

Debunking the Cult of Warren: Liberal strategist getting more credit than he deserves

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OTTAWA - In a torrent of news releases, press conferences and newspaper and magazine columns, the slumbering Canadian nation is being enjoined this week to ponder the magnificence of Warren Kinsella. As trivial pursuits go, Warren-worship at least has the virtue of being entertaining.

Mr. Kinsella is a lawyer just past his 40th birthday with a nice view of Toronto from his office in a shiny Bay Street tower. He used to write speeches for Jean Chretien when Mr. Chretien was doing a bad job as Opposition leader, although not as bad as the job can be done. He has stayed in touch with Mr. Chretien since the boss found better work. He was present in the rapid-response "war rooms" during the Liberals' 1993 and 2000 campaigns. In 1997 he was absent, busy losing as a Liberal candidate in British Columbia.

At a Toronto news conference yesterday, Mr. Kinsella was "revealed" as the "mystery" author of a fab new book, *Kicking Ass in Canadian Politics*. The book isn't actually available yet. It will be in the autumn and Mr. Kinsella's publisher figures it's never too soon to start beating the drums. His publisher has collected a number of media quotes about Mr. Kinsella's place in the politico-punditocratic firmament.

"He has been called 'The master of the Liberal war room' (Montreal Gazette), 'the architect for the Grit victory' (The Hill Times), 'the Liberal party's resident pit-bull politico' (Canoe) and 'a political hit-man' (The Toronto Sun)," the promotional material informs us.

Once we scribes convince ourselves of a figure's importance, we can be hard to dissuade. Here's Peter C. Newman informing us in this week's *Maclean's* that "Perhaps [Allan] Rock's most astute move [in the Liberal pre-leadership race] has been to sign up Warren Kinsella," a fellow Mr. Newman adjudges "impressively networked."

With the advent of a weekly Kinsella column in *The Ottawa Citizen* and the attention of the bored press gallery turning to internal Liberal politics, the Cult of Warren threatens to become even more overwhelming than it has already been. So perhaps it is not too early to do a little truth-squad work.

Fun facts: Mr. Kinsella was not "the architect for the Grit victory." He was not "the master" of the war room. In private moments, he has even been known to admit as much. (Full disclosure: We had lunch in a

swishy Hogtown bistro last week, our second lunch date in three years.)

The election was won by a smallish army of Grits whose distinguishing feature is an aversion to self-promotion. The main campaign organizer was John Rae, a Montreal lawyer so self-effacing most Ottawa scribes couldn't pick him out of a police lineup. Mr. Rae would chair morning campaign meetings with a stern warning that nothing said around the table could leave the room. The first thing he did when the staff moved into campaign headquarters was to hang signs on every floor: "When losing, say little; when winning, say less."

The "war room" -- the communications and quick-rebuttal side of the campaign operation -- was run by John Milloy, who is on TV even more often than Mr. Kinsella: As a senior advisor to Mr. Chretien, he can generally be seen trailing behind as the Prime Minister strides into the Commons. Mr. Milloy is hard to miss. He's the tall, nervous-looking guy whose mouth is shut.

Under Mr. Milloy's organization, the campaign message was honed by Francie Ducros, Mr. Chretien's much-maligned communications director. She was helped by Ken Polk, a speechwriter who came up with most of the funny lines that get attributed to Mr. Kinsella; and by the campaign's undisputed MVP, a bespectacled Albertan named Kevin Bosch.

Mr. Bosch was responsible for opposition research against the Alliance. He showed up at Liberal HQ toting a pile of briefing books taller than himself, each crammed with quotations from every important Alliance official stretching back more than a decade. He is said to have the sort of eerie memory that allows him to remember everything Stockwell Day ever said, when he said it, and in which context.

He was a devastating weapon. "I don't know that I can say enough good things about Kevin," another war-room denizen told me yesterday.

Mr. Kinsella? He was designated a "floater," which means he had no specific job at all. He was there because of Jean Chretien's personal affection for him. He chipped in, as everyone did, at idea-generating bull sessions. He went on TV because the other Liberals, terrified of Mr. Rae's gag order, wouldn't.

And what do you remember about his TV appearances? Precisely: the Barney the Dinosaur toy

he hauled out of a gym bag to mock Mr. Day's beliefs about creationism. Except the Barney analogy wasn't his. It came from Sophie Galarneau, yet another near-anonymous Grit. Mr. Kinsella only acted it out.

The Cult of Warren is only partly Mr. Kinsella's fault. It also demonstrates a perennial flaw in journalists' psychology. How many times have you seen "senior sources" or "high-ranking sources" quoted in a news story? Thousands. Now how many times have you seen a reporter hang a quote off an unnamed "mid-ranking source of uncertain influence," or a "hack addicted to his Rolodex?" Less often. Reporters are addicted to grade inflation: Anyone reckless enough to talk to us becomes the most important guy in sight, because the fact he talks to us makes us feel important.

Which is how a floater becomes king and a nation becomes even a little more ill-informed than it already was. As for Mr. Rock, he should be at least as grateful to have nailed Raj Chahal and Randy Pettipas as he was to get Mr. Kinsella. Never heard of them? Precisely.