

THE LIBERALS: STUMBLING OUT OF A HALL OF MIRRORS

Robin V. Sears



The victory of Stéphane Dion at the Liberal convention was widely reported as a surprise, but in fact it was a successful insurgency by younger Liberals against the party establishment and its two front-runners, Michael Ignatieff and Bob Rae. Ignatieff had been outside the country for 30 years and his vision of Canada proved incompatible with the party of Trudeau and Chrétien. Rae was in another party for most of his adult life, and led the provincial NDP in four elections against Ontario Liberals. Dion, who should have been fourth after the first ballot, finished third, two votes ahead of Kennedy, when six Kennedy delegates parked with Martha Hall Findlay on the first ballot. In the end, the federal Liberals coalesced around one of their own, the third man, as a compromise choice over the two outsiders. Contributing writer Robin Sears captures all the drama of the most exciting Canadian leadership convention in decades.

Présentée comme une grande surprise, l'élection de Stéphane Dion à la tête du Parti libéral du Canada traduit en fait l'insurrection des jeunes libéraux contre l'establishment du parti et ses deux candidats vedettes, Michael Ignatieff et Bob Rae. Le premier a vécu 30 ans hors du pays et sa vision du Canada s'est révélée incompatible avec le parti des Trudeau et Chrétien. Le second a milité toute sa vie au sein d'un autre parti et dirigé les troupes du NPD contre les libéraux ontariens à l'occasion de quatre scrutins. On prédisait à Stéphane Dion une quatrième place à l'issue du premier tour, mais il s'est retrouvé troisième avec deux petites voix d'avance sur Gerald Kennedy, dont six délégués s'étaient tournés vers Martha Hall Findlay. Les libéraux fédéraux se sont finalement ralliés à un des leurs, soit à ce troisième homme de compromis face aux deux outsiders. Notre collaborateur Robin Sears retrace les temps forts du congrès à la direction le plus excitant de ces dernières décennies.

Great political events are rarely what they appear, or are reported, to be. The best politicians conjure their triumphs and are always practised at the art of deception. There is no more dazzling display of this prestidigitation than a shape-shifting leadership convention.

Friendship, loyalty, sincerity, passion, conviction and momentum are all for sale at the same booths that flog the scarves, buttons and the campaign policy baloney in the corridors lining the convention's hall of mirrors.

In Montreal, these funhouse-mirror, conflicting realities were still on view even as the final gavel came down. While Liberal commentators, in TV booths encircling the floor, cheerfully spun their happy talk about the convention's surprising decision, below them the delegates trooped off into the rainy Saturday night, looking like gloomy attendees at a particularly sad family funeral.

A week's immersion in this bewildering Levantine souk can be a delicious or a devastating experience for many virgin delegates, and can implant a lifetime's bitterness for

abandoned candidates. Navigating this kaleidoscopic world is complicated for the most seasoned pro. Each attempts to stay above the political static with mounting anxiety, fighting increasing exhaustion as one sleepless day follows another, trying to manage mounting information overload, and then racing for the finish line.

Veterans of the great conventions — Trudeau's triumph in 1968, the Clark Canadian compromise in 1976, Mulroney in 1983 — all agreed that none came close to the melodrama that delivered the unlikely Stéphane Dion as Liberal leader.

Like many epochal political shifts, it was blindingly obvious only in hindsight. Some analysts, already sneering at the defeat of the party establishment, were wont to say, "Well, duh!" about the outcome. Two front-runners, second choices for many of their supporters — whose key backers included too many aging boomers and not enough next generation champions, and neither with strong party cre-

dentials — faced two crusading leadership teams.

In fact the most dramatic political convention in a generation came breathtakingly close, two delegates close, to ending very differently.

The conventional wisdom this time was that there wasn't any — with

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the exception of one reality that most observers misunderstood. Everyone agreed that these delegates, nearly one-third under 30, were not for sale. The punditi's conclusion was that no candidate could deliver a significant chunk of delegates, and that typical convention brokerage would therefore not work.

