

Public Affairs: Your Online Newsletter

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[President's message](#)

Polling is a look in the rear view mirror



by Chris Benedetti
PAAC President

A year ago, the election results surprised everyone, particularly the pollsters. Today, as the country heads for the potential destruction of Paul Martin's wounded minority government and yet another election, once again people are staring into polls as if they were crystal balls, trying to predict the unpredictable. Perhaps it's time to step back and realize the place of polling in the scheme of things.

On May 18 we will once again welcome Darrell Bricker, President of the Public Affairs division at Ipsos-Reid. He last visited us on Friday, June 25 last year, mere days before the election, to share his freshest polling results. He'll do that again, and once

again he'll likely be at pains to remind us that a poll is not a magical view of the future. The Ipsos polling results a year ago were similar to those of other polling firms at the time, and they predicted a Conservative minority win. Yet the voters surprised everyone, and proved that campaigns matter, right up to the final days.

Indeed, recent history tells us that the public mood can change rapidly, and that we must remember a poll is but one frame of a moving picture. After Paul Martin finally got rid of rival Jean Chrétien and seized the Liberal crown and scepter, his popularity was high and he was looking at a 200 seat majority. Then the revelations began and so did his troubles. Pollsters across the country reported similar trends as Liberal numbers fell and those of the Conservatives rose - a process that continued into the campaign itself. Yet those final few days of the campaign turned things around, and proved that the polling results were not views in a crystal ball, but in a rearview mirror. Voters were volatile, and therefore susceptible to the increasingly intense advertising campaigns of the warring parties. That volatility is even greater today, in the face of hugely increased evidence of longstanding Liberal corruption in Quebec on the one side, and undiminished fear of Stephen Harper's right-wingedness on the other. Polls rose and dipped wildly in recent weeks, as Paul Martin alternately took the latest Gomery revelations on the chin, then went on TV to state his case, then his enemies responded and the media commented, placing their own political spin on the commentaries. Those wildly changing polls predict nothing; they only mirror public confusion.

So here we are one year after the War of '04, teetering on the edge of another election. Last year a Toronto Star headline lamented, 'Liberals Desperate.' Not much has changed over the past 12 months. Indeed, by some measures the main political parties are not preparing to fight a new election so much as they are getting set to fight last year's election again, with renewed vigour and more powerful ammunition. In 2004 Paul Martin's soft spot was honesty and credibility. It's worse now. A year ago, Stephen Harper's problem was the ease with which he can be demonized. That's still the Liberal's most obvious and effective tactic, particularly in panicky Ontario. Gilles Duceppe concentrated on spraying Liberalcide throughout his province in '04. He will do so again. And Jack Layton will once again likely campaign for the support of disaffected Liberal voters.

These things are all true this year as they were before, and so are the facts that voters are angry, confused and volatile, and that polling, however fascinating, will always be a look in a rear-view mirror. Surprises can lie ahead.

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It is now my pleasure to welcome our newest members to PAAC:

- Sharon Maloney
- Andrew Szende, electronic Child Health Network
- Jeff Smith, Hill & Knowlton Canada
- Doug Little, Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation

- Rebecca Irwin, GPC Public Affairs

Thanks for your continued support, and as always, please feel free to contact me with your ideas: cbenedetti@sussex-strategy.com.



[Ottawa report](#)

Dr. James Young at the National Press Club

On Wednesday, April 20, PAAC hosted an event at the National Press Club in Ottawa featuring Dr. James G. Young, Special Advisor to the Deputy Prime Minister, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada.



Dr. James G. Young spoke at the National Press Club on April 20.

Canada has been a world leader in many global relief efforts for foreign disasters such as the recent Asian tsunami, has dealt with a few disasters of its own, including the 1998 Ontario ice storm and the frightening outbreak of SARS, and Dr. Young was there to tell about it.

Listening to him, it was clear that with recent history filled with sudden need for

aggressive action in the face of disaster, be it war damage somewhere like Afghanistan or natural disaster, disease or terrorism, the need to be prepared is no longer a Boy Scout motto.

That's why Young's department has blossomed from the tiny Emergency Measures organization to its present incarnation as Public Safety Emergency Preparedness Canada (PSEPC), a much larger organization, with a wide mandate for preparedness, planning, response and disaster recovery.

