

## **Who Framed Belinda Stronach?**

**National Newspaper Coverage of the  
Conservative Party of Canada's  
2004 Leadership Race**

Paper presented to the 2005 Canadian Political Science Association Conference  
London, Ontario  
June 4, 2005

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### Abstract

If masculine norms define political leadership roles and shape media coverage of leadership contests they are likely to be revealed by press coverage of serious challenges by women for the leadership of competitive political parties. The new Conservative Party of Canada's inaugural leadership race featured such a candidate, Belinda Stronach. While Stronach lost the leadership to Stephen Harper on the first ballot, she ran a well-financed, staffed and organized campaign, enjoyed considerable backing from party insiders, and placed a respectable second. This paper reports the results of a content analysis of all news stories, opinion pieces, editorials and columns published about the leadership race in Canada's national newspapers, the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*, from January 13 to March 22, 2004. It reveals striking differences in the amount of coverage accorded the candidates, as well as sexist framing and gendered evaluations of the female candidate. While Belinda Stronach's campaign received a plethora of media attention, a considerable amount of it scrutinized her looks, wardrobe, sexual availability and personal background while mocking her leadership aspirations and deriding her qualifications for political office. Press coverage of the Conservative leadership race confirms both the intensely performative nature of gender in political spaces and the tendency of the media to normalize male leadership.

## Introduction

This paper examines print media coverage of a woman who aspired to, but did not win, the leadership of a national party. Belinda Stronach surprised press and public alike when rumours of her candidacy for the leadership of the new Conservative Party of Canada were leaked by the media in early January, 2004. The new party was the product of a merger between the Progressive Conservative Party and the Canadian Alliance, a union designed to end vote-splitting on the right. A rumoured spring 2004 national election prompted an immediate leadership race and plenty of attention to the party that just might have a chance of forming the next government of Canada. The news value of the leadership race intensified with Stronach's entry into the race because she was seen as a glamorous, jet-setting multi-millionaire with friends in high places. Belinda Stronach lost the Conservative leadership to former Canadian Alliance leader Stephen Harper on the first ballot, but she ran a well-financed, staffed and organized campaign, enjoyed considerable backing from party insiders, and placed a respectable second with 35 per cent of the votes, well ahead of the third-runner, Tony Clement, who garnered but 10 percent of the ballots.

The Conservative leadership race presents an opportunity to compare media coverage of male and female candidates for a powerful leadership position. If masculine norms do define political leadership roles and shape media coverage of leadership contests, they are likely to be revealed by press coverage of serious challenges by women for the leadership of competitive political parties. A woman with two of the three features of "high quality" candidates<sup>1</sup>, namely money and visibility, not only stayed in the race but was responsible for a flurry of media attention even before she made her announcement. Stronach lacked one key qualification, political experience, therefore any differences in the amount and tone of news coverage between male and female candidates in the Conservative leadership race can be only partially explained by political resource arguments (Kropf and Boiney 2001:82).

Evidence that media coverage of female leadership candidates reflects or reinforces sex biases may help explain why so few Canadian women are now seeking party leadership positions at the national or sub-national level. Despite the fact that all of the competitive national parties apart from the Bloc Québécois have selected new chiefs since 2003, party leadership has resumed its pre-1989 status as singularly male. Similarly, women's presence in party leadership roles at the sub-national level has contracted since the mid-1990s when nine women led competitive<sup>2</sup> parties in Canada's provinces and territories. Presently, in May 2005, there are only three female party leaders, and one recently announced her intention to retire.<sup>3</sup> News media provide "the *real* public space in which politics occurs and through which citizens comprehend the political process" (Ross 2000: 1). The role played by the press in perpetuating gendered assumptions about political power and leadership and discouraging women from seeking the top jobs therefore demands investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> Kropf and Boiney, 2001, define high quality candidates as those with experience, money and visibility.

<sup>2</sup> Competitive parties are defined as those with at least one member elected to the legislative assembly.

<sup>3</sup> *Elizabeth Weir*, the lone New Democrat in the New Brunswick legislature, has announced that she will stop down as leader when the next election is called. *Pat Duncan*, former Yukon Premier leads the Liberal party and serves as the sole Liberal representative in the Yukon legislative assembly. *Carole James*, elected leader of the BC NDP in 2004, did not have a seat in the legislature prior to the May 17 2005 provincial election.

I begin this paper by outlining the research methods employed to analyze the national newspaper coverage of the Conservative Party's leadership contest. A brief review of the literature on media coverage of women politicians identifies four hypotheses that are tested in this study, with the goal of determining similarities and differences in the quantity and tone of the news coverage of male and female leadership candidates. The findings are then discussed, revealing striking differences in the amount of coverage accorded the candidates, as well as sexist framing and gendered evaluations. While Belinda Stronach's campaign received a plethora of media attention, a considerable amount of it scrutinized her looks, wardrobe, sexual availability and personal background while mocking her leadership aspirations and deriding her qualifications for political office. Press coverage of the Conservative leadership race confirms both the intensely performative nature of gender in political spaces and the tendency of the media to normalize male leadership.

## Methodology

This study employs a content analysis of all news stories about the Conservative party's leadership contest appearing in Canada's national newspapers, the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post* from January 13 to March 22, 2004, inclusive. Gathering of news texts began the day after the official entry of the first candidate who stayed in the race until the finish, Stephen Harper, who declared his candidacy on January 12<sup>th</sup>. The candidates made their official announcements within days of each other, with Clement's news conference held on the 15<sup>th</sup> and Stronach's campaign launch on January 20<sup>th</sup>. The results of nation-wide voting by party members were revealed at the party's Ottawa leadership convention on March 20, but since neither national newspaper publishes a Sunday edition, stories printed on Monday March 22<sup>nd</sup> were included to allow for analysis of the outcome. News stories were collected from the Factiva data base using the search terms "Conservative party and leadership". As well, the search query "Stephen Harper or Tony Clement or Belinda Stronach" was used to capture those articles mentioning one or more of the candidates without naming the party or referring directly to the leadership contest. The 268 news stories examined for this study represent the entire universe of national newspaper coverage of the leadership race, including hard news stories, features, editorials, columns and opinion pieces. Letters to the editor were not included. Coding of all news stories was completed by the author.

