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What B.C. Liberals need to look for in their next leader

By IAN BAILEY
From Friday's Globe and Mail

It's been 17 years since the B.C. Liberals chose a new leader - and their next one is already facing an uphill fight

The race is on, with Moira Stilwell and George Abbott entering so far and more expected to throw their hat in the ring before the leadership contest takes place on Feb. 26.

It's been 17 years since Gordon Campbell became Liberal Leader and since then he has been elected Premier three times straight. A long run, to be sure, but his dominance has meant the party hasn't had to pick a leader for almost two decades. What should his successor be like? A Campbell clone or someone completely different? What does the next premier need to be an effective leader?

A consensus builder - to a point

The party is a diverse coalition of urban and rural supporters, conservatives - both party members and by inclination - and federal Liberals.

Hamish Telford, head of the political science and philosophy departments of University of the Fraser Valley, says the next Liberal leader will need to be able to establish consensus among the groups in the coalition, but only to a point. The leader will also have to know when it's time to establish control in order to make a decision.

"They have to be a consensus maker, but also firm," Prof. Telford says.

He or she doesn't always know best

Political scientist Norman Ruff notes that Mr. Campbell's undoing, particularly on the issue of the harmonized sales tax, came about because of a failure to listen to voters. The next leader should take note and avoid Mr. Campbell's notion of leadership, which Mr. Ruff describes as, "We know best and the public should follow."

Mr. Campbell has worn his controversial decisions as badges of honour. Mr. Ruff, professor emeritus at the University of Victoria, has a different view. Good listening, he says, "means you believe in a two-way communication with British Columbians as opposed to, 'I know best.'"

Able to attract female voters

The Liberals have occasionally had equal support from male and female voters, but pollster Evi Mustel notes that the party's support has slipped because female voters have abandoned them to some degree.

As Liberals head into the selection of a new leader, Ms. Mustel says female support is "definitely soft." Former B.C. Liberal leader Gordon Gibson says Mr. Campbell never had solid female support even though it is "hugely important."

Moira Stilwell has just left her post as economic and skills development minister to enter the leadership race, and former deputy premier Christy Clark may still declare, but Mr. Gibson says he isn't sure a female candidate would lock down that support.

Has relevant political experience

As a radiologist and nuclear-medicine physician, Ms. Stilwell has a lot of professional experience but it remains to be seen whether it will count in impressing party members in the leadership race and voters beyond.

Pollster Mario Canseco says there is a hunger for leaders with tangible credentials in running things in government, which may provide an edge to the likes of, so far, Mr. Abbott, who has been in charge at health, aboriginal relations and education so far in his political career.

"You need to have been in a ministry that actually handled something important," says Mr. Canseco, a public-affairs vice-president with Angus Reid Strategies.

Perspective

Know-it-all leaders face trouble, according to a former campaign manager for Mr. Campbell. Greg Lyle, now manager of the Innovative Research Group, says one of Mr. Campbell's best qualities is that he was "a very smart and idealistic leader," always looking for new ideas to make B.C. a better place.

"The downside is once Gordon Campbell seized on an idea, there was no stopping him," Mr. Lyle says. "Sometimes it worked as with the carbon tax. Sometimes it didn't, as with the HST."

Gets along with others

More than ever, it's important for the leader to be able to connect with voters, Prof. Telford says.

Although Mr. Campbell won three straight majorities, many observers say he lacked this crucial quality.

"You can get better at it, but you have to have it to begin with," Prof. Telford says. "You don't get time to learn that on the job."

Mr. Lyle says leaders need to come across as a person rather than a caricature on TV. "We can and do vote for less likeable leaders, but elections are always an uphill battle for those people."

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