



9. National Campaign Directors

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National Campaign Directors

David McGrane and Anne McGrath

Most observers agree that the actions of national campaign directors are consequential for the success or failure of political parties in Canadian federal elections. Yet little is known about what they do on a day-to-day basis. In this chapter, we argue that campaign directors play four important roles in national campaigns. They make strategic decisions about the allocation of resources and how to react to changing campaign dynamics, constantly monitor the overall strengths and weaknesses of the party's campaign, consult with a wide array of important political actors inside and outside the party, and solve large and small problems that threaten the progress toward the party's electoral success.

La plupart des observateurs s'entendent pour dire que les actions des directeurs de campagne sont étroitement liées au succès ou à l'échec des partis politiques lors des élections fédérales canadiennes. Pourtant, on sait peu de choses sur leurs activités au quotidien. Ce chapitre soutient que ces acteurs centraux jouent quatre rôles déterminants dans les campagnes nationales. En plus de prendre des décisions stratégiques au sujet de l'affectation des ressources et de la façon de réagir à l'évolution de la dynamique de la campagne, ils surveillent constamment les forces et les faiblesses globales de la campagne du parti; ils consultent un large éventail d'acteurs politiques importants à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de leur parti; et ils résolvent de petits et grands problèmes qui menacent la progression de celui-ci vers le succès électoral.

CAMPAIGN DIRECTORS APPEAR fleetingly in academic accounts of Canadian party history. With the exception of the work of Tom Flanagan, the University of Calgary political scientist who has managed a number of Conservative Party campaigns, the role of the campaign director is generally mentioned only in passing when political scientists discuss the successes and failures of political parties.¹ For example, in the chapters on the campaigns of federal political parties in the Carleton University–led series of studies, the names of national campaign directors usually appear with their dates of appointment and their backgrounds.² Little additional information is given.

Campaign directors themselves have authored much of what has been written about the role. They ascend to the apex of Canadian party politics only after years of working in a large number of roles for their respective party through which they acquire deep knowledge about their party’s culture, develop extensive networks, and understand thoroughly the organization of national and local campaigns. Canadians who follow politics were probably first introduced to the existence of national campaign directors through media accounts of Senator Keith Davey – the Liberal Party’s “rainmaker” – who managed the party’s successful campaigns from the beginning of the 1960s to the middle of the 1980s. At the end of his career, Davey wrote a political memoir entitled *The Rainmaker: A Passion for Politics*, which describes the strategies of the campaigns of the Liberal Party during his time as national campaign director.³ A few campaign directors from other political parties have followed suit.⁴ A common element of these books is that they concentrate on the pivotal events of the campaigns in which these men were participants. The reader gets a good sense of what went on in the back rooms and how these operatives reacted to the twists and turns of the campaign. However, their books lack a basic description of the duties that national campaign directors are expected to perform and how those duties fit into the larger organizational structure of a national Canadian campaign.

In recent elections, campaign directors have been thrust either willingly or unwillingly into the media spotlight. They have gained a public media profile as large as that of cabinet ministers and much larger than that of most MPs. For instance, in the lead up to the 2015 federal election, several newspapers and magazines ran stories highlighting that the national campaign directors for all three contenders for the government were women (Jenni Byrne, Conservative; Katie Telford, Liberal; and Anne McGrath, New Democratic Party) and exploring their personalities and life stories. Consequently, Byrne was the subject of much media speculation that she had been demoted when she stopped travelling with Prime Minister Stephen Harper on his tour plane in the middle of the campaign and returned to work in the war room in Ottawa. The party denied the rumour.

Overall, in the Canadian public and media, and to a lesser extent in academia, there is a sense that national campaign directors play a formidable role in Canadian federal elections. They are judged as having a significant amount of political power. Furthermore, their actions are seen as consequential for the outcomes of elections. They are like the head coach of a hockey team in that they play the leading role in devising the party's overall strategy and plan to win the election. Therefore, they are often held accountable for just about everything that happens during the party's campaign. Just like a head coach at the end of the season, a national campaign director will be proclaimed a genius if the party wins the election but, along with the party leader, will take most of the blame if the party loses it.

