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THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

April 28, 2013

Looming debate puts pressure on Clark and Dix to connect with voters

By JUSTINE HUNTER

The spotlight is always on in the campaign

When Adrian Dix toured a distillery in Kelowna in the first week of the election campaign, the cameras never stopped recording as the NDP Leader, usually a teetotaler, was offered a series of tasters – a heady mix of a liqueur, a martini and a whisky sour.

Christy Clark's early morning training run in Terrace wasn't on the B.C. Liberal Leader's tour schedule, but it became material for a behind-the-scenes newspaper story.

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But on Monday night, the intensity will be magnified as the leaders step up for a 90-minute television debate that could turn the election from a predictable march to victory for the NDP to a real contest.

The Liberals have pinned their hopes on the telegenic and confident former talk-show host scoring a knockout on the front-runner, the not-so-telegenic and less pithy Mr. Dix.

Mr. Dix went into Friday's debate with a commanding lead, but was weak in defending his new oil-tanker policy. He needs to do better on Monday to hold his ground – because these 90 minutes of scrutiny can undo the gains his party has made over the past two years.

Both Ms. Clark and Mr. Dix need to be mindful of the other leaders on the stage.

Ms. Clark has sought to neutralize the B.C. Conservatives' John Cummins by making a "debt-free B.C." her central theme.

Mr. Dix's party was bleeding support to the B.C. Greens because he wouldn't take a stand the proposed expansion of Kinder Morgan's oil pipeline. Last week, he sought to inoculate himself against attacks from the Greens' Jane Sterk by vowing to oppose the increased oil-tanker traffic out of the port of Vancouver that the pipeline project would require.

Unlike last Friday's radio debate, the Liberals hope the visual comparison between Ms. Clark and her main rival will favour her. Mr. Dix, who has Type 1 diabetes, has said that he can appear nervous when his condition causes tremors.

The candidates likely spent a good chunk of the weekend in excruciating mock-up debates, with stand-ins for their

rivals taking the toughest shots they can think of. "It's a painful thing, to watch yourself being critiqued," said Ron Johnson, who has done debate prep with 10 NDP leaders, from Jack Layton to Mike Harcourt.

Mr. Johnson is now retired, but offers some armchair advice for Mr. Dix: "He wants to not be rattled, to be moderate, and to connect with potential NDP voters," he said. U.S. President Barack Obama's first debate against Mitt Romney last October offers a good primer for Mr. Dix on what not to do: The President got lost in a labyrinth of facts and figures, allowing his Republican opponent to walk away with a victory.

"You can't give a long scholarly answer," Mr. Johnson said. "You have got to connect with voters, you have to offer solutions to voters' problems, and you have to contrast why you are different from the other side."

For Ms. Clark, who needs to bring back disaffected Liberal supporters in significant numbers to close the gap, the pressure is on.

"The Liberals every day need to get blood out of the NDP," said pollster Greg Lyle, who was campaign manager for former B.C. Liberal leader Gordon Campbell. "The NDP, they just have to not lose."

Ms. Clark was out for blood on Friday in the radio debate, when she went after Mr. Dix for his stand on the Kinder Morgan pipeline, suggesting he landed on it for politics, not principles.

Ms. Clark isn't going to win over swing voters by defending the oil pipeline proposal. But she wants to paint Mr. Dix as an untrustworthy character.

Mr. Dix can, and did, return fire over Ms. Clark's record. Her campaign promises a debt-free B.C., yet her government has run up the provincial debt to record heights, and the NDP has raised questions about whether the Liberal budget is really balanced. On the doorstep, Liberal candidates are finding that a tough sell.

But Mr. Lyle predicts a nuanced argument about why NDP debt is better than Liberal debt won't offer Mr. Dix an easy point to nail in a fast-paced debate.

"She will say, 'We are talking about future and you don't have a plan to balance the budget,'" he said. "He should be attacking her on health, on poverty, that's where the NDP wins. If they are talking her issues, she is winning."

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