The two English-language national newspapers were chosen for this study because of their agenda-setting role amongst the Canadian media (Taras 1999: 18) and in particular because they devoted considerable resources to covering the Conservative leadership. Despite the institutional constraints confronting the news media, not least shrinking budgets and tighter deadlines, the national papers were able to assign key reporters and columnists to the story. The *National Post* took a particularly active interest in the new party, having championed the "unite the right" initiative since its inception (Dorman and Pyman 2002: 194). While both newspapers followed the race carefully, the *National Post* ran considerably more stories on the subject, a total of 149, compared to 119 for the *Globe and Mail*. The Conservative leadership had a high profile in both newspapers, as most of the stories, 90 per cent, were in the front sections of these two papers, with 21 per cent of the leadership coverage carried on the front page. The contest was covered as a hard news story in 60 per cent of the stories; 32 per cent of the stories were opinion columns, most by regular columnists. Editorials on the

race comprised 7 per cent of the coverage. This was a story told by male journalists and columnists. Of the stories with a by-line, 85 per cent were written by men.

### **Female Politicians and the Media: Literature Review and Hypotheses**

Political leadership is a “historically constituted and gendered performance” (Clare 2002), and remains, in Canada as elsewhere, a male preserve. Masculine values and themes are evident in the campaign rhetoric devised by parties and leadership candidates (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 1996). These are, not surprisingly, reproduced by the press. As van Dijk asserts, the “reproductive and symbolic role of the press is not isolated, but linked in many ways to political, economic, or other power institutions” (1991: 254). Research in several countries has revealed sex differences in the quantity, direction and tone of media coverage of women contesting elections and party leadership positions (Carroll and Schreiber 1997; Heldman, Carroll and Olson 2000; Gidgenil and Everitt 1999, 2000, 2003a, 2003b; Kahn and Goldenberg 1991; Norris 1997b; Jenkins 1996; McGregor 1996; Robinson and Saint-Jean 1991, 1996; Ross 1995; Scharrer 2002). Sex differences in media treatment fall along three axes; *visibility*, *framing*, and *evaluation*.

#### ***Visibility***

Female political aspirants tend to be less visible in the media than their male competitors, receiving less attention in the form of news stories, commentary and cartoons (Carroll and Schreiber 1997; Gilmartin 2001, Heldman, Carroll and Olson 2000; Kahn 1992, 1994, 1996; Kahn and Goldenberg 1991; Norris 1997b; Sampert and Trimble 2003, Scharrer, 2002). However Norris’ (1997b) study of women world leaders revealed only modest differences in the amount of coverage granted male and female government leaders immediately after their victory or appointment, suggesting the quantity of coverage is related to their place in the race (perceived ability to win) and proximity to power (status of the post). There is little available data on gender differences in press coverage of men and women seeking leadership of competitive national political parties. Studies of Elizabeth’s Dole’s six-month campaign for the Republican Party’s presidential bid found that she was mentioned more often in news stories than all male contenders except the front-runner, George W. Bush in the three months before she dropped out of the campaign (Aday and Devitt 2001). However, Heldman, Carroll and Olson (2000) argue that Dole received less press coverage than she ought to have based on her second-place standing, and on some indicators of news visibility she was surpassed by John McCain.

While the evidence is mixed, most content analyses show that women receive less media coverage than their male counterparts, especially when they are not considered front-runners (Scharrer 2002: 395). *Thus the first hypothesis for this study is that Belinda Stronach received less attention than her second-placing showing would predict, and significantly less coverage than the eventual male victor, Stephen Harper.* Visibility was measured in five ways. For each news story I coded whether or not each candidate was: 1) named in the story; 2) named first in the story; 3) named four or more times in the story; 4) named in the headline; 5) named first in the headline.

## *Framing*

Framing analysis, the study of interpretive structures that give meaning and order to the news (Norris 1997a: 2), helps explain women's lower levels of media visibility. Hegemonic masculinity in political life ensures that gender is, in and of itself, a frame, with news coverage of female politicians typically making explicit reference to their sex (Helman, Carroll and Olsen 2000: 8; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996: 109). The novelty of the first woman to contest a traditionally masculine role can propel her onto the front pages of newspapers (Norris 1997b: 161). However, when women are in the picture *because* they are women, their gender difference becomes central to the story. The news media often situate female politicians as women first, politicians second by highlighting their marital status, sexuality, appearance and domestic roles, and simultaneously obscuring or overlooking their issue positions (Carroll and Schreiber 1997; Devitt 1999; Fountaine 2000; Fountaine and McGregor 2003; Heldman, Carroll and Olson 2000; Jenkins 1996, 1999; McGregor 1996; Motion 1996; Robinson and Saint-Jean 1991, 1996; Ross, 1995; Van Acker 1999). For instance, newspaper coverage of Elizabeth Dole's 1999 bid for the leadership of the Republican Party accorded less attention to her issue positions and more to her personal traits than did coverage of her male opponents (Aday and Devitt 2001). Political cartoons sexualized and domesticated Dole and suggested she lacked substance on the issues of the day (Heldman, Carroll and Olson 2000; Gilmartin 2001).