His work often stresses bringing order from chaos, he said. But you cannot simply wait for chaos to assert itself. "When you see something coming you must act aggressively," he told his audience. "You're never going to have an emergency that is smooth and ordered."

-with files from Rosaleen Dickson

[Event report](#)

Airport 2012: The final sequel

Lorrie McKee, former PAAC Board member and General Manager of the Greater Toronto Airports Authority (GTAA), was featured speaker at our April 13 breakfast event at the Sutton Place Hotel in Toronto. The title of her talk was, *Then and Now - The Pickering Airport Project: A Review of Stakeholder Management*.



**Lorrie McKee (left) chats with PAAC Past President Joe MacDonald.
Below: McKee takes the podium April 13 at the Sutton Place Hotel.**



McKee is responsible for shepherding the Pickering airport project on its long trek toward a construction start-date now expected some time in 2012. And she admitted that when she agreed to take on that responsibility, "It filled me with dread...the project has a certain amount of notoriety."

Which is something of an understatement. The Pickering airport project was the *bête noire* of Toronto's activists in the 1970s. Yet McKee says her dread is long past, although people still ask her if she wears a flak jacket. "Years later, I still have no flak jacket and I think I won't need one." But in fact, her optimism is her flak jacket. Because Lorrie McKee is in charge of the longest delayed and most effectively obstructed project in Canadian commercial aviation, and as the time creeps nearer when governments will have to do what governments hate to do - commit themselves - the history of the project suggests a flak jacket won't come close to being enough.

The GTAA was born in the 1990s, McKee explained, when the federal government decided to lease airports to not-for-profit groups in order to obtain money for re-investment in those airports. Government would be landlords and regulators while the private groups, with no shareholders and no government funding, would be in a better public relations position because they would be tainted neither by Big Business nor much-derided government. There would be a shift from the taxpayer-funded to the user-funded. The GTAA mandate was to develop "a co-ordinated system of airports in the GTA." That's airports, with an S. Plural. So eventually the Ministry of Transport had to steel itself to meet that mandate and begin a process for "assessing the need for a Pickering airport," she said.

People Or Planes

But in fact, the need for such an airport has been clear since the 1970s, when the project first achieved the notoriety McKee alluded to, which everyone who read newspapers in those years will clearly remember. The original Pickering airport proposal was tarred, feathered and run out of town on a rail by a hellbroth of protestors, NIMBYists, media windmill-tilters, professional activists and opportunistic politicians propelled by an anti-development mindset that was the *zeitgeist* of the 1970s. People Or Planes was the name of the main protest group, and the media loved that name because it made pictures in the sky. You could have people, walking barefoot on green grass and drinking lemonade under a smiling sun while their children and puppydogs capered about, or you could have the screech of aircraft in the sky and the stench of jet fuel, and the daffodils turning brown and shrivelling like a political promise after election day. The protests took the popular form of the time. Young men with thin voices strummed guitars and sang...

That's the gist of what happened, although McKee used much more professional terms to describe it all. "Thirty years ago the government evicted people from their homes and said we'd build an airport that would generate the need for an airport," she recalled. The result: People rose up against the government's heavy-handed tactics and, with the support of the media, handed that government a legendary defeat.

Those events did not change the need for a new airport, but by the time the issue had to be revisited in 2001, it had changed the thinking about what kind of airport would be needed, and how the issue could be dealt with. That's why McKee's talk focused on the new approach to stakeholder management, a task very poorly handled in the '70s.

For this new version of the project, the GTAA acquired a chunk of land four times the size of the original Pearson airport lands, with an appropriately large array of stakeholders to which they must defer if they know what's good for them, including residents, pols looking for an issue, business people, Special Interest Groups and any airport tenants who might want to weigh in. And this time around, it's acknowledged that Pearson airport will continue to be the major international airport for Toronto, while the proposed Pickering airport will have the role of a "regional reliever."

Regional reliever

Regional Reliever is also a good public-relations name, which also makes pictures in the sky. If an airport is a reliever, it's there to relieve things that need relieving, such as congestion, inconvenience, and the vacuum of unmet needs. Thirty years after the protests first turned it back, the Pickering airport is now a kinder, gentler project with much more public involvement. "It's a really different project today," McKee stressed. "Environmental awareness today is very different from the way it was in the 1970s. There is much more stakeholder consultation." Such as with runway siting, for example, where major creeks were avoided due to environmental concerns.