These young, articulate and passionately independent delegates shared many values and these values could produce bloc voting of a different kind. That they were in lockstep with some more conventional voting blocs — new Canadians of Tamil, Sikh, Indian and Arab backgrounds — most of the pros also missed.

One who did recognize it early was Mark Holland, a key Kennedy organizer. The Kennedy campaign was a curious mix of crass opportunism and anti-establishment passion. Kennedy was an Ontario minister popular with voters but detested by many former cabinet colleagues — including some of the most senior ministers of the McGuinty government.

A supremely ambitious, personally disorganized, successful social entrepreneur, Kennedy was a keen student of the vulnerabilities of the party establishment. His 1996 run for the Ontario Liberal leadership, while still a

just elected politician in his 30s, was blocked by the party greybeards, but only after a night-long, nail-biting five-ballot convention.

His mandate as education minister was to buy peace from the unions, after a decade of public rancour. He achieved it by promising the fiscal

moon to parents, teachers and school boards — then seeking forgiveness from the Premier and his finance minister for this excessive exploitation of his mandate. He left the inevitable collision between his promises and the government's inability to deliver for his successor to clean up. Sandra Pupatello placed several school boards under the hated trusteeships that the Harris government had used to impose fiscal discipline, before falling on her own sword weeks later.

Kennedy leapt out of provincial politics with so little preparation that the party had no succession plan for his riding, where it promptly suffered a humiliating defeat to the NDP only weeks later.

Flash forward from the spring launch of his campaign in an Ottawa park chosen for its photo-op potential (Peace Tower flag flapping in the background), to the convention. Kennedy has done surprisingly well — given limited finances or national recognition — in building young delegate support across Ontario and the West, but has been virtually wiped out in Quebec. By contrast, Dion has increasingly positive notices in the English media and among party savants, and has won strong delegate backing in Quebec, but has been disappointed in the delegate battle outside the province.

Both Kennedy and Dion, and their lieutenants, have met frequently with Rae and Ignatieff and their envoys. But it is becoming increasingly clear to all that just as there is a yawning cleavage between Ignatieff and Rae, there is little in common between the two front-runners and the two challengers. Kennedy's chief campaign strategist, David MacNaughton, is the only senior party fixer in either challenger's camp. A wily political operator from the days of Trudeau and Peterson, he hints to confidants that any deal required is possible, and that all will be revealed when the horses make the final turn at the convention.

He is either wrong, or fibbing.

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The improbable victory was thus set in motion.

What Mark Marissen, Dion's tough young BC campaign chief, says to no one is that this deal is not really reciprocal. They know Dion could not deliver many of his Quebec delegates to Kennedy — the only candidate to vigorously attack the province's "nation" status. Marissen is a fish a little out of his normally murky waters among the green Dionistas. A transplanted Ontarian and former Martin organizer, he is widely unloved among BC Liberals for his role as the former leader's local muscle.

In addition to the young party-renewal zealots, the Kennedy/Dion coalition had another important strength — congenital anti-establish-



The Gazette, Montreal

By far the most experienced campaigner of the Liberal leadership candidates, “Rae had the handicap of being a newcomer to this political family,” writes contributing writer Robin Sears. In the end, the Liberal rank and file rejected both front-runners — Michael Ignatieff, who had been outside the country for the last 30 years, and Rae, who had been in another party, the NDP, for the last 30 years.

ment party dissidents. Every party has a collection of “outs.” United in their umbrage at the slights received from party elders, they are resentful champions of previously defeated leadership candidates, true believers in obscure causes that consistently fail to receive broad party support and — Canada being Canada — perennially unhappy regional malcontents.