Moreover, it is widely acknowledged that news media frame political life, especially elections, as games, by focusing on leaders or frontrunners, strategic concerns, polling data and explanations for wins and losses (Cappella and Jamieson 1997: 37-57; Patterson 1994: 53-93; Trimble and Sampert 2004). Women candidates often fall on the margins or even outside the game frame because they are not typically among the leaders of parties or the frontrunners in leadership contests (Gilmartin 2001; Sampert and Trimble 2003; Scharrer 2002; Ross 1995). Alternately, women who are among the frontrunners are, by virtue of their sex, regarded as lacking the qualifications necessary to stay in the game until the finish and play it well (Gilmartin 2001; Ross 1995; Sampert and Trimble 2003; Scharrer 2002).

The framing literature suggests two hypotheses. *The first hypothesis is that the marital status and appearance of the female candidate were of more interest to the national newspapers than the looks or domestic roles of the two male candidates.* The use of explicitly gendered frames was measured by determining whether or not the story mentioned the looks, family and marital status of the leadership candidates named in the story. I also coded whether or not the story discussed Stronach's appearance first, before anything else that was said about her.

*The second framing hypothesis is that media coverage of male candidates, Harper and Clement, situated them in the game by focusing on their place in the race or issue stances, while press treatment of the female candidate, Belinda Stronach, put her on the sidelines by drawing attention to her background.* This was measured by assessing whether each of the leadership candidates was prominent in the story (that is, referred to by name four or more times), then coding the dominant focus of the story as fitting into one of three categories; the place of the candidate in the leadership race, the candidate's issue positions, or the candidate's background (personality and characteristics).

### *Viability*

Because gender structures much of the news framing applied to women politicians, newspaper assessments of women's capability and electoral viability reflect gendered assumptions. The evaluative criteria applied to female politicians in news coverage are often harsher than those applied to men (Kahn 1992, 1994; Gidgenil and Everitt 1999, 2000, 2003; Jenkins 1996; McGregor 1996; Robinson and Saint-Jean 1991, 1996). Evaluations of women politicians tend to act as "de-qualification" devices, positioning them as inexperienced or atypical politicians (Carroll and Schreiber 1997: 145; Norris 1997b: 161-163; Jenkins 1996, 2003). Lack of visibility coupled with gendered framing generates negative viability coverage for female politicians (Heldman, Carroll and Olson 2000; Kahn, 1994, 1996; Gilmartin 2001; Ross 1995; Scharrer 2002). Jameison (1995) argues that female candidates are more likely than their male counterparts to be subjected to negative gender distinctions, that is, gendered references that undermine the capabilities of the candidate. They are less likely than male contenders to be portrayed as winners. As a result, women's very legitimacy as political actors and their capacity to lead or govern effectively if elected are called into question.

For the purposes of this study, viability refers to evaluations of each candidate's ability to win the Conservative party's leadership contest. *I hypothesized that Stronach was assessed as a less viable candidate than the victor, Stephen Harper, and received more negative comments and evaluations than did both her male competitors.* Viability was measured in three ways. When the ability of a candidate was assessed in the story, it was ranked as positive, negative or balanced/neutral. The reasons specified for negative viability assessments were also coded. As well, the adjectives used to describe each candidate's leadership skills and competence were listed and compared.

## Findings

### *Visibility*

*H<sup>1</sup>: Belinda Stronach received less attention than her second-placing showing would predict, and significantly less coverage than the eventual male victor, Stephen Harper.*

<b>Table 1</b> <b>Measures of Visibility by Candidate</b> (% of all news stories)					
<i>Candidate</i>	<i>Named in Story</i>	<i>Named First in Story</i>	<i>Named 4 or more times in Story</i>	<i>Named in Headline</i>	<i>Named First in Headline</i>
Belinda Stronach	87%	47%	60%	35%	32%
Stephen Harper	78%	43%	47%	24%	21%
Tony Clement	65%	10%	26%	12%	9%

As Table 1 shows, the first hypothesis is not supported. The female candidate, Belinda Stronach, garnered considerably *more* attention from the national newspapers than either of her male competitors. Stronach scored highest on all five measures of visibility. While all three candidates were named in most of the news stories, Stronach was named first in 47 per cent of the stories and referred to four or more times in 60 per cent of the stories. In contrast, the front-runner and eventual victor, Stephen Harper, was the first candidate named 43 per cent of the time and was named four times or more in 47 per cent of the stories. Only ten per cent of the news stories named Tony Clement first, and just over a quarter (26%) named him four or more times.

Headlines are arguably the pinnacle of news visibility as they signal what the story is about and shape interpretations of the story by readers (van Dijk 1991: 50). Headlines are often the only part of the story that is read or recalled (van Dijk 1991: 69). Since headlines are designed to grab the reader's attention, high levels of visibility are conferred when a candidate is named, and ideally named first, in a headline. Many of the national newspaper headlines accompanying the stories on the leadership contest did not name any of the candidates, but, as Table 1 shows, Stronach was most likely of the three contenders to see her name in the headlines and to be named first in the headlines. Of the headlines that did name names, Stronach's appeared first over half of the time (52%), while Stephen Harper was named first in the headlines far less often, in 34 per cent of the headlines naming one or more of the candidates. Tony Clement's name appeared first in only 14 per cent of these headlines.

