

The Trauma of Political Defeat

by Steven Kleinknecht and William Shaffir

At the time this article was written William Shaffir was a Professor and Steven Kleinknecht a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at McMaster University in Hamilton. The data for this paper derives from a series of forty-five informal interviews, conducted by the senior author with former provincial and federal Members of Parliament. In most cases, the conversations took place within five years of the defeat.

Sixty to eighty hour work weeks are common in political life. Individual identity becomes reflexively linked to work. The suddenness of defeat and loss of public attention has an abrupt and direct impact on the politician's identity. Ideals of caring and making a difference are inexorably sidelined and the now ex-politician is forced to deal with his or her new reality. Coping strategies are developed to come to terms with the loss and the stigma of political defeat. This article focuses on the dynamics surrounding career terminations using defeated politicians as a case study in disinvolvement and disengagement.

Newcomers to political life must familiarize themselves with the informal culture of the legislative assembly, the formal rules relating to that institution's organization, the political party's organization including the various responsibilities that he or she will be expected to assume. Added to these time constraints, and, perhaps most challenging of all, are innumerable meetings with constituents and various interest groups who always expect immediate attention.

Ex-politicians recall numerous instances where family-related activities were sacrificed to the demands of political office; for example, missed ballet recitals and hockey games, or family trips and vacations that could not be planned in advance or were suddenly postponed or even cancelled. For some, political life contributes to the dissolution of their marriage. From the perspective of these former politicians, the adverse effect on family is connected to the enormously long hours required for their work, much of which removes them from the family setting for lengthy periods.

Political life is also exhilarating. Immersed within its subculture, politicians readily believe that they are affecting change in a needed direction. As they are socialized into this subculture, they become convinced that they are becoming better at doing what they are supposed to do. Initial feelings of uncertainty and confusion are replaced by confidence and determination. In the process, their status as politician becomes their master status, overtaking the various other statuses they occupy. However, while self-assured at this point, they are particularly vulnerable. It is within this context that political defeat at the polls is experienced as death.

The following comments capture the essence of this feeling: "It is like the phases of death. You have loss, anger, sadness, and then you come to accept it," says a defeated Liberal. A more starkly-worded description is offered by this individual when he says: "It is as sudden as death. The only thing different is that you do not have to walk into a funeral home, peek into the box and say, 'Well, he was a nice guy.'"

The analogy to death is meant to focus on the enormous regret occasioned by the loss. Political resurrection is not entirely uncommon but its immediacy precludes any realistic long-term perspective imagining an eventual return to the political arena. Instead, the loss is viewed as the snuffing out of a promising political career with its projected achievements and successes.

Quite often, the trauma of the experience is magnified owing to the all-possessing and preoccupying nature of political life: "... because you invest so much of your life into this, you become preoccupied. You live and breathe this thing. It is part of your being. So when it is taken away prematurely, of course there is disappointment." (Progressive Conservative)

The metaphor of death, resonating with the vast majority of those interviewed, is the terminology they use to best capture the profound disappointment resulting from their defeat.

Although some defeated members claim to have anticipated defeat, particularly during the campaign's latter stages, it, nonetheless, constitutes a severe blow to their ego both because it occurs in public and they believe they deserved better. They are surprised and unprepared for its impact on them. Defeat represents rejection at its extreme: "You did not get fired by one person, you got fired by 6,000," remarks a defeated NDP member. Embarrassed and upset by the defeat, it is not unusual for them to withdraw, as revealed in the following transcripts:

"I can imagine that some people were devastated and did not want to go out, did not want to go to a funeral, did not want to go to a wedding, did not want to go to a baptism, did not want to go to a confirmation, did not want to go to church. Did not want to do a lot of things." (Liberal)

"I thought I had come through it fairly well. When I woke up one day about a year and a half later, I realized that I had not responded to a single telephone call from Manitoba in those 18 months. I could not do it." (New Democratic Party)

"... people crawl into shells. They do not want to peak their head out because they think the public has turned them down. That destroys their self-esteem." (New Democratic Party)

It is not surprising, therefore, that in reflecting upon the defeat, former parliamentarians refer to periods of grieving and mourning that, for some, endured for periods of several months and even longer. As the Clerk of a provincial legislature remarks: "It is a loss so there is a grieving process and some people handle that better than others.... People grieve in various ways and that is a reaction people have to being defeated."

The mourning is not confined to the defeated politician alone, but may extend to family members who also experience the accompanying frustration and sadness.

