

# WHAT I SAW AT THE LIBERAL PARTY

Antonia Maioni



The Liberal Party leadership convention last December ended up defying many of the “conventions” associated with party leadership contests: the race was wide open; no one could call the winner in advance; and the front-runners failed to win the day. Stéphane Dion’s triumph bloomed within a hothouse atmosphere in which political intuition and identity still resonated, and in a party where gender issues and the divisive notions of nation have yet to be resolved. In this birds-eye view of the convention on the ground, McGill University’s Antonia Maioni draws out some political insights and media commentary on what happened at the Liberals’ big party in Montreal.

Le congrès à la direction du Parti libéral de décembre aura finalement défié plusieurs des « conventions » propres à l’exercice : la campagne était grande ouverte, personne ne pouvait en désigner le gagnant à l’avance, et les candidats vedettes ont fait chou blanc. Stéphane Dion a triomphé dans une ambiance surchauffée en misant sur l’intuition et l’identité politique, et dans un parti qui doit encore résoudre les enjeux liés à la nation et à l’égalité des sexes. Antonia Maioni tire les leçons politiques et médiatiques du grand happening libéral de Montréal.

There were over 900 media registered at the Liberal Party convention in Montreal last December. The mass of media in a single location was larger than anything in recent memory, certainly more impressive than I had ever witnessed. Through the good graces of a newspaper editor as well as of CPAC, which invited me onto its main panel, I was able to be one of the media masses. Moonlighting from my day job at McGill University, the experience proved to be rich in insights for a political scientist and an observer of the media. From their raised perches at the back of the convention hall, the broadcast media had a bird’s eye view of the movement in the room and of the action on the stage. The print media, meanwhile, were able to move back and forth from the writing hall — with rows and rows of desks and laptops — to the floor of the convention where they trolled for information, black notebooks in hand. Instead of the smoke-filled rooms of the past, the air was filled with BlackBerries buzzing and mobile phones beeping incessantly. As political history unfolded in real time, I made a few observations about the Liberal leadership race, one that few would have thought necessary two years ago, and fewer still could have predicted a year ago.

**I**nsights from the poli sci crowd: I met with several fellow political scientists at the Liberal convention in

Montreal. Neither political junkies nor political groupies, my colleagues provided a welcome counterweight to the horse-race obsession that pervaded the army of media scribes. The Liberal convention in Montreal ended up defying many of the “conventions” associated with party leadership contests in Canada. The race was wide open, for starters, no one could call the winner in advance, and the apparent front-runner failed to win the day. But as political scientists will tell you, the real difference was that the experienced Liberal caucus member ended up ahead of the outsiders in the race.

As John Courtney has argued, leadership conventions in Canada have historically represented a struggle between recognizing proven political prowess and electoral potential, and the lure of the next best hope in the form of a white knight outsider. And it must be remembered that party leadership conventions are not general elections. They are venues that attract party activists and true believers. So it should not have been that much of a surprise to see the party faithful turn their backs in the final instance against the carpet-bagger intrusions of Michael Ignatieff and Bob Rae. Instead, despite the establishment muscle, most of the rank and file chose the party man, Stéphane Dion, who was perceived to have a fresh message and vision for the party, thus logically bringing together both experience and renewal.

Despite the pre-convention poll indications that Ignatieff might be a stronger opponent to Stephen Harper, or that Rae might enjoy broader support with the Canadian public, the Liberal delegates were more willing to offer the crown to the politician who had fought — and won — past electoral battles alongside his mentor Jean Chrétien. The sight of Eddie Goldenberg wrapped in a green Dion neckerchief seconds after Rae withdrew confirmed for all to see where the Chrétien soul of the party was going.

There was a palpable sense on the convention floor of the importance of the party's identity in this leadership contest. Wading through the convention floor or eavesdropping in the voting line, one could feel the unease among some Liberal delegates about the NDP past of Bob Rae and the divisive declarations of Michael Ignatieff. Gerard Kennedy's unremitting attack on the federal Liberals in his speech to the delegates probably didn't endear him to many people outside his circle, either. The psychic pull of a deeply devoted Liberal "believer" like Dion was of immeasurable importance to party members looking for a way to recapture their sense of purpose — and power.

**Words from the wise:** On speech night, I bumped into an influential media personality. He seemed to be spending a lot of time with the Kennedy camp, which in hindsight was probably the best place to be to chart the course of the convention (and to win the media pool predictions). Did Kennedy have a chance? "Who knows," he remarked, "but each and every one of these contenders think that they can make it." This reminded me that a few weeks earlier, Scott Brison and I had chatted on the train, and he repeated his

mantra about being in the race to win. "What kind of a masochist would I be to run in this race if I didn't think I could win?"

It may be hard to believe, delusional almost, like the wannabes on those *Idol* programs! But that is how you survive in politics, by keeping your eye on the prize and out for the main chance. Gerard Kennedy believed he had a chance, but knew

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that he had to hedge his bets. Most important of all, he — and Dion — had a plan. In the fateful minutes as the clock ran out before the third ballot, Frank McKenna, sitting in at the CPAC anchor desk, made the observation that Kennedy had no choice but to act — and fast — if he wanted to retain any measure of influence in the race and the party. With 30 seconds to spare, he pulled his name off the ballot and went to Dion.

