

With friends like that . . .

All too often, provincial premiers are the real problem for their own federal party leaders

PETER MANSBRIDGE

What is it with provincial premiers and their federal party leaders? Last week's shots from Ralph Klein certainly rocked his Conservative partners in Ottawa – there was Peter MacKay, suggesting the best way to handle the Alberta premier's verbal bombs could be summed up with two words: "duct tape." What was it Klein had said? Only that he felt Paul Martin was going to win another minority because Stephen Harper is seen as "too much on the right" by vote-rich Ontario. That Klein is blunt with his assessments is nothing new, and to some quite refreshing – remember, this is the man who suggested, with a smile, that dinosaur farts caused global warming. But when it comes to unreservedly supporting his party's national leader, Klein is hardly the first premier to be judged as letting the side down. Alberta's Peter Lougheed was often seen as lukewarm on Joe Clark, as was Ontario's Bill Davis; there was no love lost between Quebec's Robert Bourassa and Pierre Trudeau; Manitoba's Gary Filmon caused no end of headaches for Brian Mulroney; and Ontario's Dalton McGuinty seems to always be pounding Paul Martin's handling of Ontario concerns. For most of them, banging on Ottawa, even when it's all in the family, is seen as smart politics.

Does this stuff translate into more than just a good story? Probably not when it happens between elections, but on the eve of a campaign, maybe. Provincial and federal campaigns share workers, and if there's a signal to back off in helping, that can obviously cause problems. That's not an issue for Harper in Alberta, where the Tories rule no matter who says what about whom within the Conservative circle. But remarks such as Klein's could have an impact in Ontario, where they only serve as a reminder of what many voters in fact did think last year, and could deflate volunteers about to head out for door-to-door work. Harper could only be thankful that Klein spoke out the week before the campaign started, not the week before the votes are counted. There's lots to come yet that could make this little whopper long forgotten by then.

All the parties claim that as the campaign begins they're in a flush cash position to fund their various activities, including one of the most expensive – the television ad buy. This year they'll certainly need the cash, and lots of it, because the pre-Christmas season is

prime commercial time and that doesn't come cheap. But slotting spots of the leaders slagging each other, or showing them in soft focus, promising trust and accountability, at the same time as a barrage of slickly produced ads feature the best of the holiday season, may be an expense and a risk some of the parties just won't be willing to take. Some campaign veterans are privately wondering whether it might be better to stay out of the way and let Christmas be Christmas without trying to hammer a campaign sign through it.

If that's the case, then expect the December part of this campaign to be a phony war – the only people watching it may be on the politicians' planes, in the rally halls, and in newsrooms across the country. Most voters may take a pass until the first week of January, and even then it will be interesting to see just how many will be motivated enough to really get involved. Turnout will again be much discussed and much fretted about – last year, even with the parties and the media determined to reverse a steady pattern of declining rates by trying new campaign and coverage techniques, the rate dropped to an all-time low of 60.9 per cent. This year, conventional wisdom suggests that two things – a disdain for what most Canadians have witnessed from their politicians in the past year, and the possible perils of a mid-winter campaign – could take that number even lower, in other words, down into the fifties.

Now for a trivia question, and don't feel bad if you draw a blank because it's a safe bet many people who work on Parliament Hill won't know the answer either. Here's the background. The current "dean" of the House of Commons – the member of Parliament who has held his seat longer than anyone else and as a result garners a certain degree of extra peer respect – is Manitoba's Bill Blaikie, of the NDP. He has admirers on all sides of the House, and, it should be noted, very few expect him to face a serious threat as he tries to record his ninth consecutive victory. But what if the unexpected happens and he *is* knocked off? Who would then be the dean? The answer: Louis Plamondon, who is expected by those who know Quebec politics to be victorious in his seventh straight race. Plamondon was first elected as a Conservative in the Mulroney sweep of 1984, but has been representing the Bloc Québécois since 1990. And if Blaikie were to be tripped up, that would make the dean of the House someone who, in fact, is trying to break it, and the country, up.

Only in Canada, you say.