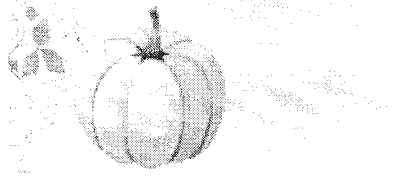


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Will Fantino be too much for Harper?

By MICHAEL DEN TANDT, QMI AGENCY

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper has invited the Big Dog into his tent. It's a bold move, one virtually guaranteed to win him a new seat in the House. But will it come back to bite him?

We're speaking, of course, of Julian Fantino -- former commissioner of the Ontario Provincial Police, former Ontario commissioner of emergency management, former Toronto chief of police, former police chief for Ontario's York Region, and former London, Ont., police chief.

Phew. This man moves. He overcomes all obstacles. He courts controversy, draws it to himself like iron shavings to a magnet. Despite this, his rise has been meteoric. And continues apace.

Here's a prediction: Fantino will handily win the coming by-election in Vaughan, Ont., expected before Christmas. In the next cabinet shuffle, likely early next year, he'll become a junior minister. And in the shuffle after that, assuming the Conservatives are still in office, he'll be Minister of Public Safety.

Vic Toews, keep an eye on your chair. And Stephen Harper? Perhaps you should do the same. Fantino is no ordinary politician. Nor does he enjoy, the record shows, taking direction from lesser men.

Are the Conservatives' standard-bearers lesser men? At the level of schoolyard alpha-dog dynamics, absolutely. Not one approaches Fantino's ability to work a room, or his simple charisma.

For proof, try this thought experiment: Imagine Fantino in an MMA cage match with, say, Tony Clement. OK, that's unfair. Jim Flaherty? Ouch. How about a Flaherty-Clement tag team then, with Fantino on his own? Still a midget-versus-giant mismatch. The professional politicians wouldn't have a hope.

You can work your way through the entire federal cabinet and not come up with a single figure who matches Fantino's personal wattage. Maxime Bernier tries -- but comes off as a middle-aged Lothario. Peter MacKay? Nope. Too plodding, too dull.

And of course, Harper himself can't hold a candle to his new recruit, on the magnetism scale. Keep an eye on these two once Fantino gets rolling. See who draws the most cameras, microphones and applause when they share an event.

Then there's the bigger problem, inextricably linked with Fantino's charisma. That would be his unshakeable certainty that his side is always the morally correct one, and that anyone who faults him is therefore dead wrong and worthy of attack, by definition.

For years, as Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty appointed him to successively more important jobs, Fantino made a habit of telling his civilian boss what laws to write.

In 2008, Fantino proposed that anyone who puts their car in a ditch in winter should be fined. In 2009, he suggested that any criticism of police use of Tasers was illegitimate because the critics "have never walked a beat and could not even pass basic police training." Hmm.

Fantino waged a bitter public fight with Caledonia, Ont., residents' activist Gary McHale. In the now-famous e-mail sent to Haldimand County Council in April of 2007, this appointed civil servant berated elected politicians, "for appearing to support McHale," and threatened to withdraw OPP services.

Fantino was later charged with "trying to influence municipal officials by means of threats." Earlier this year, an Ontario Crown prosecutor withdrew the charge on grounds there was no reasonable prospect of conviction.

So here's the question for the prime minister and the slouch-shouldered, gentle gnomes in the PMO -- worthy political warriors no doubt but not alpha dogs, necessarily.

Can you handle Julian Fantino? And what will you do when he snaps at you? Just curious.

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