

Opinion

Trouble rolls off our Jean like water off a duck

One only has to glance at the headlines and the lead items on the news to know that an election is not far off.

All three Metro Toronto dailies were reporting they had the inside track with the political elite as to when Canadians would head to the polls. June 2 seems to be the date, even though an announcement is about two weeks away.

You can also tell because Prime Minister Jean Chrétien has emerged from the public image bunker he has kept himself sequestered in since his party's much-reported blunders this past winter. And there is nothing quite like a visit to a friendly neighbor to stir up fond feelings back home.

Canadians can't seem to get enough of our Jean. Americans, on the other hand, had no idea who he was, until his first joint



Viewpoint

Andrew Mair

press conference with the U.S. president. When asked what he thought about all the drugs coming over the border into Canada, the Prime Minister replied, "Great, send them on in."

There was a stunned silence, then Bill Clinton whispered in the P.M.'s ear. "Oh, I heard 'trucks,'" Chrétien said, "not 'drugs.'" Everyone, including Clinton and Chrétien, had a great chuckle - imagine, the Canadian prime minister sanctioning the import-

ing of illicit drugs. But this is the sort of PR nightmare that rolls right off the Liberal leader. It seems he can do no wrong, and when he does, he waves it away goofily or disappears for a few weeks until the heat dies down, and suddenly, all is forgiven.

He must be credited with his party's huge popularity. One wag responding to Chrétien's controversial plan of parachuting women candidates into ridings noted that a dead goat could get elected under the Liberal banner at this stage in the campaign.

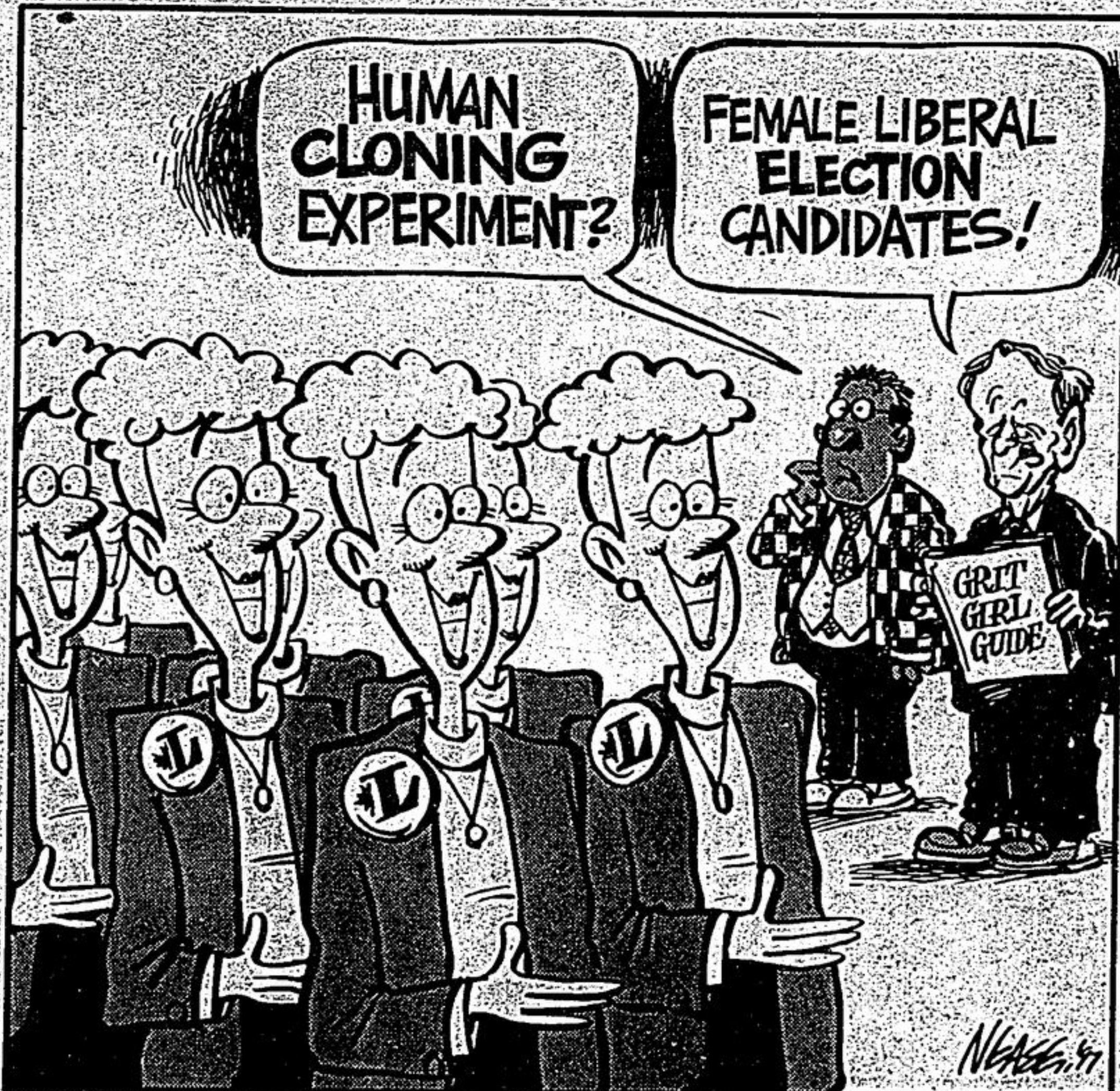
You also have to credit the man with impeccable timing. Had he called the election immediately after the parachute scandal, or his floundering over the breaking of his Red Book jobs promise debacle, his re-election hopes would be dimmed.

