



## Conservatives may be upping their glamour quotient

**American Virginia Postrel shares her expertise on glamour and politics at the conservative Manning Centre think-tank.**

By Susan Delacourt

Feb. 27, 2015

Next week, when some big thinkers in Canada's conservative movement meet in Ottawa, the subject of "glamour" will be among their deep thoughts.

Glamour seems an unlikely topic for the annual Manning Centre gathering, which tends to dwell on decidedly non-glitzy matters of policy, democracy and electoral strategy.

But this year, the conservative think-tank founded by former Reform Party leader Preston Manning is putting a U.S. cultural expert on stage: Virginia Postrel, author of *The Power of Glamour*.

Now, why, months from an election, would conservative-minded folks be suddenly interested in the allure of glamour?

Just a guess, but might it have something to do with that leader of the third party in Canada, who seems to occupy so much space in Conservative fundraising letters and advertising budgets?

Very few Conservatives would likely call Justin Trudeau glamorous, at least not as a compliment, but they might concede that some voters view the Liberal leader that way — young, camera-friendly, son of a charismatic former prime minister, a crowd magnet.

Should that worry Conservatives? Well, only if they believe in the power of visual imagery in politics. And judging by the enormous effort and money dedicated to optics in Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government — blue backdrops, oversized cheques, expensive ads, snazzy photos and videos churning out of the PMO — Conservatives obviously do value the visual. As well they should, Postrel suggests. "Glamour is as useful in political persuasion as it is in commercial advertising," she wrote in a fascinating essay exchange with other cultural scholars last July, part of an online-discussion series hosted by the U.S. Cato Institute. "It is all about hope and change."

Her essay is titled “No Fireworks on the Fourth of July,” and begins, partly tongue-in-cheek, with the picture of a perfect political world for policy wonks — all serious, earnest discussion and no frivolous imagery (not unlike a convention that a Canadian think-tank would hold, actually).

In the real world, Postrel writes, there is a role for glamour in politics, and a need for “serious people” to wrap their minds around it.

“Instead of dismissing, neglecting or condemning the power of images, therefore, it makes sense to try to understand how they work,” she says.

We can probably assume that this is the Manning Centre’s motivation for putting Postrel on the stage this week: the wisdom of never underestimating your rival, glamorous or not. Trudeau himself, or his advisers, may want to tune in to the Postrel speech too, because she has warnings about the wild card of glamour in politics.

Here is one salient piece of advice, for instance: better to have glamorous policies than to be a glamorous politician.

“Although we commonly associate political glamour with public figures, notably (former U.S. president) John F. Kennedy, as visual persuasion it is better suited to policies and ideas than to politicians,” she wrote in the Cato essay. “Glamour requires mystery, which the intense scrutiny and populist expectations of contemporary campaigns tend to destroy.”

Intense scrutiny and populism are precisely the weapons that Conservatives have been using to chip away at Trudeau, as well as ridicule, which Postrel also says can be toxic to glamour over the long term.

So if Trudeau is mindful of Postrel’s advice, he will attempt to shift any aura of glamour away from himself before the election and toward policies and ideas.

But what defines a glamorous idea these days? In the 20th century, Postrel has written, it was anything from suburban idylls to the U.S.-Soviet space race, ideas or policies that held out the promise of a glamorous future for citizens.

It’s hard to say how that would translate into a 21st-century idea, accustomed as we Canadians have become to politics as plodding rhetoric, promising to protect us from change rather than asking us to imagine a sunny future.

And in an interview a few weeks ago, Postrel ventured to say that our current prime minister is not all that glamorous. Trudeau, she said, has “inherited glamour.”

But Postrel also seems to be saying that one doesn't have to be a glamorous politician to push a glamorous idea, meaning that the field is open for Harper or NDP leader Thomas Mulcair to come up with their own ways to glamorize their policies, too.

It could be that glamour is more an American phenomenon — that Canadians are as wary of glamour as they are of celebrity. But much of Canadian politics, especially in the realm of tactics, has been inspired by U.S. examples.

And whether Canadians are attracted to glamour or not, it's on the agenda for the major conservative thinkers conference this year. That would seem to indicate that at least some Conservatives believe glamour is going to play a role in this year's election.