



## 11. Senior Adviser to the Leader on Tour

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# 11

## Senior Adviser to the Leader on Tour

*Mireille Lalancette with Marie Della Mattia*

In this chapter, we explore the role of the senior adviser to the leader – also called the political lead – in image management during the campaign. Political leads need to have experience in all aspects of campaigning: strategy, polling, targeting and messaging, fundraising, media relations, and social media. They are constantly thinking about the impact of every word and action on the candidate’s image and voters’ perceptions. Advisers play an important role in communication strategies of the leader before, during, and after the campaign. They prepare the leader for the long journey of a political campaign and participate in strategic choices that will help the leader to look her or his best among the public and in the media eye.

Ce chapitre explore le rôle du conseiller principal en gestion de l’image auprès du chef pendant la campagne. Ces conseillers, qui accompagnent les leaders au quotidien sur leurs tournées, doivent avoir de l’expérience dans tous les aspects de la campagne: stratégie, sondages, ciblage des message, collecte de fonds, relations avec les médias traditionnels et numériques. Ils réfléchissent constamment à l’impact que peut avoir chaque mot, chaque action sur l’image du candidat et sur la perception des électeurs. Les conseillers principaux jouent un rôle important dans les stratégies de communication du chef avant, pendant et après la campagne. Ils préparent le chef au long cheminement d’une campagne politique et ils contribuent aux choix stratégiques qui aideront le leader de parti à se présenter sous son meilleur jour devant le public et les médias.

**IN MOVIES ABOUT** political campaigning, we often see a character who whispers in a politician's ear, providing strategic advice about what to say to the media and/or making decisions about what information to conceal from the leader. Who are these skilled strategists? In Canadian politics, special advisers to leaders are often called political leads and go on tour with the leaders. They play a key role in a political campaign.

The political lead is the last voice in the leader's head before events and media scrums while on tour. The lead reports to the campaign director and travels with the leader at all times, providing constant feedback to keep the leader focused and on point. Image management takes up a substantial part of the lead's time. The job is all about making sure the leader successfully implements the campaign strategy while on tour. Since image encompasses every public utterance, movement, and interaction, a political adviser must evaluate choices about how to present the politician to voters and the media.

Image management requires strategic mobilization of symbolic devices – visual and verbal – to provide shorthand cues to voters. Branding, marketing, public relations, advertising techniques, and polling are then used to sell the candidate.<sup>1</sup> Research shows that citizens look for specific leadership qualities when electing a politician for office. Image and personality traits are significant determinants of vote choice.<sup>2</sup> During and between election campaigns, every aspect of a leader's life is leveraged to manage image, including style, character, public life, and private life.<sup>3</sup> Voters assess leadership abilities by looking for qualities such as honesty, intelligence, friendliness, sincerity, responsiveness, and trustworthiness.<sup>4</sup> Political advisers play a crucial role in helping the leader to project these qualities.

Political advisers need to have experience in all aspects of campaigning: strategy; research/polling; audience and targeting; messaging; and tactics such as voter contact, fundraising, media relations, and social media. They constantly consider a number of questions. Is our message coming through in our leader's images

and words? What are audiences hearing from us, and is it resonating? What accomplishes our goals of defining ourselves and defining our opponents? What helps us to define what the election is about? They use the answers to these questions to give continuous feedback to the leader.

What does it take to become a political lead? The campaign director in consultation with the leader usually selects the political lead well before the writ of election is issued. Political advisers need plenty of experience to get the job. It is among the most senior roles of a campaign. Years of experience managing people and understanding the psychology of leadership are key elements of a political lead's acumen. That experience might include working for years as a local campaign organizer, as a staffer to elected politicians, as a communication or advertising person, and/or as a staffer for leaders on their campaign buses. Studying politics in university does not specifically prepare someone for this job, but academic studies do help political leads to acquire the tools to analyze what makes politicians successful. They can also develop the necessary skills by examining past Canadian and American campaigns to find examples of what works and why. Those curious about voters' desires and concerns will be able to connect better with them and understand how they see the choices that governments make. Drawing on that experience helps the political adviser to earn the trust of the leader and campaign director.

Political advisers know what drives successful communications. They are good at breaking down politics and campaign strategies and explaining how things work. Their knowledge enables other personnel to build their own messages more successfully and achieve their communication goals. Like a tennis coach getting a player ready for a match, political advisers often participate in preparations for special events such as debates. They perform in the shadow of the politician, working behind the scenes so that the leader can shine in the limelight.

