



Hudak: Who dat?

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When the starter is struggling, everyone loves the backup quarterback.

Sometimes, if the starter is really off his game, it doesn't even matter who the backup is. And with all respect to Tim Hudak, that's about where he stands right now.

The Ontario Progressive Conservative Leader is ahead of Premier Dalton McGuinty in the polls. But it's fair to assume that doesn't have much to do with Mr. Hudak's personal appeal, because that would require Ontarians to know who he is.

In August, 14 months after Mr. Hudak took the helm of the province's opposition, the polling firm Innovative Research Group asked 600 Ontarians for their impression of him. Of those with an opinion, slightly more were positive than negative. But 57 per cent didn't recognize his name, and another 13 per cent didn't know what their impression was.

That kind of anonymity probably reflects as much on Ontarians' political disengagement as it does on Mr. Hudak's performance. But less than a year before the next provincial election, he remains pretty much a blank slate. And so begins the race, between his side and the one across the aisle, to define him.

Fortuitously, from the Conservatives' perspective, their opponents have given them a surprising amount of leeway on that front. There was speculation, in political circles, that the Liberals would run a negative advertising campaign seeking to introduce Mr. Hudak before he got a chance to introduce himself – much the same as the Tories once did to Mr. McGuinty, applying a “not up to the job” tag that plagued him through his first campaign as Liberal leader. Instead the Tories got to the air first, with a 30-second TV spot – starting with an attack on Mr. McGuinty, then featuring Mr. Hudak looking warm and fuzzy – that started airing this week.

Mr. Hudak has also begun, at long last, to start fleshing out his policy agenda. His speech Thursday morning to the Ontario Energy Association didn't offer many specifics, but it did include promises to move forward with a new nuclear facility, to give consumers more choice on time-of-use pricing, and to let the sector operate with less political interference. While much of it was too wonky for the average voter, it seemed to play fairly well with his audience.

Still, Mr. Hudak is only a tiny way toward building a lasting impression. And it's hard to know what exactly that impression will be.

The Liberals will likely try to convince voters that he's Mike Harris, Jr., pining for a return to the polarizing mid-1990s. That's not unfathomable. Mr. Hudak started his career as a member of Mr. Harris's caucus and cabinet, and seems to have very fond memories of those days. And he's surrounded by some of the key players in the Common Sense Revolution – including, but not limited to, his wife Deb Hutton.

But there are few signs, yet, of anything so defined as a clear agenda of smaller government and reduced services. And that may have something to do with the fact that Mr. Hudak is surrounded by a younger, more pragmatic crowd as well.

The likes of Mark Spiro, Mr. Hudak's campaign manager, aren't interested in reliving past glories; they're interested in winning. They seem even more inclined to lean on "micro-targeting," the gearing of policies toward specific voting blocks, than the Tories were back in the Harris era.

It remains to be seen what sort of vision will emerge from this mix of personalities and ideas, and how effective Mr. Hudak will be in presenting it. He may yet catch fire, his retail politics skills a good match for uneasy economic times. He may be just passable enough to just enough people in just enough places to capitalize on the desire for change. Or he may come off too glib and insubstantial, as he appears on bad days at Queen's Park.

Conservative strategists say the gradual introduction of their candidate is by design, and is going according to plan. But the high-risk part is clearly still to come.

Everyone loves the backup, when they don't actually have to watch him play. Only once they've seen him on the field for a while do they really know if they want him to be the starter.

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