



Liberals' speeches will be defining moments

Pressure mounting on front-runners

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Speeches are to leadership conventions what debates are to federal elections. Dramatic and crowd-pleasing, their capacity to separate winner from losers is also almost always overrated.

But the ones Liberals will hear two weeks from last night are the real deal. Come the morning after, they will still be talking about what they heard the night before.

A confluence of rogue factors is putting pressure on the front-runners, as well as those trailing just behind, to deliver the speech of their political lives. After nearly a year of formal and informal campaigning, the outcome remains deliciously fluid.

Soft support means no one will arrive in Montreal with a prohibitive advantage. Delegates are already demonstrating independence by refusing to follow candidates to new camps. And, most significantly, the value of the prize continues to soar.

Instead of picking a party and opposition leader, Liberals now see themselves as again doing what they have done so often before: anointing a future prime minister. That's more likely today than at any time since Conservatives came to power, and nothing rivets Liberal attention like an opportunity.

Still, opportunity is nothing more than potential until seized, and this one is particularly slippery. After pawing through his EKOS Research surveys, pollster and analyst Frank Graves declares the candidates "Plasticine."

"They are relatively incompletely formed images," he says.

Compared to Paul Martin, Jean Chrétien and John Turner, these contenders aren't familiar. Their pasts offer no sense of security, no clear forecast of what they might achieve.

In that sense, the final speeches are set to become the defining moments of campaigns that, at least for the front-runners, were locked in from the start. After decades away, task one for Michael Ignatieff was always to convince the party that his luggage is bulging with the right stuff, while Bob Rae had to persuade it to ignore his Ontario NDP baggage.

Those advising Ignatieff hoped the job would be done by now. Borrowing from Martin's juggernaut strategy, they tried to burst the Harvard professor and public intellectual on to the scene as a fully formed great hope, 58-year-old boy wonder and slam-dunk winner.

They did well, but not quite well enough. Serial gaffes sapped momentum, and now to win on December's first Saturday, Ignatieff must take the advantage of speaking last Friday night to regain what his campaign calls the "wow factor."

Instead of lighting up the room, Rae mostly needs to curb enthusiasm for Ignatieff, a university pal

who is now the Liberals' high risk, high-reward, roll-the-dice proposition. An almost flawless Rae campaign is making that easier.

An old pro among comparative amateurs, the former Ontario premier gambled early that, in the end, pragmatism would guide a party that isn't embarrassed to make power its priority. After smearing himself with confessional NDP ashes, Rae is keeping policy expectations low while reminding Liberals that more mistakes by Ignatieff will leave them wandering Ottawa's wasteland.

Apart from the powerful David and Jim Peterson clan and Ontario loyalists who can't forgive Rae for their 1990 defeat, that resonates with a party that's more big-tent than big-ideas. It understands the subliminal message that Rae, backed by Chrétien's in-crowd, is offering a relatively short-term managerial contract to put Liberals back on top.

Graves puts it this way: "Liberals are desperate to defeat Stephen Harper and get themselves out of the penalty box."

How they choose to do that will depend a lot on how well the Ignatieff and Rae speeches harness optimism and pessimism. Ignatieff's must again make believers of Liberals now revisiting their doubts, while Rae's must convince them his interests and theirs are coincident.

Along with changing final ballot odds, a dud delivered by either Ignatieff or Rae would open a crack for Gerard Kennedy and Stéphane Dion. Both failed to establish themselves as the obvious alternative and now risk being crushed in the stampede toward a perceived winner.

Making matters worse, neither is as engaging a speaker as either favourite. Nor are their stories as compelling.

As much as each offers — Kennedy credibly champions party renewal and Dion's strengths are policy and integrity — neither has royal jelly, the elusive ingredient that separates leaders from followers. In place of Ignatieff's challenging dreams and Rae's scarred wisdom, they bring little more than welcome reassurance that politics still attracts good people trying to make a difference.

The only difference Liberals are looking for in Montreal is the difference between winning and losing, and the last best place to find it will be in the speeches.

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