In this renewed attempt to slide an airport past potential protests, the GTAA's job has

been to make nice with the community for years and years, in order to establish a friendly and co-operative relationship. After all, this is a community with its blood up, having won before against the evils of landfills, development, and the assault on the Oak Ridge Moraine. These residents are not to be underestimated.

So the GTAA is committed to a slow, planned process to ease the community into the idea by involving them in that process. To this end, McKee said, GTAA acquired the use of an historic house at Highway 7 and Brock Road, renovated for the task with an old-fashioned, homey feel to it. This is the place for public gatherings and committee meetings, and the look and feel of it is calculated to reassure residents that the feds are not sneaking up behind people with an eviction notice in their teeth. There is an openness about the place. There they hold meetings and welcome visitors and maintain daily office hours. There they brief their stakeholders. There is a [web site](#) where plans and intentions and community information are posted for one and all. There is a newsletter. In 2004 they released a Draft Plan to the public. McKee and her team, ever mindful of the ghost of Mirabel, are determined to do right by the community and by the project itself.

No effort is spared to facilitate public input. The Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency (CEAA) is in charge of environmental concerns, so let nobody claim Big Business or Big Government are walking all over the environment in their jackboots. CEAA even offers intervenor funding - meaning if you want to obstruct the project, the agency will pay the tab.

Question: Will being nice to protestors mollify them? Those experienced in media matters might be forgiven for doubting it. Key issues for modern protestors will certainly include a range of items from the reasonable through the shortsighted to the downright silly. They will want to talk about noise, Environmental Assessment, the lesson of Mirabel, the presence of an airport in Hamilton, the downturn experienced by commercial aviation in the post-911 era, and anything else that's useful as a reason to believe nobody will ever need another airport near Toronto - or that if they do, say in 2020, why then the government can just put one up then and there, like a circus tent. Yet whether GTAA sees merit in an issue or not, McKee knows they can no longer claim an airport will generate its own demand, as government claimed thirty years ago. GTAA must prove to the community that despite Hamilton, there is still a need for an airport at Pickering. The long timelines required for this task account for the far-off construction start date of 2012.

Held hostage

"This community has been held hostage to this issue for many years," McKee said solicitously. Yet some might say commercial aviation and the flying public have been held hostage by obstructionists, and that imposing a process that delays construction by so many decades is the final victory of people who simply dislike development. No matter. People Or Planes had power 30 years ago, and an impact on the 1975 election, and their philosophical descendents will have power again when the long-silent bulldozers of the Pickering airport project once again have the temerity to belch

their diesel fumes.

The careful stakeholder management McKee described is clearly based on an assumption that historical opposition was the result of ham-fisted government tactics, including expropriations, closed meetings and an insensitivity toward the public. If that's true, look for the new Pickering airport construction to commence on schedule seven years hence, with only a minor gaggle of placard-wavers to say nay.

But if previous opposition was simply those philosophically opposed to development whipping up local pols and the media, well...perhaps McKee should still keep an eye out for a good deal on Kevlar.

-D.S.

[The Web Editor's corner](#)

The filthiest election in modern memory

by David Silburt
PAAC Web Editor

Paul Martin looked like a sap when he went on TV last month to beg. But that was how he chose to begin his campaign for the next election, which is certain to quickly degenerate into the filthiest political fight in modern memory.

Martin's national TV address was not really a plea to the public to 'give Paul another chance, give Paul another chance,' because it's the opposition parties who decide when and how to bring down the minority Liberal government, not the public. Martin's TV election speech, portraying his personal emergency as if it were a national crisis, was done to blame the opposition parties in advance for the tedium of yet another election.

Paul Martin wants to be seen as the Liberal committed to rooting out corruption, which is why he keeps poking people in the ribs and reminding them that he put Justice Gomery in motion, and they should see that as proof of his fine character. But in fact he launched the Gomery Inquisition out of political necessity. People were ready to talk. The bag was full of angry cats, yowling aggressively, already tearing their way out. Martin could either get an inquiry going on his own terms or let the media dig the dirt for themselves. By launching an inquiry headed by a nice, sedate judge, nothing was made public that could have been kept hidden, but Martin was able to wrap himself in the flag when the dirt hit the fan. Then, by the time April rolled around, he knew his best chance was to start the election off by going on TV to begin a campaign that was clearly inevitable.