And now, this week, our leader is in the most powerful nation on

earth, tweaking the nose of its power establishment by not backing down on issues like Cuba and taking shots at the American's dragging-of-feet on health care. In a carefully orchestrated bit of political jousting, the Americans, for their part, agree to disagree while they continue to sing his praises.

Chrétien is an anomaly in Canadian political history. A more unlikely leader would be hard to find (with the possible exception of Joe Clark), and one who's ability to dodge political bullets, is unparalleled. Trouble seems to roll off him like water on a duck's back.

At the moment, it would appear Mr. Chrétien and his party have a lock on the Canadian voter. But a lot can happen in a month of campaigning. It will be interesting to see how the other parties intend to put a scratch in the Teflon.



Index of weirdness is going up

Thank heavens for the Fortean Times—I thought perhaps it was just me.

The Fortean Times is a British journal that tracks weird happenings and unexplained phenomena around the globe. And the latest issue of the Fortean Times claims the world became weirder last year. Two point nine per cent weirder, to be precise.

The journal has published an Index of Weirdness which is divided into four sections: Animal, Natural and Paranormal. After careful analysis, Fortean Times editors have announced that last year's weird stories, including bloodthirsty goatsuckers and fossil bacteria on meteorites, have catapulted the planet onto a whole new plateau of The Bizarre.

Bloodthirsty goatsuckers? You missed that story? The Puerto

Rican press has reported goat corpses that have been found with the blood—and even the livers—sucked right out of them via a pair of Dracula-like incisions in the neck. Nobody knows if the vampire culprit is winged, four-legged or favours a walking stick and a cape, but reports of His/Her/Its handiwork are showing up in Colombia, Brazil, Miami and the south of Spain.

Pretty weird alright. The other story—the one about fossil bacteria found on a 16-million-year-old meteorite will be even weirder if it turns out to be true.

It would confirm a century of Sci Fi speculation about the possibility of life on other planets. Alas, the scientists are squabbling over the veracity of the specimens, so the jury is still out.

How does the Fortean Times explain the upshot in weirdness? They say it's due to PMT.

That's Pre-Millennial Tension—the anxiety that subconsciously infects us all as we lurch toward the year 2,000. "PMT is gripping people" says a spokesman for the Fortean Times. "People get worried near the end of the century, with millennium cults predicting the end of the world. And that could explain why there is so much interest in the paranormal."

Well, maybe. And maybe the editors of the Fortean Times are affected too. Because I read the whole issue and didn't find a single mention of some of my favourite weird stories from last year.

Where for instance, is the story on the Indestructible Cake? How about greatest golf feat of all time which came out of Korea last year?

The cake story originated in the U.S., where last year researchers at the Army Soldiers System Command managed to create a pound cake suitable for soldiers in the field.

This cake can survive a fall

Basic Black
Arthur Black

from an airplane and temperatures that range from 120 degrees Fahrenheit to minus 60 degrees Fahrenheit. Oh yes, and it has a shelf life of five...years.

That's pretty scary too. As for the golf story, we owe that to the official news agency of North Korea.

Perhaps that should read 'official public relations agency' of North Korea.

All I know is last year the North Korean press reported that "Dear Leader" Kim Jong Il played his first game of golf in astonishing style, scoring five holes-in-one and beating the world record for a single round of golf by 25 strokes.

Since we're in the realm of comic relief, let me report another weird happening the Fortean Times appears to have missed—the rising incidence of Comedian Abuse.

Last November, Al Romero a comedian in Lancaster, Pa., was cracking wise about hicks from Arkansas when a customer by the name of Judy Strough (of Arkansas) walked up on the stage and slugged him.

Two weeks earlier, comedian Timothy Ward filed a lawsuit in New York City against Prince Rainier of Monaco who, Ward says, backhanded him during a 1995 show in which he made fun of the Prince's eroding hair-line.

First Puerto Rican goats...then comedians...is nothing sacred?

By the way, if you're reading this, Judy or Prince... Just kidding, eh?

Editor's mail

Did Sam Morse yell "Eureka"?

Open letter to Arthur Black

I have read your "Morse Code is Over and Out" of March 22. I have enjoyed all your articles - including this one. I was particularly interested since I have always been interested in Morse Code, having been given two boxes and a wire set by my dad when I was a boy.

As usual, the interest in it lasted only long enough till I found it was work to memorize the code. And it was fun to see the telegraph operator send out a message at the opening of the Heritage Railway in Uxbridge last summer when I asked him to. If the "interstellar satellites and fancy display monitors" don't work, then what? We won't have the simple Morse Code to fall back on. Perhaps you are also aware that each operator has a different "fist" - a distinguishable way of tapping out the message - from which other operators can identify the sender.

"Samuel Finley Breese Morse...was fooling around with an electromagnet when it occurred to him...How did it "occur" to him?

Where did his brain originate? Some would like to say that God "invented" the brain. I wonder if he sent the message "What Hath God Wrought?" because it was "politically correct" in those days, or did he believe that his inspiration came from God? "Old Sam Morse's brainwave" could have come from his own brain - the result of the progressive advancement of creation from the original rather than improve - that brainwave could have come from its Creator at His appointed time. However, you believe that "he" (not God) had wrought. I wonder if he yelled "Eureka" like Archimedes did when he discovered that the displacement of water in his square bathtub solved the problem of the volume of an odd-shaped object. Or did he yell "Praise God"? We won't know without a detailed study of his life and beliefs. I wonder if he was the product of a revival around 1838.

Thank you for your articles. Keep on keeping on!

D. Bruce McDowell
Goodwood