

IGGY'S CHALLENGE: A WAR ON TWO FRONTS

Robin V. Sears

Five months after assuming the Liberal leadership in a bloodless coup, Michael Ignatieff has stopped the slide in the party's fortunes and promised to make the Liberals competitive again everywhere in the country. "The new leader," writes Robin Sears, "is making important headway in rebuilding at the riding level, especially in the west." Having walked away from the opposition coalition that resulted in Stéphane Dion's final demise, Ignatieff appears determined to unite the Liberal Party, fill its coffers and lead it back to power. While he may yet be the beneficiary of "Harper fatigue" and the scary economic downturn, many obstacles remain in his path.



Cinq mois après avoir pris la direction du Parti libéral, Michael Ignatieff a enrayeré le déclin de son parti et promis de redonner aux libéraux leur avantage concurrentiel partout au pays. « Le nouveau chef progresse rapidement dans la reconstruction du PLC au niveau des circonscriptions, observe Robin Sears, surtout celles de l'Ouest. » S'étant dissocié de la coalition de l'opposition qui a causé la fin de Stéphane Dion, le chef du PLC semble déterminé à unifier son parti, à remplir ses coffres et à renouer avec la victoire. Mais même s'il profite présentement de la « fatigue de Stephen Harper » et d'une inquiétante récession, il lui reste cependant de nombreux obstacles à surmonter.

"When Liberals pretend to be Conservatives, voters always have a better choice."

Dorothy Cameron

Michael Ignatieff has done more to arrest the decline of the Liberal Party in less than six months than his two predecessors did in the previous six years. Following the crushing disappointment of the brief Martin era, it seemed impossible that the party would slide further, until Stéphane Dion was elected. By the time of his ouster in December last year, there was no political machinery worthy of the name in either the leader's office or the party headquarters. Ignatieff moved quickly to assert his leadership, to gather an impressive group of outsiders and to force the government onto its back foot on the management of the economy almost from day one. A lifelong expatriate, an English intellectual in form and style, he was famous for espousing classical European liberal values, very different from the Canadian variety — with a soupçon of Slavic gloom and American edge. For a man with less than four years' experience of politics of any kind, let alone any experience in the often-corrosive world of Canadian leadership politics, it is unprecedented.

With the passage of months, however, the limits of this wafer-thin political resumé have begun to emerge.

The academy is about the balanced consideration of evidence and options with a rare requirement to make a painful choice. Leadership politics is about instant decisions, often taken with inadequate information and under ridiculous time pressures. Those hasty judgments are hostages to fortune for a leader. Their impacts ripple across supporters and enemies immediately and then echo well into the future. Academics can muse, as Ignatieff was famous for observing about human rights, about choosing between "the awful and the unacceptable." Leaders must frame their choices in far more appealing terms if they are to survive.

In a lifetime few intellectuals are called to make existential choices. Leaders of countries at war — or those fighting a major economic collapse — face them daily. Prime ministers of minority governments anxiously face career-ending decisions several times a month. There are more than a few members of Ignatieff's caucus and one or two in his inner circle who believe that his decision to walk away from the coalition was more about angst at making a fateful decision than it was about strategy. Those doubters cast worried glances at each other over the new leader's climbdown days

later in the face of a revolt by his Newfoundland caucus.

The Harper government is hoping that with every rattled but never unsheathed political sabre, Ignatieff's mostly invented leadership credentials will begin to fade. After he attacked, then passed the Harper government's budget, then howled about and voted

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for the curious \$3-billion stimulus "petty cash box," then gave the government a pass on its first quarterly "report card," the inevitable grumbles have begun to emerge on blogs and in private conversation at spring fundraisers.

The new leader is making important headway in rebuilding at the riding level, especially in the West. His appearances have played well to good crowds of the curious and the faithful. This grinding work of exhausting travel and endless smiles is the essential work of retail politics, and Ignatieff is showing he has the commitment and the patience to do it with growing skill. It's his strategic chops that make some Liberal veterans twitchy. And the Armageddon test is the question of when to trigger the next election.