His stated wish was for a chance to continue in power while Mr. Justice Gomery chews the AdScam evidence over in his judicial cud over the summer, and rage against the Liberals cools down. That way, by the time Gomery finally egests his nice gray report it will be almost Christmas, a time when people would rather think of other things. To give himself yet a better chance, Martin promised to delay another full month after that before calling an election, thus giving him the whole rest of the year plus an extra month to dish out goodies to the public - a task he set about at warp speed.

There's nothing in a long delay to benefit Stephen Harper. Thanks to the Conservative Party's decision to choose him over Belinda Stronach, they are saddled with a leader who is easy to demonize as a right-wing crazy. The only antidote for that is fresh rage, which is why Harper needs an election while the public's blood pressure is still high enough to pop their eyeballs clean out of their skulls.

Gilles Duceppe also has nothing to gain by giving Paul another chance. With public rage against Liberals at redline in Quebec, he can now look forward to chasing every surviving Grit out of his province, setting the stage nicely for a shot at becoming the first Emperor of Free Quebec. But he needs that public anger, so he's not ready to give the Liberals jack -

- Say. Jack Layton has deftly positioned himself as the only one of the three leaders interested in working for a living. Layton is switchblade-sharp. He knows full well an election is coming whether he wants one or not. Harper and Duceppe can make it happen without him if they want one badly enough - and they want it so much they're ready to wheel a couple of guys into the House straight from the hospital on gurneys, with IV poles trailing along, to vote against the government. So Layton set to work squeezing Paul Martin to provide some populist changes to the budget. It won't hurt the NDP at all when the other parties bring down the government and Layton's knifepoint budget with it. Jack Layton will still retain his image as a better choice for lefties.

The most dedicated of the nation's left-wing voters won't be persuaded to shift from Liberal to Conservative. Harper is too easy to portray as a bogeyman. But some voters can be persuaded to move further to the left into Layton's friendly embrace, and Liberal campaign strategists will do most of the persuading. Remember the last-minute ad blitz by the Liberals that turned the tide last time? The ones portraying Harper as a meanie who would send our troops to Iraq, to fall as wheat before the scythe against the mighty radical hordes? Those ads are going to look like milk-for-health commercials compared to what's coming. Be assured that as you read this newsletter, advertising experts of the finest calibre are working on TV spots designed to scare the stuff out of potential Conservative supporters, and the meanest of them will be saved for last. It will take steady nerves to remember Liberal corruption in the face of them. The NDP has good reason to hope that many left-of-centre voters who still want to punish Liberals at the end of it all will be highly susceptible to Layton's pitch.

Harper may hope to replay Brian Mulroney's landslide of 1984. But Harper's

Conservatives are not Mulroney's. Mulroney was a Quebecer first, last and foremost, and that helped him win his landslide. Harper, despite his jarring ability to change gears between English and French in alternate sentences on TV, represents the end of the Quebec hegemony, and every Quebecer knows it.

At this writing, opinion polls were still bouncing unpredictably on the issue of public appetite for an election, and Duceppe and Harper were still carefully circling the bleeding Prime Minister, growling deep in their chests and looking for a chance to spring. Emotions and stakes are high, compunctions and gag-reflexes are low, so get set for the filthiest election in modern memory. A Conservative landslide is unlikely, but a Conservative majority is possible. So is a Conservative minority with Jack Layton holding a snarling Harper on a short leash.

But if Paul Martin pulls off any kind of a win using the same tactics that have always served his party well, and does so in the face of all the latest evidence of towering corruption in his party, it will mean much more than continued Liberal rule. It will mean the Liberals can commit any crime, misdemeanor or malfeasance without losing power. It will be a signal that they can get away with anything.

Anything at all.

Have your say

We welcome member input, whether it's a letter to the editor, a story suggestion or a proposal for a guest column. Feel free to email your input or suggestions to us. All submissions for publication on this site are subject to approval by the Editorial Board.

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Public Affairs is E-published by the Public Affairs Association of Canada
100 Adelaide St. West, Suite 705
Toronto, ON
M5H 1S3

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