Even Liberal “outs” understand the meaning of leadership in their tribe, however. Only a Liberal prime minister, asked to define the key qualities of leadership, could say with no

trace of irony, “One who wins.” Thus Jean Chrétien sliced one more time into the battered reputation of Paul Martin, first to reporters and then to wild huzzahs at the convention. Generations of Liberals have been drilled by Mackenzie King and his successors about two fundamentals: “You must be united. You must win.”

Veteran observers could be forgiven, therefore, for not spotting the signs that delegates were about to choose a candidate not supported by 82 percent of them. Liberals, after all,

did not do this: take punts on long-shot untested leaders, when safer options are on offer.

After all, party unity had only recently been papered over and the leadership campaign had inevitably reopened some still fresh wounds. The backroom party leaders who had shared power for nearly 40 years had accumulated a long list of unhappy “outs” as a result of their sometimes brutal enforcement of party discipline while in power.

This was now a party in opposition, however, hollowed out at the riding level

to a degree not visible from the centre. Bitter not only in defeat, but also at the ignominiousness of that defeat: a humiliation delivered only a few months earlier by the most incompetent national political campaign in half a century.

The Liberals' record as the most successful political party in the Western

At Dion headquarters, a much less experienced team, with a fraction of the war chest assembled by Rae and Ignatieff, decided that to pay for their final-day *coup de théâtre* — a sea of green scarves and signs — they could not afford a hospitality suite! For those not imbued with the ritual of a Liberal leadership convention this may have seemed an obvious economy. After all, allowing any hanger-on to drink free booze and nibble expensive if inedible hors d'oeuvres all night may not seem the most strategic use of scarce campaign funds.

world was not achieved without a lot of blood spilt in hundreds of nominations and leadership conventions: Michael Ignatieff's campaign chair, Toronto senator David Smith, national campaign chair throughout the Chrétien era, volunteers as a badge of honour his seven successful defences against suits brought by party malcontents enraged at his insertion of the leader's choice as candidate over the heads of local activists.

Restoring the country's fiscal health had generated a cadre of angry Liberal social activists whose cherished programs bore a disproportionate share of the cutback pain. The list of government decisions that generated local Liberal anger at the power of the party elites was already long, before the disaster of the Gomery Inquiry laid waste to their reputation for either probity or competence.

It's a cliché that we are a deferential culture, willing to tolerate significant abuse from grumpy Air Canada employees and assorted official tormentors, not to mention hard-edged party enforcers. But cross the threshold and the explosion of rage can be impossible to contain. Brian Mulroney was a victim of such a moment, as was Paul Martin. In Montreal, it was the turn of the Liberal grandees.

To eavesdrop on the angry exchanges on the floor, at the most dramatic moments before the fateful third ballot, was to witness a high-volume dialogue of the deaf. The green-scarved Dionistas being cajoled, pleaded with and threatened by very senior Liberal organizers offered only

angry resolve to every argument. One delegate, metaphoric of the depths of conviction and rage that powered this rebellion, bellowed back at one much older party supplicant, "I don't give a damn if you think this is stupid! Mr. Dion won't destroy the party, you guys will!"

Among the many lessons from this convention's blow to the party's power brokers was the importance of looking behind you and beneath you, always, when you are on top. The men who had confidently steered the Liberal Party from triumph to triumph, a group far wider than the Rae and Ignatieff backers, got whacked from behind this time.

The lessons of hubris often flay the most powerful and well financed in politics. The Ignatieff floor organization, backed by a 30-person call centre in the bowels of the convention hall, hundreds of workers and a delegate tracking system honed over months of intelligence gathering, was an impressive sight. The Ignatieff presence was overwhelming from day one. Ignatieff greeters at every door of the Palais des Congrès welcomed every delegate. Each bleary morning the first thing that delegates saw on stumbling out of their hotel rooms

was the *Ignatieff News* delivered pre-dawn to thousands of rooms. Their red-scarved minions carpeted the floor of the convention, the party rooms and hotel lobbies.

