

Fear and loathing on the young Tory trail

Commentary

by Mike Evans

Friday, February 7, 4:30 p.m.: I dial Rob Splane, candidate for the Vice-President Finance of the Progressive Conservative Youth of Alberta and confirm a perverse desire to attend the leadership con-

ference in Calgary.

I intend to function as a subversive observer of Tiny Tory politics in the Hunter S. Thompson fashion. Of course, I have yet to achieve Thompson's stellar depravity, but I intend to do my best to, at the very least, strike fear into the hearts of this nation's future politicians.

Carefully examining my wardrobe, I withdraw a zebra-stripe, unconstructed cotton jacket and suitable accessories. No conformist clothing for this cowboy.

Upon arriving at the Stadium car park to board the official delegation bus at the headwaters of the Campaign River, I discover that it is less than half full. A well-organized campaign this. The primarily Edmonton contingent assures me that their representatives will be in Calgary in full force, having chosen for the most part, to provide their own transportation. I am let down. I counted on a travelling road show party. Like booze and drugs, loose women, loose men and loud music. Tough shit roccocco.

The trip down was roughly an equivalent experience to quaffing valium and scotch cocktails.

Upon arriving at the Delta Bow Valley Hotel in the concrete ghost town of Calgary (this is Friday night, this is downtown; where the hell is everybody? And we thought West Edmonton Mall was draining downtown Deadmonton of vitality) we assemble in the lobby to procure quarters for the weekend. As usual, I have no money.

"Don't worry," I am told by a stranger, "we'll find room for you somewhere."

We are met in the lobby by one of those legitimately ferocious beasts in political circles known as shadows. The candidates are the public faces of politics but the power brokers are the shadows who co-ordinate speeches and give up sleep for 72 hours. Tough, suspicious and shifty-eyed, they are somewhat distracted by my attire. Me. I have never seen so many pairs of grey pants partnered with blue jackets in my life. Of course, the red ties do something to liven up the act, but everyone is wearing a red tie too.

I learn quickly that there are hospitality suites upstairs where free beer is dispensed to attract support from the ranks of the undecided. My immediate destination is the Labbat's tub.

Exiting the elevator on the 14th floor, I am assaulted by a virtual tornado of electoral literature. The entire floor has been re-papered by the zealous campaigners with smiling faces beneath short haircuts. Except for the woman candidates. They have smiling faces beneath long haircuts.

Greg MacLean, former VP Finance and Administration of the UofA is one of two candidates for the presidency. An old friend, he meets me with open arms. "Who's your buddy, who's your pal, who you gonna vote for?" I mouth an Armenian blessing and hustle down the hall to the barley pop calling me in four-part harmony.

Most of that evening remains a blur. There is a memory of countless smiles, as if all present had smeared their teeth with vaseline so their lips slide off their teeth in an effortless expression of goodwill.

Saturday, I meet the other candidates vying for some ten to fifteen positions on the PCYA executive. The Calgary contingent, at home, seems to have a distinct advantage in the early going, and that impression is reinforced by the arrival of forty high school students (if you can sign your name, you can join the PCYA) who quickly find the free beer and proceed to ruin the reputation of the PC party for any other of the other patrons of the hotel. One sixteen year-old in particular, a five foot eight, two-hundred and forty pound blob of rancid bear fat is particularly disgusting. You get the impression he is not terribly well-informed about the issues to be discussed at the convention.

At six o'clock I scam a ticket for the formal dinner. The meal is satisfactory and we are blessed with the attendance of, among other dignitaries, the new deputy premier of the province, Dave Russell. He makes a joke. It is funny.

Dinner closes and preparations are made for a dance for the Young Tories. All the men are still in grey and blue. However, when the music starts, almost no one is in attendance, preferring instead to sample the Calgary nightlife. Yes, it is a contradiction in terms, but maybe local guides can find a preserve of hospitality.

Sunday morning, the troops are roused at 6:00 a.m. for final preparations. The drunken high school revellers are nowhere in sight. The Edmonton slate is well-organized and ready to dismember the opposition.


When the vote is tallied, MacLean has won by a margin of nearly two to one. The momentum has swung over to the Edmonton side and, with one exception, they crush their opponents. In the Edmonton Director contest, UofA student James Heelan loses by one vote to fellow Edmontonian Alice Schwender of the MacLean slate. It is however, a small victory, if a victory at all. Everyone else from "the opposition" is disheartened and dismantled at the polls.

This convention is over. There is still some suspicion as to my presence as I never once donned a grey and blue ensemble. But the victors are oblivious in their revelry. It is now only the losers who suspect I am a Communist subversive magician, who, through slight of hand, voted forty nine times.


I am now prepared to accompany Brian Mulroney in a little fear and loathing on the campaign trail. When is the next federal election? Will I have to pay for a room?

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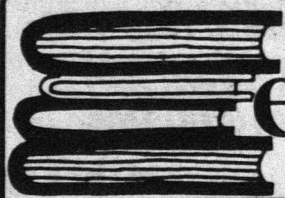
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February 22 & 23: CLOSED