Duties in an Election Campaign

To examine the activities of campaign directors, we draw on the experiences of Anne McGrath and Jennifer Howard, the national campaign directors, respectively, for the 2015 and 2019 federal campaigns of the New Democratic Party (NDP). The duties of

campaign directors vary by party and election. Therefore, the description that follows is not intended to be definitive or to fit every case. Drawing on the recent experiences of these two operatives, we argue that national campaign directors have four primary duties: strategic decision making, consultation, monitoring, and problem solving.

As in life, in a campaign not all decisions are equally consequential. Every day during a campaign, volunteers, staff, and candidates make thousands of decisions with limited consequences. A campaign manager in a local riding will decide to send a candidate door knocking in one area of the riding and decide to ignore another area. Although such a decision could be important for the success of that local campaign, it is not a “make or break” decision for the party’s national campaign. Campaign directors are frequently involved in making “strategic decisions.”⁵ Such decisions are complex and thus made at the top of the organization. They have great impacts on the performance of an organization because they shape its general direction, commit large amounts of resources, and are not easily reversible.

Within days of their appointment, campaign directors have to start making a variety of strategic decisions. One of the first and most important decisions involves human resources management. They need to build a team of senior staff, which necessitates hiring new people, keeping some people in their existing positions, and moving other people to new positions. They are particularly interested in hiring directors for each of major departments at party headquarters such as digital outreach, finance, and fundraising. Another task that needs to be undertaken immediately is the creation of a formal campaign strategy document that broadly outlines the main elements of the campaign. Once this document is in place, the campaign director collaborates with the directors of each department to create the campaign budget and formulate specific plans for areas such as platform development, communication with the media, organization within local ridings, candidate recruitment, and the leader’s tour. Like the pieces of a large puzzle,

the strategy document, the budget, and the plans in these specific areas set the general direction of the party's campaign long before voters start to cast their ballots. As the campaign approaches, these documents are constantly refined by the campaign director and their senior staff.

After the writ drops, strategic decision making continues to be an important duty of campaign managers. However, decisions have to be made more quickly, and their consequences are much more immediate. Every day of the official campaign period campaign directors are involved in making decisions about which events the leader will attend, how to react to unforeseen events making headlines, and when and how to criticize opponents as the dynamics of the campaign develop. Given the extensive planning that has gone into the campaign, strategic decisions about altering the allocation of resources and organizational structures are more difficult to carry out during the writ period, though small changes in the leader's schedule and some shifting of resources to ridings where the party is in trouble are possible. The stakes are high, and there is always risk and reward involved. The campaign director's strategic decisions about how to respond to the fast-moving and ever-changing campaign environment and about where to make last-minute organizational adjustments can have large impacts on the overall performance of the party on election day.

It would be a mischaracterization to suggest that campaign directors make these strategic decisions in isolation in their offices, far removed from others. Consultation is a process that campaign directors must engage in daily. They have to consult with and report to a plethora of people. In the pre-writ period, they interact daily with the directors of the departments of party headquarters and speak frequently to party staff spread throughout the country. Formal reporting occasions establish relationships of accountability between the campaign director and the people in the party who fight on the front lines of the elections. They have frequent meetings with the leader of the party and the leader's staff to discuss election preparations and possible election themes. They report to the party's

executive and hold conference calls with candidates and local campaign managers.

Informal consultations are also part of their daily activities as they speak one on one or in small groups with the party president, senior MPs, representatives of citizens' groups and industrial associations, members of the media, and prominent pundits. These conversations allow a campaign director to get a sense of the feelings and thoughts of important party members and influential people in Canadian politics. The interactions are also opportunities to influence the thoughts and actions of these people. During the election, campaign directors generally continue to consult the same individuals and groups that they consulted prior to the election period. The difference is that, because of time constraints and events happening quickly, they can consult a much smaller group of people before acting. Ultimately, efforts to consult as widely as possible before making decisions can help the campaign director to make the best decision, whether a small decision with short-term consequences or a strategic decision that might prove to be decisive for the outcome of the campaign.

As mentioned, campaign directors have directors working under their supervision who are responsible for specific elements of the campaign (e.g., digital outreach or managing the media). Although these staff concentrate exclusively on their responsibilities, the campaign director must constantly monitor all areas of the campaign to discern where strengths and weaknesses are emerging. In short, a campaign director always tries to get a sense of the big picture.

