying even more on paid and owned channels.

Repeating a message drives reporters crazy, but it's the best way to ensure your word gets filtered through to voters. In the noisy era of digital and social media, the temptation is to say many different things to many different audiences. It's all too easy to lose the ballot question in a blizzard of tweets.

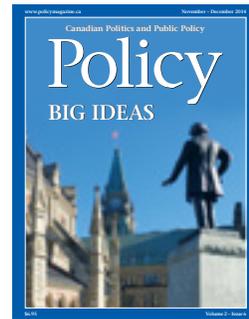
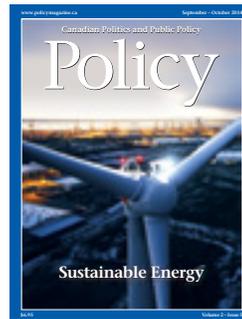
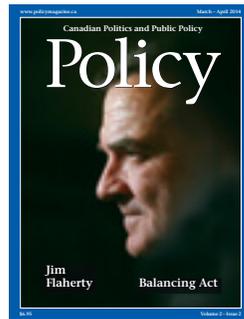
Of course, the best way to come out of a campaign with a clear message driving a favourable ballot question is to go into a campaign with a clear message and ballot question.

Whichever party spends the run-up to the writ framing a clear choice in the most positive light will be the one that has the pleasure of governing our great country come November 2015. **P**

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