How did the female second-place finisher win more attention from the national newspapers than the male victor? Since there were no statistically significant differences between the two newspapers on any of these measures of visibility, the argument that one of the papers championed Stronach's candidacy can be ruled out, leaving three possible explanations. First,

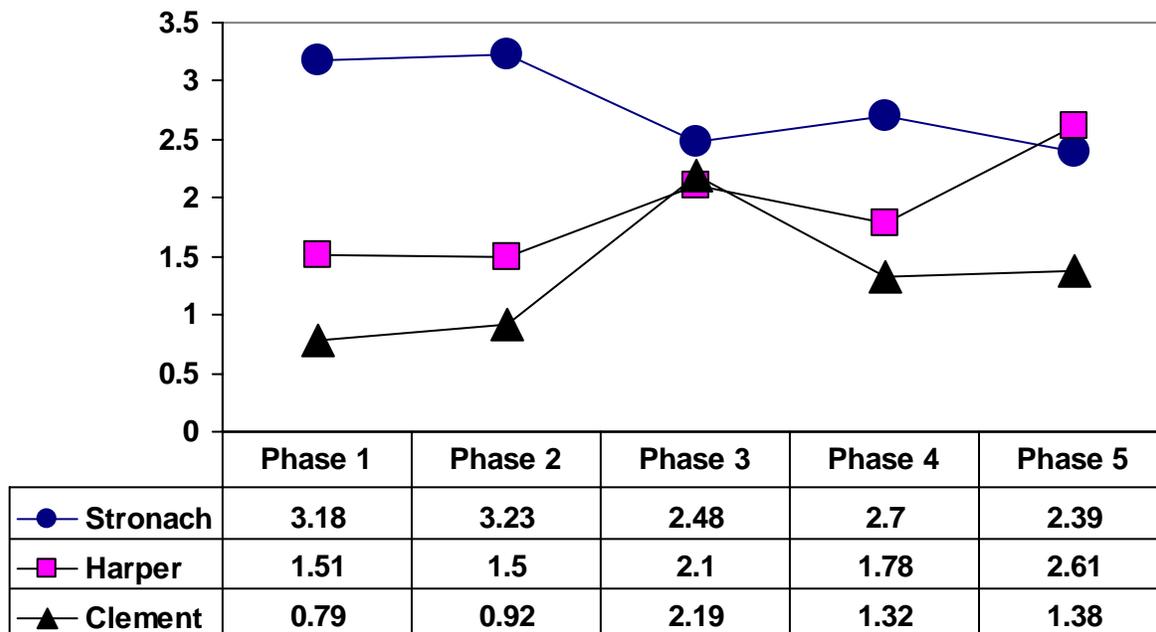
perhaps Stronach *was* regarded as a possible victor for at least the initial stages of the race. However, only six per cent of the stories mentioning Stronach evaluated her as a viable candidate, a mere eight stories. None of these indicated she would beat Stephen Harper. Indeed, not a single story appearing in either of the newspapers predicted Harper would lose the race. Stronach's visibility did not result from a perception that she posed a serious challenge to the eventual winner.

The second explanation is that the novelty value of Belinda Stronach's candidacy attracted a disproportionate amount of media attention in the initial, entry, stages of the campaign, attention that waned as the campaign wore on. This seems more plausible. The announcements of the two male contenders were predicted well in advance, especially that of Stephen Harper, leader of the Canadian Alliance. Harper had made his intentions clear in December, when the merger was finalized. Former Ontario cabinet minister Tony Clement's entry seemed a *fait accompli* after a series of high-profile Progressive Conservatives, notably national PC leader Peter McKay and former Ontario premier Mike Harris, bowed out of the race. A *National Post* headline labelled Clement the "no surprises candidate". In contrast, Stronach was a political unknown whose candidacy was kept well under wraps until a week before her announcement. Stronach's highly anticipated campaign launch was the focus of considerable news coverage in the week before her official announcement, garnering eight stories in the *National Post* and seven in the *Globe and Mail*, including several in-depth profile pieces.

To determine whether candidate visibility changed over time, the ten week campaign was divided into five two-week phases, and post-election coverage was excluded from the analysis, as it focused almost exclusively on the victor. The first two weeks comprise an entry phase during which the media concentrate on the candidates and their campaign launches. Coverage then shifts to candidates' activities, especially televised debates, changes in levels of support from elites and rank-and-file members of the party, and policy pronouncements. Finally, the last two weeks of the campaign are, for the media, the end-game, and frontrunners are highlighted in an effort to predict the outcome of the race. Indices were constructed for each candidate with a value of one granted for each of the measures of visibility, with a maximum score of five: 1) candidate is named in the story; 2) candidate is named first in the story; 3) candidate is named in the headline; 4) candidate is named first in the headline; and 5) candidate is named four or more times in the story.

Graph 1 confirms that Stronach's visibility was indeed highest in the entry phase of the campaign. In the first two weeks of the campaign, Stronach scored 3 out of 5 on the visibility index, with Harper only at 1.5. Yet Stronach's visibility remained this high for the next two weeks. The three candidates converged at the mid-phase of the leadership campaign, with scores just above 2, reflecting in part Stronach's decision not to participate in a televised debate. But Stronach took the lead for phase 4 (2.7 to Harper's 1.8). It was only in the last two weeks of the campaign, with Harper's win a foregone conclusion, that his visibility marginally exceeded Stronach's. During the end-game, with polls showing a first-place victory for Harper, the media continued to focus on Belinda Stronach. Media interest, and attention to, Stronach was not limited to the entry phase, but was sustained throughout the campaign.