Detailed briefing sessions were held twice a day for team captains, with precise instructions about how to deliver that session's spin and how to fight others' counter-spin. Leadership campaign budgeting is always an elegant confection of fiction, misdirection and ironically misnamed expenditures, so it is impossible to cost such a convention machine. Veterans of previous wars, observing the firepower, debated whether it was "high six figures or low sevens."

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Like Haida potlatches of old, however, the candidate hospitality suite is a demonstration of power as well as generosity: "Look at the important folks who have been attracted to our stale sandwiches, compared to the poor Schultz campaign at the Holiday Inn. We are clearly winners!"

A successful leadership campaign is a delicate mix of money, muscle and the blackest of political arts. Candidates issue vapid policy pronouncements and memorize a few lines about each of the most gripping policy itches of the day, but it is to the best organizers that victory most often goes. Unless they are flogging an indi-



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gestible product, as this event amply illustrated. “Organizers” became an epithet flung by angry young bloggers in the run-up to Montreal as a generic slur on the hard men — and they are almost all men — employed by campaigns first to recruit party members, then to turn some of them into delegates and finally to keep the assembled flock fed, watered and loyal.

In the distortion of a convention’s funhouse mirror, it passes relatively unnoticed that the self-anointed party reformers, the “insurgents,” have a fair sprinkling of the toughest party organizers manipulating events behind their own curtains. Separating the principled white hats from the cruel, office-seeking black hats is not so simple at a leadership convention.

Neither is choosing virtue in party reform debates. A group of unknown young delegates stun the party elders by speaking passionately in favour of delegated conventions, sneering at the “people’s democracy” that “one person, one vote” activists claim as its virtue. Even more improbably, they win. Their youthful wisdom is vindicated not only by the millions of dollars of “infomercial” coverage the convention receives, but by the more than \$2 million profit the party generates on this grand theatre allegedly “now too expensive for our party to afford.”

Among the many divisions the party is visibly struggling with is the role of new Canadians, and their apparently spontaneous desire to become new Liberals by the busload. Nowhere is the black hand of the organizational class more excoriated than in this time-honoured use of leaders of ethnic communities to rally supporters to establishment-anointed candidates. Analyzing the rights and wrongs of this product of the party’s hold on many new Canadians’ political loyalties sucks one deep into the political kaleidoscope.

No intra-mural issue within the party is greater proof of “where you stand depends on where you sit.” To the South Asian and Chinese Canadian politicians who have risen to public office, the attacks on “busloads of Sikhs” are simply racism. Employing non-visible minority shock troops to win a nomination battle is as old as politics; all that has changed is skin colour. New ethnic Liberals’ sympathizers observe that it is the loss of the old establishment’s ability to manipulate key nominations that is the real source of their anger.

There is no mistaking, nonetheless, the electric tension which zaps a Liberal convention crowd when a tightly knit group of colourfully clad turbaned Sikhs arrives in force, marshalled by serious young men snapping into their cellphones in a language mysterious to the onlookers.

This convention saw several such moments, the most dangerously charged when Liberal national director Steve MacKinnon quite reasonably ordered the doors to the registration hall barred precisely at the appointed hour. Several dozen angry young men pounded on the doors in front of television cameras, overlooked by a sullenly disapproving group of delegates. The Sikhs had arrived too late to be moved up from alternate to delegate and were furious. Racist slurs were muttered quietly.

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Canadian deference and fear of being accused of playing the race card kept discussion of the support among certain ethnic communities for one candidate to a minimum. It was, after all, not surprising that a candidate

who had drawn his early support from urban Ontario, and whose message was an anti-establishment call for greater inclusiveness and democratic renewal, would connect with delegates from those communities.

From his launch-event photo-op, it was obvious to insiders that Kennedy’s organizers had done a surprisingly good job at scooping up many desirable names in the Sikh, Pakistani and Tamil communities. He had also drawn strength from the diffuse but energetic Muslim communities heavily represented in the ridings around Toronto.

