

# TOWARDS AN IGGY-NATION IN QUEBEC

Antonia Maioni

Quebecers headed for the exits of the Liberal Party from the day Stéphane Dion became its accidental leader at the Montreal convention in 2006. Since Dion's abrupt departure in the wake of the failed coup attempt last December, Michael Ignatieff has been working hard to rebuild Liberal bridges to Quebec, especially outside the Montreal region, where the party has all but disappeared from the electoral map. Antonia Maioni looks at a leadership work in progress, and notes that Ignatieff "obviously understands what many Liberal partisans in Canada do not: that one can be a federalist and a nationalist in Quebec."



Les Québécois ont commencé à délaisser le Parti libéral du Canada le jour où Stéphane Dion en est fortuitement devenu le chef au congrès montréalais de 2006. Depuis que celui-ci en a abruptement quitté la direction en décembre dernier, Michael Ignatieff a redoublé d'ardeur pour rebâtir les ponts avec le Québec. Surtout à l'extérieur de Montréal, où son parti a été presque effacé de la carte électorale. Examinant le parcours du nouveau chef, Antonia Maioni observe qu'il « comprend manifestement ce qui échappe à de nombreux militants libéraux du pays, à savoir que les Québécois peuvent être à la fois fédéralistes et nationalistes ».

December 2, 2006 was a long day for the Liberal Party of Canada. After an intense leadership contest, Michael Ignatieff lost to Stéphane Dion on the fourth and final ballot at the Liberal convention in Montreal, leaving practically every political observer in Quebec, including most of the party caucus, in a state of shock. As the spin-doctors and pundits took to the airwaves, the Quebec delegates were already voting with their feet, leaving the convention hall in droves, clearly dismayed with the result.

While Michael Ignatieff stayed put that night to graciously listen to the Liberal leader, his supporters in Quebec were unlikely to do the same. However faithful to the cause the runner-up might have seemed from that day forward, it was clear that Ignatieff's "people" — those who supported him and those who might well want to — were not about to give Stéphane Dion the benefit of the doubt.

The rest, as they say, is history. While no one could have foretold the exact details of Stéphane Dion's fall from power, many in Quebec would have been able to predict that Dion's tenure as leader of the party would be difficult and tenuous.

Dion's days were indeed numbered. His failure to connect effectively with Canadians, to bring the Liberals back to power, or to rebuild the party brand in Quebec were prob-

ably enough to spell the end. But Dion's spectacular rise was matched by a no less spectacular fall: his disastrous attempts to fight for a coalition government in the House of Commons last December — in large part by defending the same "separatists" he had built his political career in attacking — has meant that he is now all but being airbrushed out of the party's memory.

Almost two years to the day after that fateful leadership vote, Michael Ignatieff finally became leader of the Liberal party. Much of the energy surrounding the new leader comes from the hope he symbolizes for those dejected Quebec delegates who walked out of the Liberal Party's convention in Montreal. Can Ignatieff win back Quebec for the Liberal party?

It is a tall order for any politician. The Liberal Party of Canada has not won a majority of seats in Quebec since 1980, and only once did they muster a plurality of votes, in the 2000 election. What was once a sea of red across the electoral map — 74 of 75 seats for favourite son Pierre Trudeau in 1980 — has become a checkerboard of party loyalties. In the years since, divisive issues such as free trade, the Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords, the 1995 referendum, the sponsorship scandal, along with the bitter legacy of the inter-cine rivalry between Jean Chrétien and Paul

Martin, left many Quebec voters with little incentive to move to the Liberal fold. Instead, they have tried their luck with the Progressive Conservatives, the Bloc Québécois, and even the “reformed” Conservatives led by Stephen Harper.

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Quebec is an uphill battle. Despite all odds, the Bloc Québécois has survived to become the most stable federal party in Quebec, holding its own as a progressive force in eastern Montreal, while appealing to modern nationalist sentiment in suburban and rural areas across the province. More recently, many voters in Quebec’s old “bleu” ridings that had been the purview of right-wing and nationalist parties such as the *Ralliement Créditiste* are finding their comfort zone with the Conservative message.

The Liberal party’s main calling card for Quebec voters has historically been the opportunity to support a party that could give them a regional voice in federal government. Since the big red machine can no longer guarantee electoral victory in Quebec, this is a less compelling argument than it once was. But perhaps even more important is that Quebecers just don’t seem to care anymore. Despite, or perhaps because of, the end of the mega-constitutional era in Canada, Quebec voters no longer seem interested in wielding power in the traditional mold. This drives some Quebec federalists, most notably La Presse editor André Pratte, around the bend, arguing that Quebec needs to get back on the centre ice of Canadian politics. Nevertheless, since the 1995 referendum, Quebecers may have moved

away from sovereignty, but they have yet to relinquish their preference for an independent voice in the House of Commons.

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deep-rooted experience of Brian Mulroney or Jean Chrétien, nor the familiar persona of Gilles Duceppe, or even the intellectual profile of Pierre Trudeau. Ignatieff may well be a more prolific writer and better-known international figure than all of his Liberal predecessors put together, he remains a relatively unknown quantity for most Quebecers.

By now, some will know that he does have Quebec roots, his family having immigrated to Richmond decades ago, although to what extent voters actually care that his grandfather was a Russian Count is hard to gauge. Quebecers do not seem to have the same kind of “carpet-bagger” aversion that some Canadians showed toward Ignatieff when he burst onto the political scene a few years ago. Essentially, Michael Ignatieff is seen as a philosopher-politician from Toronto, by way of wherever else he may have wandered, and whose main claim to fame so far is that he speaks French.