**Graph 1**  
**Mean scores on visibility index by candidate, 2-week campaign phases**



● Stronach ■ Harper ▲ Clement

Phase 1: January 13 – January 26

Phase 2: January 27 – February 9

Phase 3: February 10 – February 23

Phase 4: February 24 – March 8

Phase 5: March 9 – March 20

Stronach's campaign injected a note of excitement into a race with a predictable outcome. As a young (37 year-old) CEO of a successful corporation, Stronach was described as a glamorous, jet-setting multi-millionaire with connections to international notables and world leaders, including former U.S. president Bill Clinton. Stronach, labelled the "It Girl of the Political Right" had news value<sup>4</sup> because of her unanticipated entry into the contest, her strong second-place position, and especially because of her (gender-based) difference from her competitors. *Globe and Mail* columnist Lysiane Gagnon said Stronach generated a great deal of excitement in the press corps because "the media can't resist the 'star quality' of a young, blond, attractive figure." Gagnon's colleague, Margaret Wentz, put it more directly: "the media are kissing the ground in front of her because she adds some spice and sex appeal to an otherwise terminally dull event." Indeed, the *Globe and Mail* said the leadership contest wasn't much of a story without her: "In a party whose popular, if somewhat unfair image is of high collars and muttonchops, no one would say an attractive, successful young woman is anything but a bonus to a race the country would otherwise have ignored." I believe gendered news framing explains Stronach's high level of visibility throughout the campaign, and particularly in the entry and end-game phases. This assessment is supported by the findings regarding framing of the three candidates.

### ***Framing: Privatizing Discourses***

*H<sup>2</sup>: The private life, measured as marital status, family, and appearance, of the female candidate was of more interest to the national newspapers than the looks, private roles or marriages of the two male candidates.*

If any reference was made to the candidate's looks, clothing, sexual allure or body, it was coded as an allusion to appearance. Stephen Harper's appearance was discussed in only two stories<sup>5</sup>, that is, in one per cent of the stories that mentioned him. Tony Clement's appearance won marginally more attention, as his "earnest nerd" persona was mentioned in three per cent of stories (five of the stories that discussed Clement). In contrast, Belinda Stronach's appearance was discussed in 77 stories, 33 per cent of the news stories that mentioned her. Her hair, wardrobe, body and sexual attractiveness were scrutinized and analyzed. Stronach was called young, attractive, beautiful, a "hot babe" with "bodacious good looks". Many references were made to her hair, including "great blond hope", "dishy blond", "Bubba's blond pal", "young blond looker", and "Parliament Hill Barbie". Stronach was cited as the candidate with sex appeal, called sexy outright, and most outrageously, labelled "better than Viagra". In 30 of the stories mentioning her looks (40%), Stronach's appearance was the *first* topic of discussion. In fact, Stronach's appearance was discussed before anything else about her in 14 per cent of the stories that included her. For example, an article about Stronach's wardrobe titled "Power Dressing" was published in the Style section of the *Globe and Mail* on January 24.

Was the media focus on Stronach's persona maintained throughout the campaign? Graph 2 indicates that interest in her looks was most intense in the first four weeks of the campaign,

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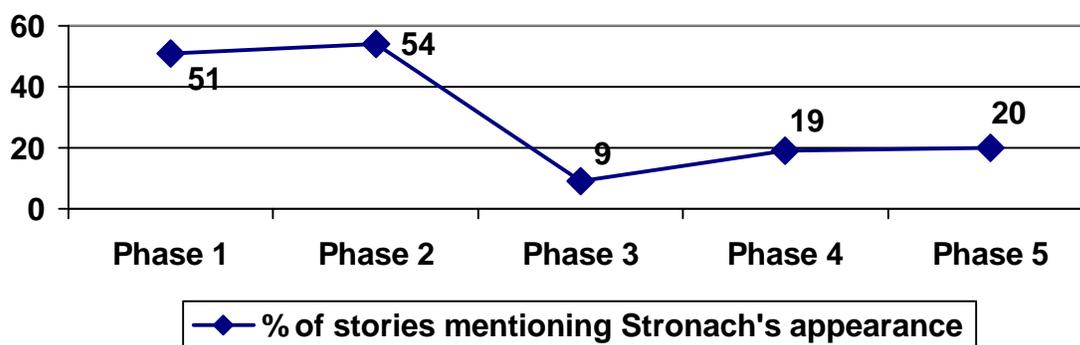
<sup>4</sup> The news value of an event or issue is assessed by editors based on its prominence, proximity, timeliness, conflict or unusualness (Scharrer, 2002: 395).

<sup>5</sup> One news story referred to his suit, and, in another story, the columnist pronounced Harper "handsome".

dropped significantly in the third two-week phase, only to rebound slightly towards the end of the campaign. That journalists and columnists continued to write about her looks throughout the campaign supports the argument that gendered news framing prompted higher levels of attention to the female candidate.

Table 2 shows that Belinda Stronach's looks, clothing, hair, and sex appeal were just as interesting to the *Globe and Mail* as to the *National Post*. Levels of attention to her appearance were, however, shaped by the type of news story and the sex of the reporter. Journalists penning regular news stories about the leadership race were significantly less likely to discuss Stronach's looks than were columnists. And although stories about the race were written mostly by men, it was female journalists and columnists who were more likely to focus on her appearance.

**Graph 2**  
**Percentage of Stories Mentioning Stronach's Appearance,**  
**by Campaign Phase <sup>a</sup>**



<sup>a</sup> Differences significant at  $p < .01$ .

Table 2 Stronach's appearance mentioned in news story by sex of reporter, newspaper, type of story							
Stronach's appearance mentioned in story	Sex of reporter <sup>a</sup>		Newspaper		Type of Story <sup>a</sup>		
	Male	Female	Globe	Post	News	Editorial	Opinion
Yes	28%	68%	33%	33%	21%	13%	62%

<sup>a</sup> differences significant at  $p < .01$ .

There was also a difference in levels of media attention to the marital status and family life of the male and female candidates. The two male candidates offered the quintessential family model, with wives and young children. That this was not of much interest to the press is indicated by the findings. Stephen Harper's marriage and family were discussed in only seven of the stories that mentioned him (3 %), and Clement's in a mere four stories (2 %). Like her competitors, Stronach has young children, but that she is twice divorced set her apart and was discussed fairly frequently in the coverage. Stronach's marital status was raised in 28 of the stories that mentioned her (12 %), mentioned four times as often as Harper's marital status. Belinda Stronach was called a "single mom millionaire", the "young mother who would be prime minister", and, less flatteringly, a woman with two failed marriages.