For reasons they would call “principled” most of these delegates could not support either of the establishment candidates. Rae had been too vigorously anti-terrorist and pro-Israeli, Ignatieff simply too flaky on each file. The front-runners’ champions from those communities tended to be more serious and from a more senior generation. Ignatieff had MP Sukh Dhaliwal, for example, a defector from the Volpe camp. Rae had Ujjal Dosanjh, a former New Democrat.

In a much shorter overall list of endorsers, Gerard Kennedy had a dozen high-profile elected politicians from those communities, and the support base they represented. Mark Holland’s comment early in the con-

vention about the inevitability of Kennedy’s delegates supporting no one other than Dion, if forced to choose among the other front-runners, takes on a different meaning viewed through this prism.

The conventional wisdom, that a candidate could not move much more than a third of their delegates by endorsing an opponent, had a “Kennedy exception.” When he quickly moved to support Dion at the hinge moment of the convention, Rae and Ignatieff organizers each thought they could seduce up to 20 percent of them.

Most observers say that fewer than 10 percent of Kennedy’s delegates went anywhere except to Dion. The Kennedy organizers worked them hard to make sure they voted, chasing them one by one by cell-phone, after checking voters’ lists to see who had turned out.

The first of several bitter pills the Rae campaign swallowed was the fact that if the six Kennedy women delegates who had loaned their first ballot vote to Martha Hall Findlay had not indulged in that gesture of feminine solidarity, Dion would have been in fourth place, four votes behind Kennedy, instead of two votes ahead. Dion’s largely Quebec delegates would not have moved en bloc to Kennedy, but rather would have split strongly in Rae’s favour. Rae has refused to comment on the equally bitter blow inflicted by Hall Findlay directly, an old school courtesy she no doubt counted on as a cover for her very old style leadership treachery. However, as the campaign manager for another Ontario candidate put it, “What the guys didn’t realize was that Martha plays politics like one of the worst old boys. First she offered a deal to Ignatieff, then made one with Rae, and finally jumped to Dion.” Hall Findlay curtly rejected a late night appeal from a close adviser that she at least tell Rae before Saturday morning of her decision to jump again, saying that she had no obligation to him or anyone else.

The Rae campaign also swallowed the attacks on their candidate by Tamil delegates for refusing to promise he would fight to remove the Tamil

Tigers from Canada’s terrorist list. Some Sikh delegates piled on for what they claimed was a slur on their whole community in Rae’s condemnation of the Khalistan activists in his probe of the Air India massacre.

Rae supporters’ unhappiness would

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have been explosive if an incident a few hours earlier had become known before the third ballot. As she moved from the convention floor to the surrounding corridors, Arlene Perly Rae was accosted by an enthusiastic if staggeringly inept delegate committed to another candidate. He told her not to support Rae because “his wife is Jewish.”

As appalling as this incident is in revealing the continuing role of anti-Semitism in politics in Canada in 2006, it would have been worth a lot to witness the encounter. Perly Rae is a tough, seasoned campaigner, a tall and commanding figure with a boisterous sense of humour and a magnetic charm — combined with a high-voltage glare capable of incinerating fools in one devastating flash of her large brown eyes. “I am that wife,” she icily informed this particular fool.

This could be dismissed as one of those racist clangers from which no party gathering is free, if it were not clearly part of a pattern. A long-time Canadian Muslim activist lit the fuse that exploded the post-convention bonhomie four days later. In a December 6 op-ed piece in the *Globe and Mail*, Tarek Fatah, the founder of the Muslim Canadian Congress and a Bob Rae delegate, detailed with devastating precision

the array of slurs marshalled against Rae by a variety of players.

He revealed the amateurishly produced, slanderous reprinted e-mails and flyers handed out widely at the convention by competing Muslim organizations, the Canadian Islamic

Congress and the Canadian Arab Federation. Mohammed Elmasry of the Islamic Congress, who had endorsed Gerard Kennedy with an “A” rating, encouraged Muslim delegates to vote en masse for one candidate. An enraged Ignatieff delegate attacked Elmasry publicly for treating her community as a “herd of cattle.”