It is a powerful position in terms of having influence on the leader's headspace and performance. Being a political adviser is

not about knowing the most about policy or breaking news; the job is more about relationship and confidence. Political leads must understand the leader's mindset and have the discernment to know the right time to talk about each subject. They must embody the campaign message since they are the liaison among the war room, the leader's tour, and the leader. Advisers accompanying the leader's tour relentlessly ensure that the leader is delivering the campaign message to reporters and voters every day. They might also talk to reporters in the background. In short, they serve primarily as the leader's guide through the strategic training necessary to be the best and win the competition.

### Duties in an Election Campaign

When whispering in the leader's ear, political leads are always thinking about managing impressions and the leader's "presentation of self."<sup>5</sup> The overall goal of political image making is to generate, maintain, sharpen, and strengthen favourable perceptions among the public in order to affect their personal political attitudes and, by extension, decision making in strategic ways.<sup>6</sup> This special adviser is responsible for all aspects of the leader's performance. A political adviser's duties during an election campaign can be presented on a timeline with three major stages: before, during, and after the campaign.

Before the campaign, the political adviser must provide the leader with the confidence that each day will go as planned so that there will be no second-guessing the decision-making process. Political advisers and the rest of the strategy team work together to manage impressions and craft a strong message about the strengths of their leader. Image management helps to generate confidence and highlight the leader's best features. A good guideline is that "you can't create something if there is nothing underneath." A political lead works to polish the leader's brand during the campaign. Politicians have their own styles. Each has a unique background, communication skill, and motivation for being in politics. The political adviser

must factor in this information when planning the leader's tour and contemplating how to highlight the leader's strengths.

The leader's attributes are thoroughly studied by the campaign team before the campaign begins. In focus groups up to two hours long, citizens are invited to say what they think about the leader. This information offers a distilled look at the public's view of what the leader has to offer. It generates impressions of the perceived strengths and weaknesses of both the leader and opponents. Current advice suggests that leaders lean into what makes them different. The political adviser must keep the contrasts in mind when presenting the leader and trying to shift citizens' perceptions. During this crucial period, the adviser and the campaign team find a strategy for using the leader's strengths to shape the story of the campaign. The adviser tries to make both the team and the media see the election in a certain way, within a frame that works for them. This strategy is in line with the adoption of political marketing tactics in recent campaigns in order to modernize the party's brand.<sup>7</sup>

The activities intensify after the writ is dropped. The political lead supervises and coaches the leader to be at their best. The lead is responsible for the leader's preparation and performance and can influence what the politician wears; how the politician comes off the bus; what the politician says and does at events, interviews, and scrums; and how the politician interacts with citizens and the media while on tour. During the campaign, the political adviser works with the other members of the team to prepare the leader and think through questions: What is the message? How are we defining the choice for voters? Are we connecting with people on what they care about? Are we supporting the leader to be authentic and true to that individual's values, not scripted? Political advisers play a crucial role in "shaping and recalibrating campaign messages, selecting campaign tour stops, making sure their candidates put their best foot forward – and sometimes cleaning up when they put out the wrong foot."<sup>8</sup> On the campaign trail, every detail is considered, from the politician's words in speeches to the locations visited or the features of the politician's private life shown to the public.

Politicians, along with their advisers, devote time, money, and energy to present themselves in the best possible light. Collectively, they try to offer voters an appealing package without revealing how it was crafted strategically.

When planning events, the political lead asks certain questions repeatedly: What is the best way to tell our story? Whom is the leader with? What issues are we profiling? What places should we visit? How do we showcase our strengths? The three modes of persuasion – ethos, logos, and pathos – are continuously appraised and, if necessary, reoriented to offer an engaging discourse and image to voters.<sup>9</sup> The ethos is tied to the character and credibility of the political actor. The logos relates to policy and reliability in speeches. And the pathos is connected to the ability to foster emotions and a certain frame of mind to connect with voters.