Ignatieff's coronation at the party's convention in Vancouver in May, along with that of his faithful placeman, Toronto lawyer Alf Apps, as party president will presumably go smoothly, but will prove little or mean much. The media and the Conservatives will be predictably churlish about the Liberal Party's democratic credentials following such an elitist process. Curiously, going into the convention, many otherwise cautious veteran Liberals, including some of Ignatieff's closest advisers — bloodied now three times by the Harper war

machine — were increasingly united on forcing an election by the summer. Perhaps they are dreaming of the post-convention bounce a leadership convention used to deliver. Their problem is that the Chinese Communist Party's recent congress and selection of new leadership will have produced more excitement and interest than the week of mutual backpatting the party will

indulge in with fundraising barbecues and endless tributes on the sleepy shores of False Creek and Wreck Beach.

Troubling for some veteran strategists, those more impressed by real numbers and riding level data than by the sycophantic celebrity coverage lavished on the new leader by the *Toronto Star* and *Globe and Mail*, is how modest the growth in popular support has been since the Ignatieff coup. While Liberal numbers in Quebec continue to be stronger than at any time since Jean Chrétien's departure, most months the national totals still bounce between level-pegging and leads within the margin of error for Ignatieff or Harper. Given that the Bloc owns more than half the seats in Quebec for the foreseeable future, and the Conservatives own Canada west of the Lakehead barring a handful of competitive seats in three provinces, Liberal ridings are at a premium.

That the battle will be fought in BC and Ontario is now a cliché. Some polls show a small federal Liberal lead in Ontario, but that includes a large wasted vote in Toronto and says much about competitiveness in the famous 905 belt. In BC, the parties are more evenly balanced, with NDP support buttressed by the strength of the provincial party. Federal Liberals have been able to count on strong provin-

cial organizations with weak local competitors in each province for the last six years. The Conservatives and the NDP had been decimated in Ontario, and Gordon Campbell's government was all-conquering in BC until a year or so ago.

Today the Ontario NDP has an interesting new leader in Andrea Horwath, ending more than a decade of the walking dead under her predecessor. The provincial Tories are in the midst of a fascinating leadership battle, one that may split the party badly but seems more likely to revive its fortunes after five years of drift. Both parties will dine eagerly on the political

spoils created by an economy and a government crashing into deficit, debt and job destruction not seen for nearly a generation. Days after the Liberal beach parties wind up in Vancouver, the unhappy voters of BC may reject the Campbell government's reach for an unlikely third term, a goal not achieved by any party there since the death of Social Credit.

However, this shakeup of the political kaleidoscope on the left coast and in Ontario, Canada's first rust belt province, presents more challenges for the opposition than it does for the Harper government. The Conservatives will not need to attack the McGuinty government's so far feeble record on recession fighting — the media, the local Tories and the NDP will do that for them. In BC, whether Premier Gordon Campbell survives or not, Ottawa's ability to rain "money from helicopters" — as one Liberal wag put it — is a considerable political weapon in fighting both the Ignatieff and Layton local teams.

Harper has recovered and is apparently learning important lessons from the pre-Christmas debacle, though he continues to be plagued by regular gaffes by some ministerial dim bulbs. He has cleverly begun to frame the next round as an us-versus-them

battle with the ballot question: “Whom do you trust to lead Canada out of this economic mess — me or the coalition parties?!” Harper seems to have concluded that, like Mackenzie King and Pierre Trudeau, being loved is not a requirement for political success. Putting Ignatieff in a political box with Jack Layton and Gilles Duceppe may seem overreaching, but as Lyndon Johnson liked to say, “We’ll call him a pig [lover], and watch him deny it.”

Harper’s is the first PMO in more than a generation with no senior francophone adviser. To some senior Conservatives, there is a connection between that gap and the party’s return to barely double support in some Quebec polls. If Harper fatigue grows, and the government continues to perform erratically, Ignatieff could be the beneficiary of a government defeating itself.

Every minute spent refuting the smear is a minute lost to both Ignatieff and Layton. The image of the national opposition parties in harness with Duceppe appeals to the Tory base in English-speaking Canada, though it’s not helpful to Harper in Quebec and it’s less clear what it does to harm either leader with his own target audience. For Liberals it is embarrassing but easily refutable; for Layton it’s probably neutral or a plus everywhere he cares about and especially in Quebec.