As Robinson and Saint-Jean (1991) observe, media attempt to resolve the cognitive dissonance produced by a female interloper in a "man's world" by playing up her femininity. News media use a variety of discursive techniques to remind readers that the female politician is, first and foremost, a woman, "including paying undue attention to their household tasks, emphasising their personal relationships, and making pointed observations about their wardrobe, hair, make-up, and weight" (Trimble and Arscott 2003: 93). Further, "the reduction of women in the public arena to a basic sexuality is a device which is routinely and regularly employed by the media" (Ross, 1995: 503). Privatizing discourses act as de-qualification devices by situating the woman politician firmly in the domestic realm and suggesting that she does not belong in the public, political world. *National Post* columnist Don Martin scored a privatization hat-trick by asking Stronach the following questions during an interview for a feature story: "Is it hard to be a single mom on the road? Is your being beautiful an asset or a liability? Are you dating anyone?"

As the studies of Elizabeth Dole's presidential campaign illustrate, media coverage of this sort tends to override attention to the female candidate's political experience and issue positions (Aday and Devitt 2001; Heldman, et. al., 2000; Gilmartin 2001). Did the focus on Stronach's looks, sexual availability, etc., detract from less serious coverage of her campaign?

*H<sup>3</sup>: Media coverage of male candidates situated them in the game by focusing on their place in the race or issue stances, while press treatment of the female candidate put her on the sidelines by drawing attention to her background.*

As we have seen, both national newspapers focused considerable attention on the personal background of the "national woman of mystery", as *National Post* columnist Don Martin labelled Stronach. To determine whether or not the press framed the male and female candidates differently, I determined the main focus of each story that highlighted a candidate by mentioning them four or more times. If the story was primarily concerned with the candidate's place in the leadership race or other strategic concerns, it was coded as a horserace story. Stories that fore-grounded the candidate's issue positions or policy ideas were code as issue-based. Those stressing the candidate's career, personal life or other aspects of his/her background were coded as having a candidate focus. Table 3 confirms a dominant political frame- the game frame<sup>6</sup> – but shows differences in framing of the three

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<sup>6</sup> The game frame is defined by Trimble and Sampert (2003: 53) as an approach that "shapes the selection and content of news stories, focusing on the horse-race elements of the campaign". This frame reflects a preoccupation with winners and losers, conflict, strategy and personalities.

candidates. While the focus of coverage for all three contenders was their place in the race, Harper attracted more of this sort of attention than his competitors. Clement received more issue-based coverage than anyone else. Stronach attracted almost three times as much candidate-focused framing as did her male competitors, and less horserace coverage. In short, Stronach was in the game, and it would be misleading to suggest she was sidelined by the coverage. However, national newspaper stories emphasized Stronach's background more heavily than those of the male leadership candidates.

<b>Table 3</b>			
<b>Focus of stories naming the candidate four or more times, by candidate.</b>			
	<b>Focus of story</b> <b>(% of stories mentioning the candidate four or more times)</b>		
<b>Candidate</b>	<i>Horserace</i>	<i>Issues</i>	<i>Candidate background</i>
<i>Belinda Stronach</i>	63%	9%	28%
<i>Stephen Harper</i>	81%	9%	9%
<i>Tony Clement</i>	73%	17%	10%

### *Viability Evaluations*

*H<sup>4</sup>*: *Stronach was assessed as a less viable candidate than the victor, Stephen Harper, and received more negative comments and evaluations than her male competitors.*

Media evaluations of candidate viability in this particular leadership race were straightforward, as the national newspapers regarded Harper as the clear and undisputed front-runner. As Table 4 shows, almost a quarter of the stories evaluating the ability of the various candidates to win the race pegged Harper as the winner. None suggested he risked losing. Harper was described as unstoppable, unbeatable, holding a decisive and insurmountable lead, “so far out in front of his rivals they can barely see his vapour trail”.

The *Globe and Mail* ran a story on 21 February with the headline, “Harper gains a clear lead in the Tory race, poll finds”. Surprisingly, the *National Post* did not inform its readers about the likely outcome of the balloting until more than three weeks later, on 13 March, just one week before the vote. “Harper 59%, Stronach 32%: Survey suggests first-ballot victory is nearly certain,” declared the *Post*. This lag, plus the fact that the *National Post* ran more stories on the leadership race, illustrated how invested the newspaper was in the spectre of a hotly contested race. That the majority of the evaluations of Stronach and Clement were balanced or neutral likely reflects the desire of newspaper editors, especially those from the *Post*, to sustain reader interest in the contest despite a predictable outcome. Still, none of the columnists, editorial writers and journalists from either paper gave Clement or Stronach much of a chance. Stronach's probability of winning was assessed positively in only six per cent of

the stories that evaluated her viability, and Clement received positive viability ratings in only three per cent of the stories that assessed his place in the race.

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>Viability Evaluation</i>		
	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Balanced or Neutral</b>	<b>Positive</b>
<b>Stephen Harper</b>	0	26%	74%
<b>Belinda Stronach</b>	39%	55%	6%
<b>Tony Clement</b>	36%	61%	3%

What did distinguish the evaluations of the two losing candidates were the reasons offered for their lack of success. When a candidate was evaluated negatively the reasons given by the journalist or columnist were coded into three categories: 1) problems with the campaign (such as insufficient funding or strategic errors); 2) lack of support from party elites and party members; and 3) the candidate's lack of political experience.