Dion’s office issued a sharp denunciation of the incident and the partisan use of ethnicity as soon as it became public. It seems likely that the man who so vigorously thrashed a different kind of ethnic politics in his own province will have little tolerance for these old Liberal organizers’ games in the party he now leads.

Kennedy did not return reporters’ calls seeking a similar condemnation.

All of this made Rae’s defeat more bitter than it might have been in a less vicious contest. Having resurrected his political career with a quiet, confident skill that confounded his critics, Rae came within inches of victory. Readers of the political insiders’ bible, *The Hill Times*, dubbed his rebirth the “Comeback of the Year.”

Typical of the quiet grace which marked his brother John Rae’s role as a senior backroom operator for over 30



The Gazette, Montreal

Stéphane Dion with Gerard Kennedy at the hinge moment of the Liberal convention. When Kennedy moved to Dion after the second ballot, Martha Hall Findlay was already there. The six Kennedy delegates who parked with her for the first ballot meant that Kennedy was fourth rather than third, and may have changed the outcome of the convention. Had Kennedy been third by four votes, rather than two votes behind Dion, where would she have gone?

years in Liberal elections, a role he played for his brother's campaign, Bob Rae steered clear of the tactics which marred the Volpe and Ignatieff reputations. He appeared to follow the counsel of a sage political analyst of an earlier generation, Bill Wilson of the *Montreal Star*, who, commenting on the fratricidal leadership behaviour of Canadian Conservatives, offered the following axioms to underpin party unity and stability:

1. *Battles that can only produce mutual defeat are to be avoided above all else.*
2. *Never humiliate your opponent, protect his pride as if it were your own.*
3. *Always leave your opponent a way out...*

4. *Always leave yourself a way out, remembering how easy it is to look like an idiot. It is much easier for you to do this [to yourself] than for anyone else.*

Rae had the handicap of being a newcomer to this political family. Any sharp attacks on opponents by him risked reminding delegates of how devastating his critique of Liberals had been for two decades. Some observers believed his refusal to outline a broad new vision of a centre-left Canada for the 21st century hurt him; other supporters bemoaned this self-imposed sheath on his ability to sting an opponent.

By contrast, Michael Ignatieff, little schooled in the niceties of partisan family etiquette, frequently

indulged in sharp defences of his “forward leaning” policy views, regularly sideswiping his opponents for their timidity. His absence of self-doubt — to describe his jaw-dropping chutzpah most charitably — was particularly galling to long-time Liberals who might have been willing to accept a newcomer who was less enthusiastic about trashing the caution of successful party leaders. Ignatieff paid for his hubris in the 48 hours of decision-making at convention time. Despite — some said, in part, because of — his brutal organizational muscle, he stood paralyzed at less than 30 percent support from beginning to end.

Reaction to Dion's victory swung wildly in the days following the convention. His traditional enemies in the

Quebec media were initially insulting, then silenced by early poll numbers showing how badly they misread their own readers. Delegate reaction ranged

erations of Tories savaged their leaders and each other over immigration, bilingualism, the flag, abortion and capital punishment. This test — bind-

ror that of the NDP. Canadian electors, never highly ideological in their allegiances, famously turf out their MPs with a zeal not found in any other democracy. The hollowing out of party patronage and the slow disappearance of riding activists, in combination with the weakening of party identification, ratchets incumbency risk ever higher.

In urban ridings this new spice in the Canadian political stew will be strongest. Anywhere Liberals and New Democrats traditionally compete for the votes of young, well-educated, independent, centre-left voters, the Greens will be the spoiler. While post-convention national polls gave Liberals the usual bounce one expects from a high-profile leadership contest, and appear to predict a disaster for New Democrats, the story is more complicated at the local level in Canada's big cities.

from furious disbelief — “This party has f**ked itself,” said a senior party official, cited by Paul Wells — to more gloomy acceptance. Despite their shattered demeanour leaving the hall, by the following week many were convincing themselves and reporters that it was “probably for the best, in the long run.”