In the pre-election period, the day begins with both traditional media and social media scans to see which issues are emerging within Canadian politics and whether there is any immediate role for party headquarters to play. Next the campaign director looks at the daily reports coming in from the various departments that track the party's fundraising, organization, spending, and communication. These reports give an overall sense of the party's performance in these areas. The information indicates how close these departments are to meeting the goals and internal deadlines set out

in the strategy documents of the campaign. These reports are crucial for understanding the party's overall performance and the areas where the campaign director needs to intervene to improve it. The rest of the day is filled with face-to-face meetings and conference calls with a variety of people from party staff to vendors to stakeholders. The slate of people scheduled for each day changes, but the goal of all the meetings is always to monitor the party's election readiness – though a campaign director never thinks that the party is 100 percent ready for an election or that there is nothing more that can be done.

Once the writ is dropped, monitoring duties become even more important. If campaign directors are stationed in Ottawa and not on the leaders' tours, then they arrive at party headquarters early to prepare for the day. Sometime before 9 a.m., they hold a daily strategy meeting with their staff to monitor all of the key metrics of the campaign (e.g., polling, fundraising, canvassing) and to review the "message of the day" that war room staff have formulated. The directors of each department are then given instructions to follow at the end of that meeting. With the morning strategizing done, the rest of the campaign director's day and evening consists of meetings to get updates on particular aspects of the campaign. Campaign directors make decisions about what direction to take in these areas and the planning required in preparation for the next day of the campaign. Between these meetings, they are present and visible outside their offices as they check with their senior staff to see how they are progressing on instructions given to them at the beginning of the day. They are also in communication with personnel on the leader's plane. They speak with staff on the plane and possibly the leader at least twice a day. Their day ends after the leader's last event, the time of which varies depending on the time zone, but normally it is about 9 p.m. After a final round of emails and phone calls once back at home, campaign directors hopefully will be in bed about 11 p.m. They cope with the sleep deprivation by the adrenalin that fuels their work in a hectic, stressful environment.

Campaign directors' monitoring role sets up their final important duty: problem solving. The general rule both before and after the writ of election is dropped is that areas of the campaign running smoothly and meeting expectations get less attention from campaign directors. For example, if their daily monitoring indicates that candidate recruitment is running ahead of schedule, then they can turn their attention to other areas of the campaign that might be struggling. Another rule is that, the more difficult the problem, the higher the likelihood that campaign directors will be called on to deal with it. Some of the problems brought to their attention are challenging but can be dealt with relatively quickly and easily. For instance, if candidates in a certain region are struggling to get media attention, then campaign directors will instruct the director of communications to organize media training for them. However, the campaign director does not have the time to solve every problem that arises during a campaign. They have to trust their senior staff to figure out which problems do not require their attention and which problems do.

Occasionally, a crisis explodes and will require all of the campaign director's immediate attention. The emergence of such a serious problem usually necessitates quick strategic decision making that can be decisive for the election results. For instance, a gaffe by the leader or an issue that divides the party can throw the entire campaign off message and cause polling numbers to plunge. In these types of situations, almost all of the central resources of the campaign are consumed with dealing with it, and the campaign director is called on to take a leadership role in coordinating all parts of the campaign to get it back on track as soon as possible. It is their job to keep everyone focused, unified, and working together to solve the problem at hand.

Overcoming Obstacles

Over the course of one evening, all four duties of the NDP's campaign director in 2019 came into play: monitoring, consultation,

problem solving, and strategic decision making. With little time to reflect, she had to act quickly concerning an issue that turned out to be decisive for the success of the party's campaign.

As was her duty, the campaign director was monitoring a town hall meeting that NDP leader Jagmeet Singh was holding in a racially diverse riding in Toronto. As he was speaking, the campaign director was made aware that a photo of Justin Trudeau in blackface had surfaced and that the news story was going viral on social media. Singh had not seen the photo, nor had he been briefed on what to say about it. As at every town hall meeting during the campaign, the NDP leader was scheduled to take questions from the media after he had responded to questions from the public. The NDP staff on the leader's tour immediately called the campaign director to consult with her on how to solve this problem. With the clock ticking down before the leader started to take questions, the campaign director was faced with a strategic decision. Would it be best to pull the leader awkwardly off the stage before he was asked a question about the blackface photo so that he could be briefed? Or would it be better to allow him to speak from the heart and get his response out into the public realm as soon as possible? Considering that Singh was the first person from a racialized minority background to lead a major Canadian political party and the only non-white party leader in the campaign, everyone in the country would be interested in his reaction. Indeed, it would instantly become one of the top new stories of the day.