"There was mourning, definitely. I mourned, my husband did. The next morning he woke up early to go and pick up the signs and he said that he was crying the whole time. He was very angry. Angrier than I was that the electorate was not loyal. It was very sad." (Liberal)

Staff and volunteers do not emerge unscathed from defeat. Their loss is not easily ignored and the defeated member may feel some measure of responsibility for their new-found predicament. "There is a funny thing that happened the day of the election. I felt really bad for my people, not for me," a defeated Liberal member reminisces. Another defeated parliamentarian, a Progressive Conservative, observes: "... I think of the concentrated time you put in and you also have a number of other people spending this kind of time for you too. You have to feel a little bit responsible for what happened, not just for yourself but for the others who are involved."

"...I felt I owed a lot to the people who had worked for me as volunteers and it is very difficult to let down the side. Now realistically, in politics, there are always people being let down, regularly. It is just that I had not had that experience. I had won every time.... So, for me, it was a taste of failure that I had not been used to. For a number of months, I felt really guilty about having let people down." (Liberal)

The imagery of death rings true for yet another reason. The defeat generates a series of sympathetic telephone calls and visits from family members, friends and constituents offering

words of solace and comfort. The spouse of a defeated Progressive Conservative member observes:

"After the election, there is a period where we are still around for a little bit. The phone would ring, people would be leaving messages: 'Sorry about this.' I remember taking one phone call, it was our minister and he wanted to offer his condolences. People would not know what to say to us, or me. I would say: 'It is OK, we are fine, we are OK with it.' I had to reassure them that we were OK with it. If anything, it was the others that were not."

Intending to comfort, they are, instead, reminders of the bitter loss: "The last thing I wanted," recalls a defeated Liberal, "was for people to drop by and tell me what kind of great guy I was, and how they could not believe it happened."

As incapacitating as defeat may be, the defeated member must make sense of it. Expressions of mourning and grief are not experienced to the exclusion of other lines of thought, notably those helping to make the loss more understandable and palatable. In time, and with the assistance of others, a series of explanations for the loss – rationalizations – are embraced which serve to reduce the individual's culpability.

We now turn to the types of accounts employed by the defeated politicians to assuage their bruised egos. In short, they rely upon a variety of rationalizations which, whether recognized or not, serve to deflect responsibility for the outcome. These are presented as justifications for their defeat and situate the outcome of the election as being outside of the politician's control.

The Party and the Leader

In attempting to come to terms with their defeat, ex-politicians point to a number of external factors, not the least of which is their political party. Some rationalize that it was simply because they were affiliated with a particular party that led to their defeat. In terms of party dynamics, ex-politicians may also blame their loss on their leader, the organization of the party, unpopular political decisions, or the calling of an election at an inopportune time. In this way, when the entire party is "swept" during an election, it supports the sentiment that the defeat was the result of the party platform or leadership issues rather than anything the politician could control or be responsible for. In the process, ex-politicians distance themselves from responsibility for the loss and attempt to shield themselves from the negative repercussions accompanying the political defeat. For example:

"I think my government at the time caused its own defeat. So when we had the election and I lost, I was a little more upset with my government than I was with anybody else including myself."
(New Democratic Party)

"I expected to lose because people were angry with the NDP. They were not angry with me personally. But like you live and die with the party in this system." (New Democratic Party)

Door-to-door campaigning may alert politicians to the possibility of defeat. As some politicians indicate, their reception during these encounters enables them to gauge the support they might expect to receive on election day. Some recall experiencing very direct indications that members of the public were dissatisfied with the party:

"I remember knocking on doors, and the guy would yell at you for 15 minutes. He would say, 'Jim you are great, but I cannot afford the NDP.' So Howard [party leader] asked me how is the canvassing going and I said, 'Howard, I am not canvassing, I am doing psychotherapy on the doorsteps.' There is not a hope here. I cannot win. They say, 'you are doing a great job, if you

were not running for the NDP we would vote for you.' We got creamed in the election." (New Democratic Party)

Based upon experiences of this kind, the politician is provided with evidence to support the rationalization that it is not the individual politician with whom the constituents are unhappy, but the political party with which they are affiliated. Encounters such as these, offering cues from the public, help shape a vocabulary necessary to think about and explain the defeat both to oneself but also others.

The first broad category of coping mechanisms involves developing ways to think and talk about the loss; that is, framing the loss in a particular light so that it would appear as if it were expected and thereby deflecting responsibility for the outcome. The second category is activity-based and related to new involvements or re-involvements that are undertaken.