A political lead's job is complex. It entails making decisions in attempts to convince voters to elect the party leader. Filtering information to let leaders operate at their best, the lead continually asks: "Do they need to know this, or would sharing the information distract the leader from focusing on performing?" The adviser keeps the chaos of campaigning out of the leader's thoughts, removing the leader from the campaign's daily vicissitudes. Leaders rely on their teams to deal with both small and big matters, so they do not need to be concerned with every aspect of the campaign along the way, such as the discovery that a candidate posted something controversial on social media. The job of the senior political adviser is to maintain focus and simplicity. This is challenging even in our daily lives – imagine what it is like during an election in which attacks are coming from every direction and the media are covering the campaign as if it was a boxing match. Social media platforms amplify this impression. In this context, leaders need not be in the thick of everything. They must be free to focus in order to perform well. During the campaign, their attention should be on connecting with the audience during a talk and answering journalists' questions calmly, confidently, and, most of all, clearly. The political adviser's

coaching makes the leader feel secure in the message – which, in turn, makes the leader appear to be authentic, an important aspect of modern politics.<sup>10</sup> The senior political adviser is responsible for fostering authenticity and having the leader internalize the message and campaign strategy. At some point, the leader must live and breathe the campaign message. The politician must deliver it every day of the campaign, whether on a talk show or during a town hall event.

Political advisers also participate in debate preparation. The team works with the leader to focus on what the audience should take away from the debate and believe about the leader and the opponents. As with any other job, overconfidence is a problem. Undermining confidence can be an even bigger problem. Coaching the leader to be at her or his best can be a long process in which things get worse before they get better. Why? Because being a political leader is different from being a local elected representative. Leaders continuously receive intense doses of feedback from all directions, including colleagues, media, and people on the street, even when they are not looking for it. They rely on strategists such as political advisers to sort out the often confusing and contradictory opinions about image and performance that can weaken a leader's confidence. Leaders are also coached to improve their focus and discipline. Since they interact with the media daily, there is a high risk that the campaign can be derailed if the leader says something wrong. Consequently, the management of message and image is a key concern throughout the campaign.

After the votes are counted, political advisers celebrate if their party is successful, or they roll up their sleeves to help the next leader get ready for the next election. During this period, they consider lessons that can be learned from the experience: What are the take-aways? How much of the result is due to context, and how much is due to something that we did? Learning from this intense experience is crucial; the adviser knows that there will be other leaders to coach and other strategies to develop.

## Overcoming Obstacles

During the campaign, the political adviser prepares the leader to be noticed in a favourable manner during key moments. For example, if a leader is widely dismissed by commentators, the adviser and the communication team must work to rehabilitate the leader's image and rise above expectations. Advisers must prepare leaders to exploit opportunities and be prepared for criticisms. This includes performing in the leaders' debates, answering questions about specific issues (or perhaps an unplanned event), reacting to false information, or simply interacting with voters while walking down the street.

In the 2019 campaign, race was a factor for Jagmeet Singh, leader of the New Democratic Party (NDP), as the first racialized leader to run for prime minister. His very identity made him different from the other leaders. To some Canadians, this raised a barrier to understanding. He and his team had to overcome preconceived notions of who he was and what he believed. Political advisers are mindful that the fundamentals of campaign strategy are about exploiting strengths and overcoming weaknesses. How can a desired image be conveyed, especially in a context of systemic racism?<sup>11</sup> During the campaign, questions such as "is Canada ready for a Sikh prime minister?" were often raised. As with sexism, these kinds of questions are insidious.

The NDP knew that Singh would be a tough sell in Quebec since the province had just passed Bill 21, which stipulates that public servants in positions of authority – such as teachers, judges, and police officers – are prohibited from wearing religious symbols. Following focus group research, the NDP saw that the panel members evaluated Singh's values positively, but party strategists needed to demystify "the turban and the religious orthodoxy they felt it represented."<sup>12</sup> To do that, and in line with image management strategies, Singh followed the practice of a number of leaders of opposition parties by publishing a memoir.<sup>13</sup> It allowed him to

present and demystify himself as a person – telling the story of his family, his trials, and his resilience. The book demonstrated that his values were aligned with those of his party and many Canadians. Profiling his political ideals – including that Singh is pro-choice – was part of the party’s message during the campaign, particularly in Quebec, where people assumed that the opposite is true because he wears a turban. The NDP team worked to make his differences a strength, not a weakness. They became part of the party’s messages and ads. Want a different result? Make a different choice. The political lead and the strategic communication team worked during the campaign to frame his difference as a force that would do politics differently. Also, the party created an ad that starts with a shot of Singh without his turban and shows how he puts it on. This is followed by scenes of him in a boxing ring and out in nature. The ad’s message is that Singh wants to fight for Canadians in the same way that he has had to fight all his life. The ad shows that he is more than his turban and that it does not define him. This was an important strategic move: it allowed the NDP leader to frame the question before he was framed by it.