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>Reason given for Negative Viability Evaluation</i>		
	<b>Campaign problems</b>	<b>Lack of Support</b>	<b>Lack of Experience</b>
<b>Belinda Stronach</b>	2%	35%	59%
<b>Tony Clement</b>	3%	86%	6%

Note: row percentages do not total 100 because there was an "other" category.

Table 5 indicates clear differences in the newspaper's evaluations of the two losing candidates. Of the 37 stories giving Clement a negative viability assessment, the vast majority (31, or 86 %) said his third place standing was due to lack of support from party elites and rank and file members. Stronach and Clement were competing for votes from former PC members in Ontario and Quebec. Stronach's campaign attracted high-profile endorsements from former Ontario premier Mike Harris and former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, and she was seen to be far ahead of Clement in selling memberships in central and Atlantic

Canada. However her campaign lacked support from party members on the Canadian Alliance side, particularly in Western Canada, where Harper's campaign was very strong. As a result, lack of support was offered as the explanation for Stronach's campaign's lack of success in 20 (35 %) of the stories that assessed her viability negatively.

Only two news stories offered lack of experience as the reason for Clement's poor showing (6%). In contrast, 34 of the 58 stories (59%) negatively evaluating Stronach offered lack of experience as the reason for her non-viable campaign. This difference in evaluations is not surprising. Belinda Stronach was not the typical party leadership candidate. She entered the race from the private sector, as CEO of Magna International, a company her father Frank built into a multi-million dollar business. Apart from helping broker the union of the two parties Stronach had no political experience. Stronach's primary qualifications were her business acumen and the success of the company she had been running for three years. She was unilingual and had not completed a university degree. By contrast, the male candidates were, despite their relative youth (mid-40s), typical political leadership aspirants whose political qualifications were well established. Harper was a Reform Member of Parliament from 1993 to 1997, and served as President off the National Citizen's Coalition before returning to political life and winning the leadership of the Canadian Alliance Party in 2002. Clement was a cabinet minister in the Mike Harris government in Ontario, and was visible during the SARS crisis as Health Minister. Both were fluent in French and had completed post-graduate University degrees.<sup>7</sup>

While many journalists and commentators noted her business success and called her an entrepreneur and auto-parts magnate, others suggested she "earned" her high-ranking position though favouritism rather than by dint of hard work. Stronach's relationship to her father was mentioned in 46 of the 231 stories that discussed her (20%). Columnists snidely referred to Belinda Stronach as "Daddy's little girl", a woman with a "privileged background" and "coddled career".<sup>8</sup> *Globe and Mail* columnist Margaret Wentz observed "Belinda lives and works in a world that daddy built" (20 January 2004, A17). Wentz's colleague Heather Mallick said Stronach's campaign made her ashamed to be a woman, grateful only that one cannot die of embarrassment over such a "display of the drawbacks of nepotism" (24 January 2004, F2). The *National Post* sent a reporter into Toronto's financial district to ask business people whether they thought "Belinda Stronach is just 'Daddy's little girl'" (24 January 2004, TO4). Other columnists condemned Stronach as a political dilettante buying visibility and support, and trying to buy the leadership itself, by spending "millions of her father's Magna dollars". These quotations suggest Stronach was evaluated quite harshly, her business background derided and her qualifications for political life questioned.

When coding the newspaper articles for this study it became evident that Stronach's evaluations were qualitatively and quantitatively different from those applied to her male opponents. Therefore, I listed the adjectives used to describe each of the three contenders' image, leadership skills and position in the race. The descriptors applied to Stronach were

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<sup>7</sup> Harper has an M.A. in Economics. Clement is a lawyer.

<sup>8</sup> Jane Arscott and I were interviewed about Stronach's leadership bid by CBC radio's weekly Alberta political show, Friday Scrum. The lead-in music for the program was "She's a Rich Girl", by Hall and Oates. Lyrics included, "she's a rich girl and she's gone too far...she can rely on her old man's money..."

considerably more varied, vivid and prolific, as we have already seen with examples of the adjectives applied to Stronach's physical appearance, marital status, and business experience. Jameison (1995: 125) notes that "there is a larger range of language available to condemn female speech and criticize women". Indeed, the ways in which Belinda Stronach's leadership abilities and speaking style were described stand in stark contrast to the evaluations of Harper and Clement, both in their quantity and their tone.

Stephen Harper's leadership skills were, on balance, assessed positively. He was described as pragmatic, hard-working, shrewd, highly intelligent, experienced, effective, principled and statesmanlike. His intelligence and policy knowledge were foregrounded. Negative evaluations focused on Harper's personality, with journalists calling him dull, boring, aloof, reserved, condescending and guarded. His ability to lead the new party was not seriously questioned by such evaluations. Tony Clement's qualifications for the leadership were solidified with adjectives like purposeful, energetic, capable, intelligent, strong, public-spirited and articulate. Clement was deemed too ambitious by some commentators, who called him a political junkie and suggested he was over-eager and relentlessly ambitious in the manner of a "pint-sized pit-bull". The national newspapers were more negative in their descriptions of Clement than of Harper, calling Clement ruthless, desperate, unsavoury, unlikeable, bland and nerdish. Yet both Harper and Clement were depicted as experienced, knowledgeable and capable of performing the role of Conservative party leader.