In looking at party dynamics to explain their defeat, some politicians argue that the party did not have a sufficiently sound infrastructure in place to support its members. For instance, some maintain that proper educational mechanisms were unavailable. In comparing their party to other parties during the election campaign, the competition, in their view, was better organized, thereby disadvantaging them in their quest for victory.

"Some of the blame goes to the Liberal party of Manitoba because during the two-year period they did not educate us, as MLAs, as to how we can build a constituency organization that would sustain itself. We did not do it. I had a president of my association that was running around signing petitions to ban French. That is very good. You got a sitting MLA and you are out signing a petition to ban French? Unfortunately the Liberal party of Manitoba did not provide the manpower or the intellectual ability [to help build the constituency]. Take a look at the Conservatives in our area. They have a constituency and one phone call and everybody's there. The NDP is the same..." (Liberal)

"It was an unusual situation. We were, in a way, handicapped going from 1 seat to 20. We started from nothing. We had no money, there was no communications director, no research.... We had to build that up.... Had we had a majority government we would have had 4, close to 5 years to get our feet wet, to get organized... and so on. So as a result for having it for only two years, I was not known all around the riding." (Liberal)

Tied to the issue of party organization is a belief that the party leader can either make or break one's own political campaign. Therefore, in an attempt to distance oneself from the defeat, ex-politicians also look to place some of the blame on the leader of their party. Once again, cues from the public often supply the ex-politician with the ammunition necessary to re-direct the blame for the loss in this manner:

"To be honest with you, I blame the loss only on one person, and that was our leader. Number one, people were telling me on the street that Sharon was no longer the leader they thought she was. Number two, she does not have the ability to lead. Number three, Phil, we like you, we admire you, you got a lot of chutzpah, but not your leader." (Liberal)

"So what was more disturbing is that when you got the negative stuff, none of it was directed at me. It was all because I was part of Filmon's team. So while that contributed immensely to me winning in 1995, it dragged me down in 1999." (Progressive Conservative)

Additionally, having to compete against a party with a particularly charismatic leader can feed into a person's belief that it is a party's leader who should be held most accountable for the political defeat:

"I pretty much knew I was going to lose. I had access to polls. In fact, I warned the caucus we were all likely to lose our seats. Bob Smith and I were the only ones that stood a chance of holding our seats until Klein became Tory leader. When he became the Tory leader, I knew that my goose was cooked, because for some reason the man has some kind of magnetic appeal among the voters in my part of Calgary. I was probably more angry with my own party than I was with the electorate." (New Democratic Party)

While believing ahead of time that a loss was imminent may bring some consolation by providing the politician some time to plan and prepare for the defeat, there are still accompanying feelings of anger and possibly sorrow and guilt that need to be dealt with. However, if these emotions can be displaced onto something external to the politician, it helps to dampen the assault on one's ego.

The Policy

Decisions that directly impact on the public, such as taxation, public spending, and legislation, can have a tremendous influence on how the party is seen as a whole. If these decisions do not sit well with the public, the belief is that there is nothing any one politician can do to overcome these impediments to re-election. "What happens here, is the death of a thousand paper cuts. It is the toll highway, it is the nursing home, hospitals, it is the policing." (Liberal) As the following examples indicate, ex-politicians tend to rationalize these kinds of decisions as a significant component contributing to their defeat.

"I knew we were going down. I mean the timing was bad. We were in the second year. We put in a really nasty budget, raising taxes and all that. Normally in a 4-year mandate, you do your bad stuff in the early part. So we had done the bad stuff and we were running on the bad stuff, right. Aside from that, we had raised rates in the auto insurance and people were just going nuts about that." (New Democratic Party)

"Going into it, I did not think we were going to lose because I had won the previous election by the second highest majority. We had gone through a difficult time where we had spent in largesse from the standpoint of the schools, hospitals and for the first time we were in debt and we did not know how long we would be in debt.... And, of course, when we moved to 1989, the price of oil and gas had gone up... Whereas you had a lot of support earlier on in the re-election process, you started getting the finger as you were standing and freezing on the overpass waving to people... So you got the impression that things were not going as well as they should." (Liberal)

"The province had been suffering attitudinally, psychologically, economically. And in 10 years we completely turned the province around. It took some hard medicine and it required a whole lot of little no's to everybody, which eventually added up. That is why we lost in June." (Liberal)

Timing

In the eyes of politicians, the timing of an election is crucial. In order to understand their defeat, some ex-politicians rationalize that the government chose a poor time to call an election; for example, the economic climate was not conducive to winning the election, or that key elements of the electorate, for one reason or another, were simply unavailable to support the candidate.