This is an important takeaway for all campaign strategists: refuse to be defined by a campaign’s weaknesses. Every leader and every campaign face perceived risks, but they can be reframed as opportunities and used against opponents. Seizing control of the message changes the conversation. As all good tennis coaches would say, if a player’s backhand is a weakness, teach the player to have a better backhand. A player cannot win the match if his opponent can successfully target his weakest point.

After the campaign, political advisers and other campaign operatives engage in post-mortems to examine successes and failures. They look at how they presented issues to voters and evaluate which tools were useful and what kind of framing resonated or not with targeted voters.<sup>14</sup> They assess the accuracy of their assumptions during the campaign. They analyze the polls and see whether their projections were right or not.<sup>15</sup> Was talking about affordability the

best way to reach some citizens in specific ridings? Would a different narrative have helped? Could the image of the leader have been shaped differently in order to counter stereotypes? Political advisers take notes so as not to repeat mistakes in future elections. Sometimes they share their insights with journalists trying to interpret the results and assess what happened behind the scenes. Anonymity is often guaranteed so that the staffer does not experience repercussions for disclosing inside information.

As they did before and during the campaign, political advisers reflect on perceptions of their leaders. This helps them to make sense of what could have been done to shape the leader's image differently to win more votes. They reflect on communication strategies more broadly. They contemplate the strengths and weaknesses of how they reached out to and connected with the electorate. Political leads reflect on both the tools used for (e.g., traditional media, advertising, social media platforms) and the packaging of the message. They consider how they were able to reach specific segments of the population, such as the success that Singh enjoyed by lip-synching on TikTok, a social media video app.<sup>16</sup> Media fragmentation, regionalism, and the diversity of opinion and population are among the many reasons that it is challenging to convey a desired message to targeted audiences. Thinking about communication strategies means evaluating narratives and how they reach – or fail to reach – specific parts of the population. Using humour shapes the narrative in a different way and can grab the media's attention.<sup>17</sup>

In this sense, image management does not stop at the end of the campaign. Lessons learned from analyzing the campaign data help to make adjustments for the next campaign. Senior advisers on the leader's tour prepare for the next campaign by considering the responses to how messages were framed and delivered. The next time that they whisper in the leader's ear, their guidance will be grounded in their most recent campaign experiences and lessons learned, providing yet another source of counsel from the leader's retinue of image managers.

This chapter has shed light on the central work of the senior adviser to the leader – also called the political lead on tour with the leader – before, during, and after the campaign, as well as a the adviser’s role in image management strategies. It has shown how the senior adviser and campaign team work together to highlight the leader’s qualities and try to turn weaknesses into strengths. Voters have specific expectations of leaders, so much work must go into crafting the leader’s image in a socio-political context in which there are challenges and in which a campaign is simultaneously a short period and a long period to manage issues, images, and events.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Marland, *Brand Command*.
- <sup>2</sup> Bittner, *Platform or Personality?*
- <sup>3</sup> Lalancette and Raynauld, “The Power of Political Image.”
- <sup>4</sup> King, “Do Leaders’ Personalities Really Matter?”
- <sup>5</sup> Goffman, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.
- <sup>6</sup> Strachan and Kendall, “Political Candidates’ Convention Films.”
- <sup>7</sup> Marland, *Brand Command*; McGrane, *The New NDP*.
- <sup>8</sup> Hunter and Bailey, “Inside the Campaigns for the BC Election.” See also Shaw and Zussman, *A Matter of Confidence*.
- <sup>9</sup> On the modes of persuasion, see Flanagan, *Winning Power*.
- <sup>10</sup> See Enli, *Mediated Authenticity*.
- <sup>11</sup> For more on how the media cover racialized politicians in Canada, see Tolley, *Framed*.
- <sup>12</sup> Raj, “How Justin Trudeau Didn’t Lose the 2019 Election.”
- <sup>13</sup> Singh, *Love and Courage*.
- <sup>14</sup> See Gurney, “Election Post-Mortem, Part 1.”
- <sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*; and Gurney, “Election Post-Mortem, Part 3.”
- <sup>16</sup> See Gurney, “Election Post-Mortem, Part 2.”
- <sup>17</sup> See *ibid.*

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