

SHEDDING LIGHT ON *THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS*

an interview with Warren Kinsella by Scott Sellers

CONTROVERSIAL POLITICAL STRATEGIST WARREN KINSELLA has been dubbed “the Prince of Darkness” of Canadian politics. He is someone that politicians and pundits across the country admire, love . . . and loathe for his style of tough, in-your-face politics. A successful lawyer, journalist, and the bestselling author of *Web of Hate*, Kinsella is a master of the Liberal Party “war room,” and helped Jean Chrétien win sweeping majorities in the 1993 and 2000 federal elections. Along the way, he has also made life incredibly unpleasant for a number of opponents. Just ask Kim Campbell and Stockwell Day.

In *Kicking Ass in Canadian Politics*, the Prince of Darkness comes clean on the strategies of spin that political parties and candidates employ to get their messages across to the voters. From party headquarters to the campaign trail; from the riding office to the halls of Parliament, Kinsella offers readers the ultimate insider’s view of the sometimes meaningful, sometimes mean-spirited, but always fascinating circus that ensues every time we go to the polls.

Q. In the book, you offer a no-holds-barred look at the battle for the hearts and minds of Canadian voters. How did you become schooled in the various techniques of “kicking ass”? Did your experience as a journalist influence your development as a political strategist?

A. My experience in “kicking ass,” politically, includes doing it to others and — more than once — getting it done

I suggested that [Stockwell Day’s] belief that dinosaurs and humans had coexisted was evidence that he thought The Flintstones was a documentary

to me. I’ve worked on campaigns from coast to coast, and learned along the way that, despite what the media says, tough, in-your-face political communications work. And *Kicking Ass* tries to persuade people of that.

Being a reporter helped me in politics. Reporting teaches you to write fast and factually. And in a 24-hour, 7-day-a-week, 500-channel universe, being fast and factual helps a lot.

Q. Over the past ten years, the Canadian political landscape has shifted dramatically, with the creation of new parties and the breakdown of traditional political loyalties across the country. What has contributed to this transformation?

A. I’m a liberal, small and large “I,” so I’m biased. But I would say conservative parties in Canada have revealed themselves to be — among other things — completely undisciplined. In politics, in Canada or elsewhere, no voter will give you their support if you can’t keep your own house in order. And Canadian conservatives have the messiest house around. These guys couldn’t run a three-house paper route, from what I have observed.



PHOTO: CHUCK STODDY

Q. There has been a lot of discussion, both here and in the United States, about negative campaigning. Voters often complain when politicians “go neg” and view negative campaigning as dirty. Yet you argue that there is nothing dirty about going neg, and that, in fact, it is both fair and incredibly effective.

A. There’s nothing negative about criticizing the public record of an opponent in a democracy. That, in fact, is the right thing to do. In campaigns, you want to inform people and motivate them. If some critical communications — that are scrupulously accurate — help to get that job done, I say so be it. So-called negative political communications are used by guys like me because, basically, they work. People remember them more. People find them more factual. And people are motivated by them to vote a certain way.

Q. In the 1993 election, you were part of the Liberal Party’s Task Force. Why was the Task Force created and how did its activities signify a new direction in Canadian politics?

A. I shamelessly copied the idea from Bill Clinton’s top guy, James Carville. I felt there was a need to change the way we did things in campaigns. My motto was, “If you’re not part of the story before it’s written, you’re not part of the story at all.” So that’s the way we did things — staying ahead of the wave, responding quickly to attacks, and initiating a few of our own.

It was new to Canadian politics in 1993, but it ain’t now. Everybody does it. But the results of the last few elections demonstrate who does it best, perhaps.

Q. What are some of the most outrageous, yet effective, stunts that you have pulled during the course of a campaign?

A. When I suggested that Stockwell Day had a desire to hammer down the wall between church and state, and force the teaching of creationism in schools, I needed to do that in a memorable way. So I suggested that his belief that dinosaurs and humans had coexisted was evidence that he thought *The Flintstones* was a documentary. That line got a few laughs, but a serious point was underneath.

Q. You ran unsuccessfully for a seat in Parliament during the 1997 election. By your own admission, you ignored your own credo to kick ass and run an aggressive campaign. Why didn’t you follow your own advice?