A majority government enjoys considerable discretion as to when the next election will be called. Polls can be used as indicators of public support and certain strategies can be implemented to prepare a positive political setting in which to hold the election. While in theory this may be true,

even this sort of preparation does not always provide the advantage it is expected to. However, serving in a minority government may place certain restrictions on the party members – for example, minority governments typically become bound to a shorter time period during which they will call an election. As a result, the governing party may not have adequate time to become well-organized and implement policies that are conducive to re-election. Therefore, public sentiment may be poor, thus hampering an individual's bid for re-election.

Additionally, politicians rationalize that there are situational factors such as recessions and public service crises which create a political atmosphere that is not conducive to re-election. In the following example, a defeated member situates these unanticipated developments in the "bad luck" category:

"We had some very bad luck. I lost by 100 votes, which is 50 votes really. Here is what happened the week before the election. 10,000 people without a doctor in St. John's. Major crisis – X-ray technicians are on strike. 'Tom, if you cannot do something about this I am not going to vote for you.' This is two or three days ahead of the election. Then a strike on the day of the election."
(Liberal)

The next example illustrates how the timing for the election can hamper a member's chances to win. The individual in question develops a detailed rationalization which outlines how his regular supporters were not around when the election was called:

"You have to remember that a lot of people in our area are seniors. They go to the beaches. They do not stay around. Only the younger people stay. And those are the younger people who voted and they voted... for the Conservatives. So I got my butt kicked. Had my senior population stayed, I probably would have given a good run for the money or I might have even won. But that was not to be." (Liberal)

In certain instances, the argument advanced is that the poor timing of an election was the result of a bad decision made by their party or party leader.

By developing a rationalization which situates blame on a variety of seemingly external factors, the ex-politician is offered a more convincing justification as to why he or she was unsuccessful. At the same time, it allows the ex-politician to save face and deal with negative feelings experienced as the result of the defeat.

By viewing oneself as being at the whim of one's party, defeated politicians are able to feel some consolation when their party is "swept"; that is when a large proportion of members of the same party lose in their bid for re-election. When a recently defeated politician sees that a significant proportion of his or her fellow party members also lost their seat, it allows for the rationalization that their individual defeat was influenced by some factor related to the party as a whole rather than anything they did or did not do as a member of that party. While this may produce feelings of anger towards the party, it also helps ex-politicians come to terms with the defeat in a way which allows them to focus responsibility on something beyond their control. For example:

"When the election came, I was defeated by a 2-1 count which was a shock; however, the shock was diminished by the fact that by the time the election returns started coming in, until I got word that I had lost, the whole province had gone down." (Liberal)

Having people encourage the belief that the loss had to do with the government as a whole and not the individual, allows the ex-politician to accept this rationalization. In the next example, we see that having friends indicate that the defeat was the result of her party affiliation rather than anything which she could have controlled, helps the individual come to terms with the defeat:

"I guess, for me, I was able to say to myself, and others said to me and my friends said to me, 'You went down with the government. It did not have anything to do with you.' They believe I went down with the government. So my social stature has not changed very much." (Liberal)

The following example further illustrates the point that the defeat may be de-personalized by attributing responsibility to something beyond one's control:

"I think what was different, here, is that we all lost, all of our caucus lost. And it was really clear on the doorstep that people were saying, I am not voting against you, I want someone to defeat the Tories and they were voting Liberal. And that is why I knew I would not win, and that also took that personal sting out of it. That was a kind of unique set of circumstances." (Progressive Conservative)

However, as the wife of a defeated member observes, this rationalization may offer only minor comfort:

"It was a landslide for the PCs. And there is some comfort in that, but just some comfort. And so there are a whole lot of you. Big deal, you still lost." (New Democratic Party)

The Media

There is a strong consensus among ex-politicians that negative publicity, especially when disseminated via the media, can have a very detrimental impact on one's chances for re-election. Note the following observations:

"So no matter how good you are, it does not matter. It matters what they are saying on the front page and the editorial page, and they have not changed their tune one iota over the last 3 years. So you have to look at those things. Now all that can change in 24 hours." (Liberal)

"I think the media really turned against us as we started going for that re-election. They did not want to hear what we had to say, distorted my words and took them out of context. It was as if they created the stories in advance and were waiting for you to say something to reinforce their story that was already there." (New Democratic Party)

Whether the coverage is directed towards the party as a whole or focussed on a particular politician, the outcome in terms of one's chances for re-election are significantly impaired. More often than not, the ex-politician believes that the media provides inaccurate or biased coverage of issues which frame the politician or the party in a negative light. For example, ex-politicians may reason that a particular newspaper publisher had a vendetta against the party or that the paper was simply trying to bolster sales by writing a provocative smear campaign involving the politician or the party. Based upon this type of reasoning, ex-politicians are able to formulate a further rationalization that situates blame for political defeat on the media.

