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The politics of sexiness

Never underestimate the ability to allure when it comes to garnering votes



ELIZABETH
MCMILLAN

On the eve of last January's federal election, I sat down for lunch with the man who within days would be named Foreign Affairs Minister. We arranged to meet for an interview in the residence meal hall at St Francis Xavier University, located in his home riding of Central Nova, NS. I prepared a set of generic education-related questions suited to appeal to students.

I also wanted to throw in some interrogations on his Iraq position and Harper's proposed policies—just standard future-cabinet-minister fare.

But first I should tell you this—Peter Mackay has beautiful eyes. He was wearing a blue sweater that highlighted said eyes. He's also goddamn charming. Within seconds I had lost my composure, and realized that I was flirting with the enemy. My left-wing antagonism melted, like so much liberal butter, in the wake of his confidence, and (dare I say it?) sex appeal.

Instead of answering my questions, MacKay leaned across the cafeteria bench and managed to turn the tables on me. With that personable way of zeroing in on people that benefits politicians so well, he asked me a few questions: what did I think of online voting? What issues were St FX students talking about? I stammered a few questions of my own, but soon realized that I was out of my league. This Parliamentary playboy was all too familiar with his powers of persuasion.

When I dropped MacKay off at

the campus radio station for his next interview, it was a huge relief. There were five days until the elections and I needed to let my integrity grow back. But the incident made me wonder: what is it about powerful people that makes us swoon? Why do otherwise intelligent people become so captivated in someone's aura—and how does this reaction impact voting trends?

Arguably every Canadian would be more interested in politics if it was sexier. The 1990s gave us Jean Chrétien, the most uncharismatic leader we could have asked for. If he didn't alienate up-and-coming voters, I don't know who could have done

personality count just as much as ideas with our politicians. This weekend, the film *Bobby* hits theatres. Would the Kennedys still be a household name if JFK was an eye-sore? Doubtful.

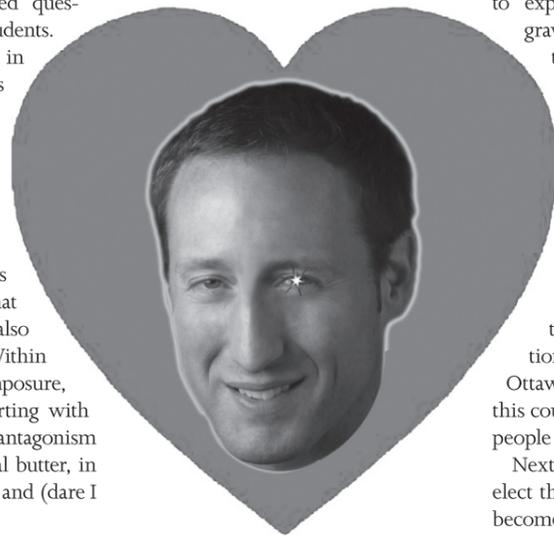
Politics shouldn't need to be sexy. Yet in an age that sees as many headlines about Brad Pitt or Paris Hilton as world conflict, it's easy to get distracted by intriguing faces and flashy scandals. How many young Canadians could name more than a handful of current Cabinet ministers? Regardless, I bet a lot more could tell you that Belinda Stronach is sleeping with Tie Domi.

While the elected franchise needs to expand voters will continue to gravitate towards politicians whom they want to reflect in themselves. Voters choose people they believe in, and part of the political game involves interacting with the audience. People like MacKay are masters at it.

Maybe Canada still wants, and perhaps needs, a new Trudeau—someone to make the rest of the world pay attention and return some glamour to Ottawa. It's been a long time since this country had a leader that inspired people to care about politics.

Next week the Liberal Party will elect their next leader, who may well become our next Prime Minister. Will the most charming candidate win? I hope not. I hope they're smart, articulate and informed, but half the battle is getting attention and beating out TomKat for air time.