In addition, Ignatieff’s strategists appear to be about to make the same error that Trudeau’s did in 1972 and 1979: attempting to challenge the Conservatives for their soft supporters. It didn’t work then, and seems less likely today. As my grandmother liked to warn New Democrats who pushed too close to the centre, or Liberals dressed in light blue, voters are always more likely to choose the authentic political article, not the poser. Michael Ignatieff praising the oil sands may shave a few thousand votes off the Conservatives’ North-Korean-sized majorities in Alberta, but at the expense of what vulnerabilities to the NDP and the Greens in BC, Ontario and Quebec? His quick refusal to take on the Harper government on reform of employment insurance or equal pay in the federal civil

service is a gift to the New Democrats and the Bloc. (His internal critics prevailed on EI and two months later he announced his intention to demand reform.) His ability to claim statesmanship and political responsibility for having supported the Conservatives at the depths of the Great Recession is a political time bomb.

Soon it will seem more like collaboration for those who cannot stand

the Harper government. Triggering an early election may be appealing, as Liberals understand that Ignatieff and his front bench cannot get away with the “Ain’t it awful?” school of political rhetoric much longer, but it is also fraught with huge backlash risk. Bellowing how awful the government’s jobs record is, or how awful the slow deployment of stimulus spending is, without demonstrating your ability to do better is a necessarily short-term strategy. If Harper is wise and holds on until at least the fall, when the first shoots of stimulus growth should have sprouted, it will be much harder for the opposition to simply keep shouting insults about jobless numbers. Next spring, following another stimulus budget, makes even more sense.

However, Ignatieff may yet be the beneficiary of Harper fatigue. This spring the very buttoned-down government began to show the same accident-prone tendencies that marred its election performance. At the same time, Harper seemed to vacillate between somewhat bizarre appeals to the Conservative base — on guns, taxes and the CBC — and his previous defence of a “big tent” Conservative Party. Harper’s is the first PMO in more than a generation

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Each leader has a painful decision to make about when to blow up this shaky Parliament. If summer is almost certainly too soon for a Liberal Party just emerging from near-bankruptcy and years of organizational decline, next spring may be too late. If Canadians greet next spring after two years of gloom with no visible break in the clouds ahead, the opposition should be in a strong position to hammer the government’s management record. If the Liberals and NDP have presented no alternative that gives shaken Canadian voters the confidence to switch horses while still stuck in the middle of a river of bad news, however, the Tories could survive.

Choosing the precise moment, issue and public defence in such finely poised circumstances would test the judgment of a veteran Liberal leader of the calibre of a Jean Chrétien. The wrong choice would mean the end of the brief Ignatieff era, and a leader nearing senior citizen status does not get second chances. A bad election result would probably end Harper’s, Duceppe’s and Layton’s careers as well; each has his career and his legacy resting on when to pull the plug. The echoes of the coalition flirtation will haunt the Liberals into and beyond the next election. Harper will pound away at the “treacherous” ménage à trois during the campaign, and Layton and Ignatieff will no doubt adopt a dismissive mantra — “I’m running for prime minister and Canadians will decide what the form of the next government is.”

Both of them would be wise to curb their tongues about each other, for sev-



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In only five months Michael Ignatieff has successfully reversed the decline of Liberal fortunes that occurred under his predecessor. But many challenges lie ahead following his official confirmation as leader at the party's convention in Vancouver.

eral reasons. First, every sound bite lashing each other is one less attack on the Harper record. Second, if the pattern of every election in the past decade persists, they will need to be able to find common ground the morning after. Canadian and American voters have signalled clearly they are fed up with partisan bickering. Clear and compelling alternatives to the Harper government on issues Canadians care about — economic recovery by far the most important for the foreseeable future — will go a long way toward making up the competitive gap the Tories have as a united

government and a disciplined party; squabbling among the opposition parties will have the opposite impact.

Another shaky minority government led by Harper should be easy to topple, but only if a united opposition presents a credible alternative. The less likely outcome, a shaky minority led by Ignatieff, would be somewhat less vulnerable, unless the NDP and the Bloc are so furious at the election crossfire they refuse to cooperate. An Ignatieff-led coalition would be secure for several years.