A former east coast MLA argued that his chances for re-election were hindered by erroneous media coverage of a particular project the party had completed:

"The year leading into the election, the media turned on us. The Moncton paper was unjustifiably vicious. One issue was the park we built... wonderful deal, worked out well, but the paper crucified us there." (Liberal)

The media are seen to provide a significant source through which politicians have an opportunity to express their particular platform to the public. However, as the next example demonstrates, there is a great deal of competition fostered through the media, not only between parties, but also certain interest groups. In the following example, an ex-politician points out that it does not matter

how truthful the claims being made are; even more important is that well-presented, even if inaccurate, claims made through the media can have a powerful impact on public sentiment:

"In this election, rightly or wrongly, we built this toll highway and I will be honest with you, I never agreed with it. But the toll busters ran a very effective campaign against the government. They ran ads that were as effective as the conservative campaign against the government... So there was no truth and ads were flashed on TV. They bought the time and put it on during the Stanley Cup finals. We could not spend the money even if we had it to counter that sort of thing and you could not counter it anyway." (New Democratic Party)

As some politicians indicate, one can use the harshness and extent of negative media attention to judge how they might fare in an up-coming election. By being able to judge one's chances for re-election through the media, the ex-politician is provided with the opportunity to brace him or herself for possible defeat.

"I knew in my town I would have a difficult time because the local media, two years prior to the election, was extremely rough with us and had not stopped being rough with the Liberal party. I mean 45-day front-page campaigns on the toll highway, 21-day front page on the project, which I was defending, a seven-day campaign on another major, so it was just incessant." (Liberal)

Personal Health Issues

In discussing one's personal health and the impact it had on attempts to secure re-election, rationalizations take on a somewhat different focus. Rather than placing the blame on a factor far beyond the individual, some ex-politicians rationalize the defeat in terms of a very personal factor, their own well-being. While placing the responsibility for defeat more directly on oneself, by attributing the loss to issues relating to personal health, the ex-politician is able to displace blame onto an illness, something which they could not control.

"For a number of months, I felt really guilty about having let people down. If only I had not been sick. I do not think there is any doubt that had I not been ill, I would have been able to get out a couple of hundred votes. It does not take much effort to swing a couple of hundred votes." (Progressive Conservative)

"So I was ill from before the election. I had a kind of very serious laryngitis. There were times when I could not talk, which means I had to write notes. I tried to go out twice during the election, campaign door-to-door, that is the way it is done here. I could not. I got ill both times. I would be out an hour and I would not be able to talk. So I lost by a few votes." (Progressive Conservative)

By rationalizing defeat as the result of personal health, ex-politicians are able to also frame their defeat in a positive light. As the following examples illustrate, political defeat is sometimes viewed as the best medicine for the stress induced illnesses that become associated with a career in politics. Very powerful personal examples are also offered as possible benefits of having lost an election due to health concerns:

"By the time the election had come, I still had not fully got on my feet. Sleeping on the chesterfield in the office, getting up and going again for 10 or 12 hours, diabetes out of control. It is constant." (Liberal)

"Another term like that in government would have killed me. It truly would have. I worked that hard and I was just wasted so the defeat, when it came about, was a good thing because I was able to become my wife's number one care giver. She passed away on December 24 of the same year, having been diagnosed with lung cancer. She was not well in September and then October came the diagnosis and December came the death." (Progressive Conservative)

The following example further illustrates how the ex-politician rationalizes a defeat in terms of personal health. For this individual, personal health may not have been the most significant factor contributing to his defeat, but he believes it was quite influential when combined with a second justification:

"I spend 14 days in bed in the middle of the campaign with bronchial pneumonia out of the 35-day campaign. So my health may have contributed to it. I was the lightning rod for all the antagonism and rage over the language issue from 1983-4. It is now 1986. It should have been forgotten but people needed to express it. I lost by 55 votes. The doctor was going to put me in the hospital if I was not going to promise to stay home in bed, so I did. If I could not have swung 28 votes in two weeks, then I should not have been in politics. So you can blame it on bronchial pneumonia, but the bottom line was it was the French language issue."(New Democratic Party)