Successful politicians in Quebec are not those who have necessarily territorial or even linguistic attachments, but rather those who have been able to express a sentiment of understanding and a shared sense of purpose. That is why Ignatieff has been visiting Quebec early and often since he took over the Liberal leadership. He has been relentless in

reminding Quebecers of his original idea of the “nation” notion that was then captured by the Bloc and the Conservatives in 2006. It is a measure not only of Ignatieff’s leadership but of the Liberal party itself to remember than the nation idea was, for many Liberal delegates in 2006, the last straw that turned them away from Ignatieff and toward Stéphane Dion.

For Quebecers, the new Liberal leader has little of the post-referendum baggage that weighed down his predecessors. He had no role to play in the sponsorship scandal that devoured Jean Chrétien’s “Plan A” approach, nor the Clarity Bill that defined Dion’s “Plan B.” Nor is he regarded with the kind of suspicion that many Quebecers now reserve for Stephen Harper and the hollowness of “open federalism.” Still, he has yet to make any bold gestures that would suggest what it is that the Liberal brand now stands for with regard to Quebec voters. And he would be perhaps be better off to do that sooner rather than later, or at least before any of his intellectual musings are taken out of context by his political opponents.

While it is not yet clear *what* Michael Ignatieff’s intentions are toward Quebec, it is clear *who* he intends to woo. He obviously understands what many Liberal partisans in Canada do not: that one can be a federalist and a nationalist in Quebec; and that one way to win over that kind of voter is to assure them that they won’t have to choose between Canada and Quebec. This is the end game as Ignatieff moves across the province, trying to recapture the elusive francophone electorate outside Montreal. It is a strategy that remains fraught not only on the ground in Quebec but perhaps even more within the party faithful elsewhere. One of the big lessons of last December’s parliamen-

tary debacle that brought Ignatieff to the Liberal leadership was how quickly Canada-Quebec antagonisms could be mustered by politicians, and how close to the surface they really are in the Canadian body politic.

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the money and restructure the ideas. On the first count, he is doing arguably much better than Stéphane Dion. Money talks in politics, and the dearth of Dion's ability to attract it in Quebec speaks volumes about the party's past few years. While Ignatieff has been making some progress into Quebecers purse strings, his financial connections remain rooted in Toronto, not Montreal, and the Liberal Party is still struggling with the grass roots imperatives of recent party financing reform.

Nonetheless, with at least some measure of financial stability, he is providing renewed discipline to the Liberal caucus, and a palpable sense of hope to party members. The street smarts of his Quebec lieutenant Denis Coderre, and the impressive political pedigree of his backroom adviser Marc-André Blanchard, speak volumes about the kind of potential for recruitment in the party and rebuilding of the brand in Quebec.

As the Conservative party has learned, however, money doesn't talk all by itself: ideas matter in politics. The moveable centre, that great wide

expanse in the Canadian political spectrum that defined Liberal success for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, may well be Ignatieff's goal. Unlike Dion, he sees no gain in shifting the party further to the left, although in the context of economic crisis, he will need to know which buttons to push to create some semblance of stability

and consumer confidence. On foreign policy, Ignatieff also can be seen as a centrist, and while his past positions on military engagement may be controversial, his glowing tête-à-tête with President Obama reflects his substantial credibility on the world stage.

While these issues are as important in Quebec as anywhere else in Canada, voters here hold their federal parties to an additional test about the

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to include a vision of federalism that resonates with Quebec identity and aspirations.

Just where that leads the Liberal Party's strategy is the real unknown. Jean Chrétien made a successful political career out of battling "*les séparatistes*" but his protégé Stéphane Dion felt the other side of that double-edged sword. Likewise, the Conservative party's search and destroy mission toward the Bloc Québécois has also suffered from the same lack of perspective about what drives nationalist sentiment in Quebec.

**T**he conundrum for Michael Ignatieff is this: the Liberal party needs to win back Quebec

in order to have any aspirations of gaining power in Ottawa. But to win a majority in Quebec, he needs to recast the Liberal Party as a safe haven for federalist nationalists and francophone voters outside of Montreal. Any serious attempt to do so will necessarily entail clear and precise commitments about fiscal federalism, provincial autonomy, and Quebec's status in the federa-

tion. In so doing, he risks hitting the wall in alienating voters in the rest of Canada.

There are no easy answers in the Liberal playbook, but the one person Ignatieff may look to is the one that shares many of the same challenges. In the 1960s, faced with a tired party torn at the seams, Lester Pearson decided to "forget about the old



Jean-Marc Carisse

**Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff greets former cabinet minister Lucienne Robillard at a general council of the Liberal Party's Quebec wing in the Montreal suburb of Laval. Antonia Maioni appraises Liberal prospects for a revival in Quebec under its new leader.**

party” and attract a new kind of liberalism. The new kind of federalism that glimmered under Pearson was one in which the Liberal Party could be an interlocutor between Quebec and the rest of Canada, instead of a hammer to settle old scores or impose a contentious vision.

This will all need to be achieved as the country and the world confront a deep recession that might

remain with us for years to come. The challenge — which also is a unique opportunity — is to offer credible solutions to the crisis that will at the same time recast the federal pact in a new, durable consensus. Whether regional economic interests and visions of federalism can actually be reconciled, however, remains to be seen. The Liberal party of Canada cannot afford any other

moments like the day in December when its Quebec delegates voted with their feet, nor any other electoral contests in which its resonance for Quebecers remains irrelevant.

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