

The year of succession

With a passel of provincial elections and leadership battles, and maybe a federal election, major change is coming to the political landscape in 2011

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Newfoundland and Labrador's popular premier Danny Williams showed how to understay your welcome in political office, stepping down on the heels of a major success.

Photograph by: Greg Locke, Reuters, Citizen Special

'Always understay your welcome.' So goes the old adage. It applies not only to social invitations and visits to relatives during the holidays but also to leadership. In fact, it serves as the first principle of leadership succession, surely one of the most delicate of challenges.

For all organizations, private or public, a change in leadership provides a signal moment. Managed successfully, it can rejuvenate a team and refocus its strategy; badly bungled, however, it can set an organization back on its heels, forcing a period of introspection. For political parties, even more than other organizations, leadership succession is both onerous and nerve-wrackingly existential.

Political parties have always lived or died on the backs of their leaders; today, however, more than ever, politics is driven by a media-obsessed focus on personality -- in particular, the personality of the leader. And for governing parties, the challenge of managing the succession while retaining power remains a daunting task in any democracy.

Sadly, few leaders of Canadian governments have actually understayed their welcome. In fact, it's more common for Canadian premiers and prime ministers to lead their governments to defeat before

their parties can commence the soul-searching process of leadership renewal. And the exceptions only serve to prove the rule. At the federal level, prime minister Lester Pearson was able to pass the torch to Pierre Trudeau in 1968, allowing for 16 years of uninterrupted Liberal rule. In Ontario, the fabled Big Blue Machine took credit for a record 42 consecutive years in office under six Conservative premiers.

Two current Canadian examples are instructive and provide both positive and negative examples of political succession. Surely the model is provided by Danny Williams -- who voluntarily stepped down at the end of November after seven scrappy years as the premier of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Williams departed on a high note, following the completion of a major hydro-electric agreement with Nova Scotia to finally launch the Lower Churchill power project. Leaving office with the highest public approval rating of any government leader in the country, Williams is allowing his dominant Progressive Conservative party sufficient time to install a new leader in advance of the next provincial election scheduled for October 2011.

On the opposite coast of Canada can be found the cautionary tale of how not to manage political succession. Only 18 months after his government was re-elected, Gordon Campbell was compelled to announce his resignation as premier of British Columbia. Severely weakened by a tax revolt stemming from a poorly managed decision to implement the harmonized sales tax, with the lowest approval rating of any government leader in Canadian history, and facing a rebellion from within his own Liberal party caucus, Campbell abruptly announced in November that he would leave when his party selects a new leader. His unplanned and ill-timed departure, with a provincial election scheduled for 2013, has resulted in a disoriented government and a political party in disarray -- a sad and clumsy end to a political career.

With these two vividly contrasting case studies in Canada's "book-end" provinces, we can look ahead to 2011 as a likely year of political succession. Why? Well with at least six provincial elections (thanks to fixed election dates), and at least one additional change in a premier's office (B. C.), as well as the possibility of a federal election, the New Year promises to be one of the busiest and most exciting in our country's political history. And elections, of course, provide the ultimate test of whether or not political leaders have overstayed their welcome. (Political junkies may want to take note and brace themselves for early October when five elections will occur in little more than a week: P.E.I., Northwest Territories, Manitoba, Ontario and Newfoundland.)

Some may argue that this is worrisome or unsettling, that the possibility of unprecedented change on such a scale could result in disruptions and a lack of policy continuity. But it seems just as likely that Canada is moving forward with the real potential for generational change, new ideas and innovative approaches. Some governing parties will find ways to regenerate themselves in office, others will be forced to do so from the opposition sidelines. Either way, some orderly and elegant leadership succession will prove helpful.

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