

Canada's Kimeleon quest

Who is our Prime Minister anyway?

She has been called many things since her meteoric (and surprisingly recent) rise to public prominence: Kim Kong, Brian Mulrone in drag, Canada's Madonna, and, perhaps most improbably, Madame Prime Minister; however, the best nickname for Avril Phaedra Cambell (better known by the name she legally switched to, Kim) might well be the "Kimeleon". Like the self-camouflaging chameleon, Campbell has proven able to take on a variety of guises when necessary. She has assumed many roles in a number of political parties since her entry into politics, and a key element of her newfound fame has been the ability of herself (or her political handlers) to cook up whatever public image or style is palatable to the voter. This marks Campbell as an excellent political survivor, but doesn't lend itself to presenting a clear picture of what she stands for. While Campbell crisscrosses the country on the campaign trail, leaving a trail of witty soundbites and whimsical photographs in her wake, it becomes

clear that nothing is clear about her. Any overall impression of her values or political ideology is all-too-frequently lost amidst the snappy patter and publicity stunts of her carefully orchestrated self-promotion, and this, coupled with her growing personal popularity, points to an obvious danger: that of Canadian voters making their electoral judgements on the basis of style rather than substance.

This style-over-substance promotional strategy dates back long before Kim's Prime Ministerial exploits. Her recent attainment of major media attention on the national scene coincided with her appearance in a slightly risqué photo in a book on famous Canadian women (Campbell, bare-shouldered, posed behind her judge's gown so as to make it seem she might be nude). It was a trivial lark, a joke, but it augmented the already growing celebrity of Campbell as an up-and-coming minister considered to be on the rise, perhaps even a contender for the top job in Ottawa. Who could have guessed that the media would stick to her, somehow sensing her marketability and devoting more speculative

coverage to her than any other prospective candidate for the Tory leadership? Whatever the reasoning, the media coverage of Kim came to be a self-sustaining phenomenon, marvelling at Kim's popularity and notoriety after having helped to create it. The public was flooded with

implement and, so far as anyone knows, still supports. Politically, she has yet to prove that she is not (as she has been called) Brian Mulrone in a skirt. All the personal flair in the world should not be able to conceal her role in the hated Mulrone regime, but that seems to be just what is happening. The only thing more galling than the conservatives' apparent assumption of voter gullibility is the fact that their Campbell-led party facelift actually seems to be working.

None of this means that Campbell should be automatically dismissed from consideration because she is Brian Mulrone's successor. Like any candidate, she should be judged on her own political record and policies; however, it seems that at present Campbell is riding a wave of popularity inspired not by her political merits but by the cult of personality that the media has constructed around her. It's all well and good for her to go country line-dancing and barbeque-hopping all summer, but when the chips are down what

we really need to see from our politicians is the facts about their policies, how they intend to govern us. Interestingly enough, some of Campbell's few recent policy announcements have been met with anger (her belief in unemployment being untreatable in the short term), and she has waffled on other issues (flirting with the removal of the GST from books and magazines, and going against her own previously stated policies by making cuts to Ottawa's outrageously expensive military helicopter plan). It remains to be seen if she has a policy on many issues, and if so, whether the electorate will swallow it. Whatever her true colours may prove to be, voters would be well advised to look past her flamboyant style of self-promotion and try to find the nuts and bolts of her platform. While there's nothing wrong with Campbell's personal style winning Canadians' hearts, it will be a shame if that is also the deciding factor in winning Canadians' votes.

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"The media coverage of Kim Campbell has become a self-sustaining phenomenon, marvelling at the notoriety it helped to create."

more than we ever needed to know about Campbell, most of it strangely irrelevant to her political aspirations. Somehow, Campbell's publicists and/or the media thought pegging her as a Renaissance kinda gal (musician, linguist, political scientist) was far more interesting than pesky details like her stance on the GST or NAFTA. Forget policy, the woman plays a mean cello!

Frighteningly enough, all this political theatre made Campbell a political favourite almost overnight. She was the acknowledged leader of the Tory leadership race before even announcing her candidacy, let alone actually campaigning. By the time she had won the job of Prime Minister, polls were pegging her as the most popular party leader in Canada. It's baffling to see this widespread public confidence in a woman with no experience as Prime Minister or party leader, to say nothing of the fact that before her media coronation her Progressive Conservative party was virtually non-existent in the polls thanks to national loathing of her predecessor and his policies, policies she helped