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**Cherchez la femme:** The first thing I observed on arriving at the Palais des Congrès de Montréal was Martha Hall Findlay's bus, parked outside one of the entrances. It seemed forlorn, the perfect illustration of how little profile a woman could have in this leadership race. Sylvia Bashevkin has famously noted that, when it comes to women in Canadian party politics, the higher you go, the fewer you find. This Liberal leadership contest seemed to bear that out, as the lone female trailed the pack. During the first days of the convention, while loud groups of supporters surrounded the other candidates whenever they walked through the congress centre, Hall Findlay remained conspicuously alone, interviewed by a few straggling media. Most of the pack was stationed further on, waiting for a shot of — and at — the front-runners and the party brass. Belinda Stronach,



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Front-runner Michael Ignatieff and his wife Zsuzsanna Zsohar arrive in a crush of cameras at the Liberal convention in Montreal. But on the floor of the convention, as delegates voted on the Friday and Saturday, “Iggy” and his delegates sat in isolation, while an unexpected king-maker, Martha Hall Findlay, went to Dion instead of Rae or Ignatieff.

who was covering the convention for one of the broadcast outlets, was more sought out by the media than was Martha Hall Findlay, one of the candidates in the race. Women were the accessories, not the main attraction, at this event.

But Martha Hall Findlay turned out to be the main event herself. On speech night, she stole the show. Beautifully turned out, smiling and sophisticated, she delivered the first and best of the night, showcasing her grasp of policy issues and a remarkable proficiency in French. She received the first and one of the very few ovations from all of the delegates in the room — something not even Ignatieff could muster at the end of the evening.

There were many other people impressed with Hall Findlay that night, and some so impressed that they cast their first ballot vote for her. With that little margin, Hall Findlay had the goods to become a king-maker in her own right. The only woman in the race became the symbol of power. As at the high-school prom, having the right date became the key to popular success. Martha chose Stéphane, and the rest is history.

**L**es deux solitudes: The fun part of living in Montreal is the opportunity to be part of two linguistic and cultural communities. Unfortunately, the Liberal convention did not reflect much in the way of this cross-cultural

dynamic; inside the convention area, little French was heard and even less was seen.

But the real story of the two solitudes at the Liberal leadership race was the difference in the way in which French- and English-language media covered the event — and the outcome. The antipathy that Stéphane Dion generates among many francophone journalists in Quebec is the stuff of legend. Francophone Quebecers, or at least those who cared enough to pay attention to the Liberal leadership race, have not been overly keen toward this native son. But their opinion leaders have been even less so, bearing a grudge against the “unity” minister ever since he left the academy to join the Liberal

Party. Serge Chapleau's caricatures in *La Presse* representing Dion as a natty, haughty "rat" have become iconic political images in Quebec.

At the start of the Liberal leadership race, few French-language media saw the Dion candidacy as having legs. Even with an environmental platform that could appeal to pro-Kyoto public opinion in Quebec, Dion had enough political baggage for observers here to believe that his campaign would be a non-starter in his home province. As his campaign gathered momentum outside of Quebec, few were ready to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Whether still dubious or in denial, or maybe a bit of both, francophone journalists were in for a shock during the convention itself. Most of the influential Quebec leaders in the Liberal Party were in Ignatieff's camp, and Rae's failure to speak much French during his speech seemed to confirm a disconnect with the Quebec wing of the party. While the francophone media had prepared for any possible outcome — that is what media do — they had not anticipated that Stéphane Dion's political star would rise so high to become leader of the Liberal Party.

On the Saturday of the convention vote, I did double duty providing some colour commentary for CPAC and then joined a Radio-Canada radio show just before the third ballot. The French-language radio discussion was focused on who would be left standing between Ignatieff, Rae and Dion. I made the observation that Kennedy's delegates were rumoured to be loyal, and that they would probably follow his lead to Dion. We quickly did the math. "Does this mean Dion could win?" the radio host gasped. "Not only that," another guest replied, "he actually risks winning." After the risk became reality, a francophone print

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his opponents could do so. He projected the image of a calm, cool and collected leader, positioning himself

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SES pollster Nik Nanos prophesied that the nation debate would be the ballot issue at this convention. And sure enough, the divide between Dion and Ignatieff in the final vote illustrated the enduring legacy of the two solitudes. At the end of the day, delegates rallied to Dion as the defender of the traditional Liberal notion of the Canadian nation, one in which Quebec could be put in its place.

**From here to where?** Almost immediately after the fourth ballot results were read and Stéphane Dion graciously recognized the defeated candidates, the convention hall emptied out as a room can only when the puck is about to drop across town at the Bell Centre. As the delegates left to continue the perennial rivalry between Toronto and Montreal on the ice, Dion began making the first rounds of media outlets, quick to begin branding himself with the Canadian press and public before

against what he calls the "hard right" of Stephen Harper.

After the Liberal Party's initial bounce in the polls after the convention — referred to as the "10-month infomercial" in media circles — it remains to be seen whether Dion can harness the energy and promise of this historic moment into a winning strategy for the next federal election. Whatever the political twists of the next few months, the timing of the next election and the platforms of the opponents, the real challenge for the Liberal Party is to deal with the divisions from within. The first delegates to leave the convention hall that Saturday night were not only Leafs and Canadiens fans; they were mainly Ignatieff's troops, including a large raft of Quebec delegates, who seemed not only dejected but clearly dismayed at the result. Political contests are won on the ground, and that is where Dion's efforts will have to begin as he reassembles the Liberal Party into a renewed political force.

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