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ADVICE TO THE NEW LEADER OF THE NDP

COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS BY FRANK GRAVES

[Ottawa – March 23, 2012] First of all, let me heartily congratulate you on having won what certainly seemed to be Canada's longest ever readership race. No one doubts your endurance and that will be important. You may have found the leadership process gruelling but you have just stepped into the midst of what will undoubtedly become Canada's longest federal election campaign. The crucial pre-campaign period used to begin maybe three to six months before the writ was dropped. This pre-campaign is clearly already on with attack ads targeted at the interim leader of the Liberal Party. In the new Canadian political world, it's all politics all the time and campaigning never stops, except for ever briefer interruptions from the nuisance of actually governing. We have no doubt that the Conservative political machine has pretested attack ads on you and it remains to be seen if the pre-emptive attack on the interim leader of the third place party was a clever ruse or whether the Conservatives are truly sharing the collective delusion that the NDP is merely a flash in the pan and the real challenger is the Liberal Party.

Since we haven't worked closely together before, I would like to begin by sharing my views of some of the other myths that permeate the received understanding of Canada's political literati and which will be injurious to your goal of becoming Canada's next prime minister. I will then lay out some crucial long term challenges and a pivotal strategic choice that you should make sooner rather than later.

First, let's deal with this new world of hard ball, all politics all the time. This is no myth. It is a painful reality of our times and an unfortunate mimicking of the underside of American politics. The new political ecology of predator-prey adaptations shows the escalating need for the other side to develop new traits and practices to counteract or defeat the new advantages the other side has introduced. Not only does that often leave one playing catch up it also ignores the huge toll this has extracted on the public confidence in politics and government. The evidence shows that trust in political parties and politicians is at a historical nadir and the proliferation of these tactics is one of the crucial drivers of this decline. So while not responding with Pollyannaish naiveté to these tactics, we should explicitly use this longer pre-campaign period to talk about some structural fixes this vicious circle of declining trust and ever less ethical political practices. At the top of this list would be mandatory voting, then a proportional representation fix for the first-past-the-post mess.

The "framing" issues are crucial and that ground cannot be conceded. You may want to put off the purchase plan for the next iteration of the bleeding edge, recombinant data manipulation and voter manipulation robot but you certainly don't want to let the other guys define the frame or metaphor that the public will associate with you in a near Pavlovian way. Only ask those who have endured the "not a leader" or "just visiting" albatrosses know how hard those things are to shake once they are hanging around your neck. But don't forget that sometimes these things can blow up and "yesterday's man" would be glad to regale you on how nasty isn't always smart.

So you need to get out ahead and frame yourself, your party and your vision of the country in a positive light. You might also want to avoid the siren lure of taking a page from the other guys' playbook and going negative with the fear and anger cards. The burgeoning field of 'neuropolitics' shows us that the emotional triggers for the available progressive constituency are not fear and anger but hope and optimism. In experiments conservatives are drawn to threatening images, progressive to happy and optimistic ones. Plan ads and communications accordingly, I will shamelessly steal Stanley Greenberg's advice that three things win elections: 1) emotion, 2) emotion, and 3) emotion. The NDP, like most progressives, are great at constructing new policy plumbing; less so at creating the resonant narrative.

A few more myths: I wouldn't use the same language to describe the Conservative Party that the aforementioned Mr. Greenberg (former Clinton pollster, and he did okay) who recently called the Republican party a "dying cult" that couldn't get above 33 % core support. There is, however, a tendency to overestimate the reach and trajectory of Stephen Harper's Conservatives. While they did win a majority with 39.6% of voters, it was quite likely that their support with all eligible voters was considerably lower. They have rarely climbed much above the one in three mark and claims of a new dynasty, or a new Canadian spring, aren't much shared outside of this base. They are formidable campaigners and astute political tacticians but the notion that Canada is moving to the right is not borne out by any serious evidence (including your own party's position with a few points of the supposed juggernaut). Respect for their skill and achievement should not extend to a spurious read of some apocryphal right shift. It hasn't happened and your constituency is on the growing /future side of most of the key divides right now. So keep your eye on the real ball. You need to grow your constituency somewhat, but your more urgent task is to get them, particularly younger Canada, to show up (back to that emotion thing).

If the Rae attack ads are based on genuine conviction that you are an ephemeral blip floated on good luck, bandwagon effects, and the late Jack Layton's charisma, then allow that delusion to persist. It works to your favour as they won't see you as a being produced as a dialectical response to their securing government from the right and they won't notice that the shrinkage of the non-ideological middle actually works to your favour, not the Liberals. They may also have missed the appearance of inequality and fairness as new pinnacle issues. These are the real engines of your success (not discounting astute politics as well).

You also have some major exposed flanks. At the top of that list is the economy and a new sense of falling backward and fears that progress is no longer possible. While you are in unique position to deal with the fairness and inequality side of this problem, rightly or wrongly, you will be deemed deficient on the managing the economy front (and possibly the fiscal discipline front). You may also have some exposure with your positioning with unions (need to build a longer term argument of passing the boundaries of fair play and rights and the inequality link here). Your historical positions on trade liberalization and globalization also present some points of potential tension.

Which leads us to the question; what is biggest strategic decision facing you? Do you reach out and try to develop a cooperative strategy with the Liberals and possibly the Greens? I don't think

anyone realistically thinks a merger is in store before the next election. There may be other forms of ad hoc cooperation which could provide one time arrangements to produce what would most likely be an NDP-led coalition government. Agreeing not to run in ridings where the their parties have the better chance of winning would be the most obvious and practical solution. Strategic voting doesn't really work and it is also unrealistic to think that two parties with such deep roots, brand identities, and rivalry would be able to pull off a merger in the time available. If you decide not to go that route (and who knows if the other guys will would go along with it to begin with), then the stakes are huge. You might be winner-take-all, but my honest advice to you at this stage is that the combination of the four choices on the left against one on the right is bad political arithmetic. If you gamble and fail, I am guessing frustrated voters may take things out of your hands after the next election. So my advice would be to give this active consideration and see what the costs/benefits of cooperation might be. I suspect there is an ample constituency of voters who would reward such a path.