A. In politics, as in life, you sometimes forget the commandments. I forgot the one about fighting back against attacks and lies — kicking ass, in effect.

I had never thought I would win that race — the Liberals hadn’t held the seat for nearly 30 years — but I learned my lesson. If I’m ever crazy enough to run again, I’ll be practising what I preach.

Q. We live in an age of information overload. Through television and the Internet, issues and events bombard us and overwhelm our attention spans. Has this led to an erosion of content in political discussion? If so, has this worked to the political strategist’s advantage?

A. The Internet has placed more political information at the disposal of voters than ever before, and that’s a good thing for democracy. At the same time, the Internet has been a very damaging influence — with the Clinton-Lewinsky thing, for example, which is something that had no business becoming as big a deal as it did.

Right now, the Internet remains a minor part of most political campaigns. But that will change in the years ahead, I suspect.

Q. There seems to be a growing cynicism among voters across the country. As our lives become more complex and demands on our time increase dramatically, it seems that the political process is becoming less of a priority — witness declining voter turnout at the polls. With this in mind, some commentators have questioned whether political campaigns matter anymore. How would you respond to that?

A. I’ve heard the criticisms: namely, that campaigns are utterly irrelevant to the lives of real people — you know, the folks who sneer, or head to the kitchen for a glass of milk, when a political spot is broadcast. If campaigns are designed to inform voters about the choices available to

Calling all book clubs

Are you looking for



information on your favourite authors



reviews and synopses of books you may want to read



tips on how to run or join a book club

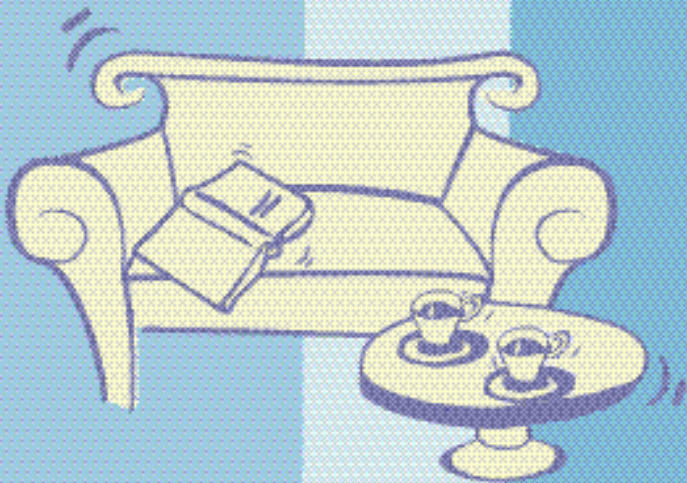


contests and literary news



simple and delicious recipes for entertaining your book club?

Visit www.bookclubs.ca for all of this and more!



www.bookclubs.ca

RESOURCES FOR READERS

I had never thought I would win that race — the Liberals hadn't held the seat for nearly 30 years — but I learned my lesson. If I'm ever crazy enough to run again, I'll be practising what I preach.

them — if they highlight differences, and if they motivate voters to express themselves on the basis of those differences — then campaigns do what they are supposed to do. Political campaigns may not be the prettiest of dialectical exercises, but they seem to meet the two basic requirements: information and motivation.

Q. In the book, you provide some very strong opinions about political journalists and offer a controversial report card for some of the country's high profile political scribes and pundits. How complicated is the relationship between a political strategist and the Ottawa press gallery?

A. Most of the time, political people suck up to reporters to win some positive coverage. My view is that that approach doesn't work — mostly because reporters aren't dummies. They know when someone is trying to manipulate them. So, I take a different approach. If a reporter is dead wrong, I say so. A lot of reporters don't like that — they're good at dishing it, but not so good at taking it. I say, too bad. Get used to it. In the future, politicians will be getting tougher with the media, because they know the voting public doesn't have the highest regard for the media, either.

Q. Do your future plans include another run at public office?

A. Not if my wife has anything to do with it. She'd murder me — and no jury would convict her!

To read an excerpt from Kicking Ass in Canadian Politics, visit www.readmagazine.ca