Wars on two fronts are always to be avoided, as all novice military or political strategists have pounded into them at an early age. Napoleon managed it for a while, but fighting two enemies almost invariably ends in tears for the party in the middle. Both Layton and Ignatieff can rerun the campaigns that the NDP and the Liberals have done three times in a row, each slashing the other and claiming legitimate title to the progressive crown. Nothing is likely to make Harper happier. He can riff lightly on “lovers’ quarrels on the

left” and “while they squabble over who sleeps on top in the coalition bed, I am working rebuilding the Canadian economy.”

If Ignatieff tries to portray himself as Harper Lite or “Harper with a heart,” he will be pummelled from two sides. If Layton gets shrill about the “Harper-Ignatieff coalition” more than on his opening day, he will find himself relegated to the same space as Elizabeth May: the one labelled irrelevant and tiresome. For the Liberal leader, to seek soft Tory votes risks losing his left flank. For Layton to smear the Liberal brand too vigorously risks losing all the Liberal/NDP bisexuals to his enemy and to the Greens.

No, each leader has to take a step back, take a deep breath, and consider some more mature and complex options. Their mutual target audience is the slightly less than two-thirds of Canadians who do not want to see another Harper government. They will make their choice on the strength and the credibility of the leaders’ messages of change and renewal, and on each man’s credibility as a Harper critic and challenger. Petulance on the part of the opposition leaders toward each other risks pushing voters to vote Green, to stay home or for some even to vote Conservative out of irritation at their leader’s behaviour at a time of national crisis.

Each party faces a growing threat from the Greens. Although they represent a naive political message, and have disappeared from public view since the last election, they continue to drain 6 to 10 percent of public support, mostly from Liberals and New Democrats. In battleground ridings that could deliver seats to Harper, Stéphane Dion’s bizarre friendship pact with Elizabeth May hurt both of them, and will not be repeated. The Liberals and the NDP should consider a combined attack on the risk that a Green vote represents in defeating Conservatives, especially in BC and southern Ontario.

The challenge of the Bloc is more complicated for each party. While attacking it vigorously is risk-free in English-speaking Canada, the soft nationalist Bloc supporters are among the opposition parties’ target voters in Quebec. However, the complications such a strategy poses following election day are real. For Jean Charest another term is unlikely; prudent counsel would probably suggest he groom and anoint a successor in the next two years, to have any prospect of holding off a Parti Québécois return to power. It is important for federal politicians to remember two things about the Bloc: apart from the fading prospect of a referendum victory any decade soon, their driving motivation is the re-election of the PQ. The corollary ambition has not changed since 1970: smash the Liberal Party in Quebec.

If Liberals reap half a dozen or more Bloc seats in the next federal campaign, it will not incline Gilles Duceppe to be as tractable in negotiations in the 41st Parliament as he demonstrably was in this one. If he has been pounded by Liberal and NDP campaign rhetoric he may be entirely unwilling to be helpful.

Clear and compelling alternatives to the Harper government on issues Canadians care about — economic recovery by far the most important for the foreseeable future — will go a long way toward making up the competitive gap the Tories have as a united government and a disciplined party; squabbling among the opposition parties will have the opposite impact.

For Jack Layton the risk is less, but the same tension exists. If the NDP were to win two or three ridings out of the half-dozen they are targeting, in almost every case the Bloc is the loser. They would be wise to avoid getting diverted from the need to defeat the Harper government into any second front in Quebec as well. But a recent Nanos poll indicates the NDP has slipped seriously in Quebec, down from 14 percent on election day in October to 7 percent in early spring, with most of those votes moving to the Liberals. At 7 percent province-wide the NDP would return to its historical standing in Quebec — few votes, no seats.

Despite his silly “separatist” rhetoric during the parliamentary crisis last winter, the opposition leaders should remember that Harper was very willing to deal with the Bloc to gain power. He would be even more motivated if it were the only way to stay in power.