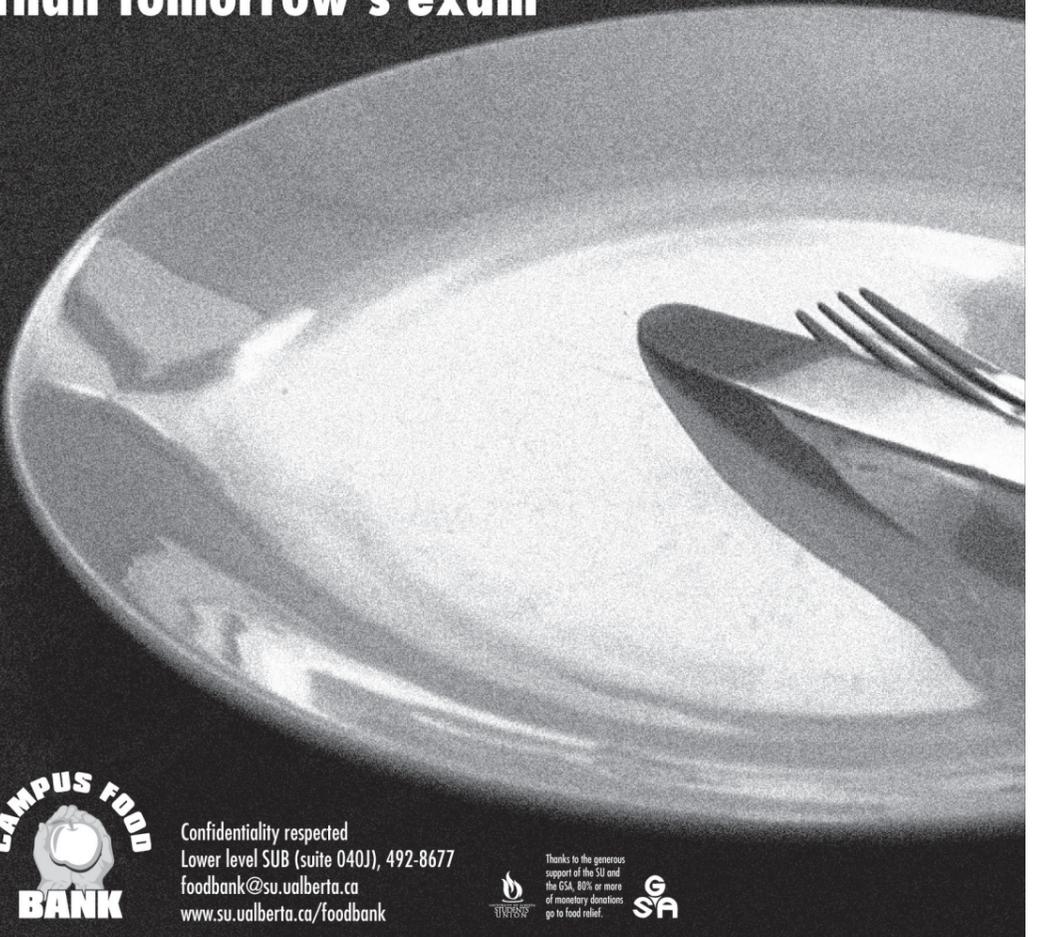
So what's the solution? Take charisma with enough humility to captivate and energize an audience; take charm as long as it's backed up with good ideas; take blue eyes as long as they're sincere. In the future, I'm staying away from politicians with nice smiles—unless of course, I really like what they're saying.



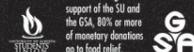
better. PM their apparent, Paul Martin proceeded to lose public confidence faster than P Diddy could proclaim "vote or die." So where does that decade of drudgery leave us? Stephen Harper is indeed a fresh face, but he's got as much appeal as a child molester. His candor with the press doesn't help his public relations either. He appears uptight, stubborn and inflexible. He's distant at best, abrasive at worst. But what's the alternative?

We're a visual culture; we thrive on charisma and charm. Presentation and

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