In consultation with the NDP staff on the leader's tour, the campaign director decided to let the event continue as planned. Once the decision was made, she thought to herself: "Am I really doing the best thing for my leader?" However, she had often talked with him about his personal experiences with racism that he had faced growing up in Canada. She therefore had confidence that he could handle the impromptu situation.

A reporter put a question to Singh about the photo and said that the Liberal campaign had confirmed its authenticity. The NDP leader stopped to think. He responded that he had not seen the

photo but that it was “insulting” and “troubling” and that the prime minister would have to answer for it. He then spoke about how the act of dressing in blackface makes a mockery of racialized minorities. The room of supporters, many of whom had often experienced racism themselves, erupted in applause. Given these difficult circumstances, Singh had performed admirably, and many news media, pundits, and citizens began to praise his answer on social media.

The NDP campaign director was then informed that the prime minister would hold a press conference on the blackface photo that evening. Another challenge immediately emerged: Should the NDP leader address the issue that night now that he had seen the photo, or should he wait to do so until the next day? Over the phone, the campaign director held a meeting with Singh and staff on their bus as it travelled to a hotel in Mississauga, where an event was scheduled for the next day. Singh had already received a large number of messages and phone calls from racialized people that he knew personally telling him about how the blackface photo was bringing back painful memories of discrimination and bullying. After consultation among the campaign director, the leader, and his staff, the strategic decision was made to have Singh address the media that evening soon after Trudeau had finished speaking. There were few racialized minority voices commenting in the media on the story, and Singh felt a responsibility to racialized minorities in Canada to speak up as soon as possible. Although there could be a general conversation on what the leader would say, there would be no time to develop a precise message, write comprehensive speaking notes, or rehearse lines.

Without an appropriate backdrop for television, Jagmeet Singh held a hastily organized press conference in a poorly lit hotel room about one hour after Justin Trudeau spoke. The campaign director held her breath because she had no idea exactly what Singh would say. It was the NDP leader speaking directly to Canadians on a major issue of the campaign with almost no preparation. It was a risky proposition. Fortunately, Singh effectively communicated that he wanted to focus not on Trudeau’s actions but on the people who

were hurt by them. Talking to young racialized minorities, he said “You might feel like giving up on Canada. You might feel like giving up on yourselves. I want you to know that you have value. You have worth. And you are loved. And I don’t want you to give up on Canada, and please don’t give up on yourselves.”⁶ The campaign director considered Singh’s reaction to the blackface photo his finest moment in the campaign. His popularity in internal polling and public domain polling began to rise after his address.

These events offer an excellent example of how a campaign director must monitor, consult, problem-solve, and make strategic decisions – sometimes all within a few hours. Technology can force a campaign to pivot quickly amid fast-moving circumstances. There is no time to think through a response when an immediate reaction is required. In the days of Keith Davey and other campaign directors of yesteryear, political operatives carefully planned their media interactions and then waited to see the headlines on the evening news or in the morning newspaper. In today’s hybrid and fast-paced media system, a party leader and senior staff receive instant responses to what is happening on the campaign trail. They rapidly exchange information by phone and take cues from social media reactions. Pressure grows to address the press without sufficient preparation. It is a lesson that communication technologies can shape campaign decision making. As politics speeds up, campaign directors will be compelled to harness all of their expertise as they inject a measure of strategic calm into hectic, high-stakes situations.

Notes

¹ Flanagan, *Harper’s Team*; Flanagan, *Winning Power*; Jeffrey, *Divided Loyalties*, 24–28; McGrane, *The New NDP*, 47–60; Marland, *Brand Command*, 147–48.

² See Pammett and Doran, *The Canadian Federal Election of 2015*, 30, 63, 86.

³ Davey, *The Rainmaker*.

⁴ Flanagan, *Harper’s Team*; Flanagan, *Winning Power*; Lavigne, *Building the Orange Wave*; Laschinger, *Leaders and Lesser Mortals*; Laschinger, *Campaign Confessions*.

⁵ Wilson, “Strategic Decision Making.”

⁶ Quoted in Zimonjic, “Trudeau Says He Is ‘Deeply Sorry.’”

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