So what would such a circumscribed set of strategic and rhetorical boundaries look like in a campaign? Probably somewhat similar to a hotly contested US primary, where wise Democratic and Republican candidates look beyond the nomination phase, and are careful about how ferociously they attack members of their own tribe or their allies. John McCain dropped his regular denunciation of the Bush administration and his congressional colleagues’ financial profligacy and won his party’s nomination. Hillary Clinton pounded her opponent with increasing contempt and didn’t.

If well executed, the opposition campaign would probably be quite boring for the media and Canadian political junkies. The Conservatives have long demonstrated deep under-

standing of the importance of message discipline and campaign focus; the Liberals and the NDP, not so much. The temptation to drift off message as a result of an attack by an angry Newfoundland premier or in response to a candidate clanger is something Harper today almost never succumbs to — and pity the Tory staffer or candidate who fails to be similarly buttoned down. Ignatieff especially will need to work hard to inject similar discipline into front-line spokespersons and high-profile candidates used to much looser discipline in recent years.

Ignatieff should produce a thin new Red Book, carefully costed and message tested, and release national policy planks from it leading to a carefully orchestrated campaign crescendo, and nothing else. The messages should be short, simple and precise. The budgeting needs to be bulletproofed by credible third parties. The strategic frame should probably address the growing values gap between the Harper Conservatives and a majority of Canadians, but echo the financial management test at the same time. Perhaps: "Canada — and you and your family — cannot afford one more year of Harper."

The challenge for Layton is more profound: the axiom that when Liberals wax, New Democrats wane is one of the iron laws of Canadian politics. This is especially true when a determination to defeat an unpopular Conservative government is in the air, as may yet develop. Finding a way to ensure that progressive voters in NDP-incumbent ridings remain loyal and that potential supporters in competitive ridings make the less safe choice than voting Liberal should be his sole strategic goal. It probably is delivered by a unique attack from the left on the government's failure to address those hardest hit by the recession. It is not advanced by undermining Ignatieff, at the expense of landing successful political blows on the Prime Minister.

Canadians defeat governments; they rarely choose them. Making the next round a referendum on the Harper record is essential if the opposition parties hope to overcome the huge advan-

tages of power, local incumbency, money and organization that the Tories hold so decisively. Even in good times, Canadian prime ministers rarely survive campaigns that turn on judgments of them. John Diefenbaker was defeated when Mike Pearson turned the 1963 election into a referendum on the sitting prime minister. Trudeau managed to survive a similar judgment contest by a few hundred votes in 1972 and then failed it in 1979.

If the opposition parties adopt strict and complementary message discipline they will force a two-front war on the Conservatives at the national level. But to overcome the Tories' formidable advantage on the ground they will also need to deploy their resources on both a riding-by-riding and regional basis, with equal strategic and tactical care. In perhaps as many as 50 urban ridings in English Canada — in Halifax, Vancouver, Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa, Winnipeg and Regina — the intensity of competition between Liberals and New Democrats usually determines the winner, but at great cost to each. Liberals and New Democrats defending their incumbents is not a growth strategy for either party. Neither is attacking the weakest incumbents on the other side. It leaves the Conservatives unchallenged in their vulnerable seats and free to concentrate their firepower on building the strengths they have demonstrated in the ring of suburban seats around Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto and Ottawa in recent years.

Since at least the 1960s Canada has had a centre-left majority in the value system of most of its citizens, as Michael Adams's social analysis and John Pammett, Kenneth Carty and Richard Johnston's electoral analysis has amply demonstrated. Most Canadians believe in a country that might be described as mildly social democratic or activist liberal or even progressive conservative, or Red Tory. (Even that much-mocked label has real political content and a deep Canadian tradition, as Hugh Segal and Bob Plamondon, among others have ably chronicled.) There have been only two occasions when governments of a harder edge have been elected in the past century — and each one was led by Stephen Harper.

If Ignatieff therefore attempts to pursue a path to victory in challenging Harper's own soft supporters, he will soon enjoy his retirement in academe. Despite the considerable advantages that the Conservatives hold in the machinery of politics and government, if the opposition parties fail to find a cooperative strategy that defeats him, they will have only themselves to blame. Given his role as leader of the largest opposition party, the ball sits very much in Ignatieff's court.

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