



## WINNER TAKES ALL by Alec Bruce

# The land of six-pack abs

**T**ogether, standing there in the floodlights of almost worshipful cameras, they glisten as young warriors, prepared to battle the forces of dissolution, mistrust or, perhaps, just slovenliness, as all dutiful models plucked from the pages of, say, *GQ Magazine*, must appear: With a minimum of subcutaneous fat tucked beneath their sculpted jowls and granite-hard abs.

To many commentators on both the left and right extremes of the political spectrum, the newly elected Grit premier of New Brunswick, Brian Gallant (age 32), and the Liberal contender for the elective throne of Canada, Justin Trudeau (a mere 11 years his colleague's senior), are ridiculous. Their joint photo opportunities merely illustrate to anyone who is truly thoughtful about good governance in this country that these pretty boys are woefully equipped to rule their respective, democratic principalities.

Still, looks can be, and often are, deceiving.

What certain critics point to as evidence of shallowness, callowness, naiveté, and youthful opportunism is actually intricately designed, calculated and even — if recent polls are any indication — cunning political strategy. Their weapon of choice is as old as soft drinks and dish detergent: Branding.

In this, they have learned much from their arch-nemesis, Prime Minister Stephen Harper,

who has spent as much time in office attempting to slay the dragon of political trademarking even as he has incongruently built his own legacy as a plain-spoken conservative of the sweater-vest-donning, piano-plunking variety, à la John Diefenbaker meets Henny Youngman to jam on a cold, winter's night in downtown Calgary.

The problem with Harper's brand is that, for a growing number of voters who are, problematically, losing faith in public institutions and those who manage them, it's fusty and played out. Four more years of federal Tory rule now seem like an awfully long time to let Ward Cleaver lock the doors at night in Everywhereville, Canada.

By contrast, Trudeau and Gallant don't appear to be shallow, callow and naive, as much as they are portrayed as energetic, determined and indefatigable. And the more their party brass

pumps that message, the more that message sinks in, just as sure as Coca-Cola is, in fact, "the real thing" and why dishes are never clean until they are "Cascade Clean".

In a province like New Brunswick — where the fiscal challenge is almost unimaginably tough, outmigration among the young is the rule, unemployment hovers, in some regions, perilously close to Great Depression levels, and divisive, irrelevant, partisan bickering among elected officials has come to dominate democratic dialogue — a strong, hopeful brand may be the sharpest arrow in Premier Gallant's quiver.

His clean-cut visage and almost athletic build credits the notion that though this province might now feel old, fat, lazy, and disappointed — it can change; it can, metaphorically speaking, hit the gym, tone up and slim down.

Of course, all good brands must cradle real substance; the value proposition must, in the end, produce, or at least enable, actual results.

In New Brunswick, that would mean persuading a fractious citizenry to concede to measures it has, so far, been unwilling to entertain: to slash as much as \$400 million a year from the provincial budget to battle a structural, annual deficit of at least that much and slowly pay down a long-term debt that stands at a whopping \$12 billion.

Does that mean a hike in the provincial portion of the HST? Does it mean highway tolls? Does it mean selling off major public assets, such as the liquor commission or (gasp) NB Power?

Or, on the expenditure side of the ledger, does it mean slashing back-office and front-line services in health care, public education and other social services?

Ultimately, Gallant's task is to convince his constituents that they are, or could be, winners in the complex calculus of economic development, and not the losers they have come to believe themselves to be.

That effort may well begin with a few charming photo opportunities. But it won't end there.

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### FEEDBACK

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