



By Don Hill

# Managed Leadership

## Spin control—mindless trash

**M**uch of what a leader says and does these days is stage-managed for public performance. You have probably heard it described as 'spin control'. Frankly, in my view, it's mindless trash. But the conventional wisdom says if you want to be on top, you must square with the public's perception of what a leader ought to be saying on this or that issue... that the face of leadership must be likeable, media-friendly, charismatic. And perfect in every way.

Suppose for a moment that this strategy actually works. Does that make for *effective* leadership?

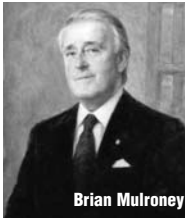
"I think that charismatic leadership is vastly overrated and fundamentally destructive," said **Michael Percy**, Dean of the School of Business at the University of Alberta. A public policy economist by training and veteran of provincial politics, Dr. Percy has been inside the minds of leaders at the federal level—politicians who have left their mark on the country. He takes a dim view of leaders who exploit charm "because what will often happen is very little will survive, in terms of successors and independent action behind the charismatic leader."

Citing examples such as the political legacy of **Pierre Elliot Trudeau** and **Brian Mulroney**, "with charismatic leadership, often what you get is more of a cult of personality," Dr. Percy complained, "as opposed to an organization that is working together to achieve a common purpose."



Pierre Elliot Trudeau

"Leadership for me in the 21st Century is a function," said **Ruben Nelson**, one of Canada's pioneers of serious thinking about emerging trends and the future. "The



Brian Mulroney

function of leadership is to understand the changing context—political or commercial or whatever... to understand that well enough to know if the life of the organization is relative to that context."

Nelson makes a good point: It doesn't matter if you think of yourself as "the one who must be obeyed" because shifts in the social, political and business environment will ultimately determine if your style of leadership *can* survive. "When you're working at senior levels, leadership takes

place at every level," said **Charlie Fischer**, president and CEO of Nexen Inc., a Calgary-based petroleum company with operations around the world. Nexen is heavily involved in the Alberta oilsands, and is considered one of the major players. "It is not one guy at the top that's the leader and everyone else is a follower. You've got to have leaders at every level. They are the people who make things happen at the front lines."

### SPOT THE WALDO

Let's do a little experiment: Imagine yourself in a room full of people. People you have never been with before. Look around. Who's the leader? And who isn't?

"Leadership is a myth," said **Janice Calnan**, an Ottawa-based management consultant, gesturing toward Parliament Hill, a stone's throw away. "I have asked teams to take that question on and they come back with lists that fill flip-charts."

Leadership is *doing*, Calnan observed in her book *Shift: Secrets of Positive Change for Organizations and their Leaders*. It is about getting your hands dirty and having the "courage to be straightforward," she nodded knowingly. "And that does take courage."

**Henry Mintzberg** admittedly has a narrow view of leadership, "which is that it is just part of managing, which is not very fashionable these days." Dr. Mintzberg is in the Clegghorn Chair of Management Studies at McGill University in Montreal. He is recognized worldwide as one of the leading commentators on management, and has written many highly-regarded books on the subject. "You are supposed to separate leaders from managers. But you know managers that don't lead are pretty uninspiring. But leaders that do not manage don't know what's going on."

Noting that Amazon lists over nine thousand books on leadership "and two on *follower-ship*," Dr. Mintzberg is averse to the ideal of a "great one riding on the white horse," and instead celebrates something he calls just-enough-leadership.

"I have a suspicion that great leaders are just ordinary people who don't have a lot of neuroses," he quipped sardonically. They "seem heroic," because "decent leaders are just ordinary people that aren't screwed up."

### REAL POLITIK

The 21st Century is well into its first decade. Yet, it seems that everything bad about the 1990s—the political scandals, the spectacle of corporate leaders trotted off to jail—still lingers. True, there has been a major change in the way business is policed; the rules of the game are more strictly enforced. But in politics, you would not be wrong to think it is business as usual.

"A lot of who gets into power has to do with who can blackmail whom," said **Cleo Paskal**, an associate fellow at

Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London, England. She gets paid big money to "tell it like it is" to clients around the world. "When you get to high-level politics, there is an enormous amount of threats and blackmail and bribery—that's just the way things work—that's what I analyze."

Paskal's clients include governments, multinational corporations and international investment houses that need to know the back-story, the levels of threat and intimidation and "what that might mean to national security issues." At the moment, her analysis is focused on the *affects* climate change will have on world governance. "It's not going to be pretty," she said.

### TRUTH TO TELL

"All of the major political parties are saying elect us and we will give you a better version of the path we're already on," Ruben Nelson noted, taking into account the present economic boom in Alberta. "Canada doesn't get it yet that we are literally living in the last decades of an industrial culture." While the signs are everywhere and seem patently obvious to anyone who cares to look, recent political history is equally instructive for those in the know.

A generation ago, **Kim Campbell**, for a short time the prime minister of Canada, spoke with utter candour during an election. She told the nation what she thought it needed to hear. The media pounced. The electorate not only voted Campbell out of office, it literally wiped the federal Progressive Conservative party off the political map. It is a lesson that some point to, myself included, as the genesis of the 'spin doctor' in Canada,



Kim Campbell

the handlers that manage every move and murmur made by political leaders in their charge.

Is managed leadership appropriate for an era of climate change? ✓

*Don Hill is a 'thought leader' at the Leadership Lab and Leadership Development at the Banff Centre. He is also an award-winning writer and broadcaster with a large footprint on the Internet. Listen to his radio series Inspiring Leadership, a 20-part documentary on contemporary leadership and the challenge of leading in the 21st Century every Saturday morning at 8 AM on the CKUA Radio Network.*

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