Belinda Stronach's candidacy was described in positive terms far less often than it was derided and mocked. She was called humble and unpretentious, decent, smart, a fast learner, calm, competent, tough, disciplined, and focused. However, journalists, columnists and party pundits alike seemed to compete for innovative ways of labelling what they perceived to be her many inadequacies. While the dominant descriptor in both newspapers was "highly scripted political neophyte", the national press had many other ways of making the point that she was new to the political game. Stronach was deemed inexperienced, a blank slate, unqualified, uninspired, unconvincing and unimpressive. Some columnists suggested she was a front for more powerful (and by implication, experienced and knowledgeable) party elites. They said she was an "invented candidate with no track record", the "tool of hired guns", "Fembot or Ladytron", a "Stepford political candidate", a "cardboard cut-out to please the boys".<sup>9</sup> Heather Mallick pronounced Stronach the "paper doll of men who think women are a joke" (24 January 2004, F2). Unlike her male opponents, the so-called "policy wonks", Stronach was assessed as under-educated, lacking in substance and depth, a "one-clip pony" scripted by the backroom boys.

Again and again the news stories emphasized that she was scripted, overly scripted, highly scripted, or tightly scripted, implying that Stronach was not speaking for herself. A *Globe* reporter wrote, "among the many knocks she has absorbed during her tightly scripted campaign has been a criticism that she is little more than a cardboard cutout fronting the ambitions of her backroom campaigners" (Laghi, 6 March 2004, A10). In fact, commentators suggested she was incapable of speaking for herself. Adjectives applied to Stronach's public speeches included wooden, stiff, nervous, tentative, shaky, unsteady, awkward, and blundering. One columnist wrote that she "couldn't win a high school oratory contest".

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<sup>9</sup> A *Globe and Mail* columnist wrote: "She has a spectacular ability to attract the support of once-powerful, superannuated pols, who are often old enough to be her father."

Stronach was judged an embarrassment due to her speaking style, which was rarely described positively (or even neutrally).

Overall, evaluations of Stronach's ability to lead the party, and the country, were derisory. A *National Post* columnist opined: "I can think of few examples of a candidate so signally lacking in...political, professional or intellectual qualifications" and gauged Stronach as "not remotely qualified to be Prime Minister". Another asserted there is "less to Ms. Stronach than meets the eye". A *Globe and Mail* columnist regarded Stronach's desire to lead the new party as "audacious":

...at 37, with only three years under her belt as the CEO of the auto parts empire her father Frank Stronach built, and without a whit of electoral experience, she has applied to be the top politician in Canada. It's astounding, really. Is there any other practice, profession or business in which an application like hers would be taken seriously?

## Conclusions

National newspaper coverage of the Conservative Party of Canada's leadership race gave plenty of attention to the lone female candidate. Belinda Stronach was more visible than her male counterparts in news stories and headlines despite her second-place standing in the leadership contest. That any press is not necessarily good press is illustrated by the differential framing of the candidates. The men were positioned as players, with plenty of attention to their place in the race and their campaign strategies. Belinda Stronach fell within the game frame, too, but less so than her male opponents. She was situated as a political outsider. In part this was a fair assessment as she lacked conventional political qualifications. However, Stronach's outsider status was, for the press, as much a product of her sex as her political inexperience. Findings from this study show that she was sexualized, her business experience trivialized, her political ambitions disparaged.

Belinda Stronach endured constant press inspection of her physical personal and private life throughout the Conservative leadership race. That a third of the newspaper stories about the leadership race mentioning her candidacy discussed her appearance is both remarkable and disheartening. Columnists even wrote opinion pieces noting how much of the news coverage highlighted Stronach's looks. My concern is that the "Stronach effect" - the intense level of personal scrutiny and lavish attention to a female candidate's looks, sexuality, and personal life - - will send a very discouraging message to women contemplating political careers. As Deputy Prime Minister Anne McLellan commented, in response to the most egregiously personalized media coverage of Stronach, "I thought we were past all that".

We are not. Belinda Stronach won the Conservative Party nomination in the Ontario constituency of Newmarket-Aurora, was elected to the House of Commons in June 2004, and sits on the front benches of the official opposition. Yet the media have persisted in telling stories about her wardrobe and relationship with colleague Peter MacKay. National newspaper coverage of the Conservative convention, held in March 2005, kept readers in the loop regarding Belinda Stronach's green suit and eye shadow, trendy cocktail parties and possible McKay-Stronach canoodling sightings. One article opined that "Ms. Stronach has put

the fun back in political functions through her combination of youth support, metrosexual advisors who know a good cocktail when they see one and *her proclivity to wear white pantsuits that show the exact location of her party lines*" (Agrill, *National Post*, 17 March 2005, TT10; emphasis mine).

As Duerst-Lahti and Kelly (1995: 24) observe, politics "has historically borne an explicitly masculine identity", yet this identity remains invisible. Because male leadership is normalized and un-interrogated, females who aspire to political leadership deeply rooted assumptions. Accordingly, "women who are considered feminine will be judged incompetent" (Jameison 1995: 16). For instance, a disturbing number of commentators asserted Belinda Stronach had been recruited by powerful backroom boys to serve as the advertising gimmick for the new party, a political equivalent of draping a bikini-clad blonde over a brand-new car. They agreed with the Toronto street performer - - Belinda Stronach was "better than Viagra" for a party in need of a lift. The national papers were advancing an intensely essentialist proposition; while a young attractive woman could use her sex appeal to sell the party to voters she was by nature unqualified for political leadership. Stronach was good for the party, said *National Post* columnist John Ivison, until she had a chance at victory. According to Ivison, Stronach's leadership would have been a "disaster" (6 February 2004, A6). "We can only cringe at the thought of how she would perform as opposition leader, let alone prime minister" said a *National Post* editorial (19 March 2004, A21).

Few women have held party leadership positions in Canada, thus it is unsurprising that popular understandings of leadership, including those held by the news media, reflect masculine scripts. As a result, women's very legitimacy as political actors, and capacity to govern effectively if elected, are called into question. This analysis of national newspaper coverage of the Conservative leadership race indicates that evaluative schema applied by the press promote the established gender order and establish women's political aspirations as aberrant and unseemly.

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