After twisting the convention kaleidoscope through its array of bewildering distortions, it's clear there remain divisions along several Liberal fault lines:

- Quebec soft nationalists versus most other Liberals from across Canada;
- South Asian and Muslim voting blocs versus “one Canada” Liberals;
- traditional brokerage party elders versus young “politics of principle” activists;
- activist “Charter” Liberals versus those respectful of provincial domain in the use of federal spending power; and on and on.

Yet the big-tent traditions of the Liberal Party have perennially managed equally or more challenging splits. Few democratic political parties could have hung onto power after vicious internal splits as bitter as those over conscription, the *War Measures Act*, the Anti-Inflation Board and free trade. The “never speak ill of another Liberal” discipline gave the party an appearance of public cohesion as gen-

ing the leadership wounds and rebuilding trust between the regional and ethnic cliques — is as old as parties.

For all the punditi's blather about renewal, grassroots reform and a new era in politics, Dion's survival challenge is no different from that mastered by Laurier, King or Trudeau: unite the party to win a majority in the next election, or in a runoff soon after, or leave. His early moves to bring the defeated candidates close to him — his Liberal “dream team” — were adroit.

Perhaps imprudently, Dion has nailed the party's colours to the environmental mast, at precisely the moment when a party with more unsullied credentials has money, momentum and an impressive new leader. It is not clear that the Green Party's Elizabeth May will wreak as much havoc on the Canadian political establishment as her German forebear, Petra Kelly, did on that country's two decades before, but the parallels are eerily similar. Each has strong media skills, battle scars preparing them for political leadership earned in the internecine battles of green NGO politics, a savvy mix of right and left wing messaging and attractive, sunny personalities masking steely resolve.

It seems unlikely that the Greens will elect more than one or two MPs any time soon, given how heavily the odds are stacked in our winner-takes-all electoral system, but their impact on the fate of their competitors will likely mir-

pete for the votes of young, well-educated, independent, centre-left voters, the Greens will be the spoiler. While post-convention national polls gave Liberals the usual bounce one expects from a high-profile leadership contest, and appear to predict a disaster for New Democrats, the story is more complicated at the local level in Canada's big cities.

These musical chairs are likely to be played out in more than 50 ridings where the Liberals and NDP are one and two, and Tory support bounces according to national trends and candidate strength. Riding organizational muscle, candidate appeal and local and regional political itches will determine the outcomes in these trenches, often in defiance of the national political winds.

Then there is the mother's milk of the profession: cash. The Tories have enough to paper campaign office walls with. Liberals will be able to borrow enough to be competitive nationally, but will be much more challenged at the local level. The New Democrat, Bloc and Green campaigns, courtesy of Chrétien's crazy election finance reforms — and with thanks to the generosity of Canadian taxpayers — have more resources than their predecessors could ever have dreamed of.

The rot in the Liberal Party that Dion has inherited is best revealed by one statistic: in 2004, 20 times more Canadians sent money to the Conservatives than supported the natural governing party of Canada! As incredible as it may seem for a governing party,

at the beginning of its second decade in power, fewer than 23,000 Canadians gave money to the Liberals nationally, versus more than half a million Tory donors. (By contrast, New Democrats were generating direct mail support from twice as many donors as the 2004 Liberals — 30 years ago!)

As the Republicans in the US discovered, when you get a voter to send you a personal cheque you have begun a relationship that can be nurtured over many years, delivering not only financial support but also equally important political intelligence. You learn what subjects elicit the most cash, which partisan messages deliver turnout and support and, crucially, when your support is cresting or crashing. Individual political donations are the canary in the coal mine for tracking your activists' mood. Liberal dependence on ever-higher amounts of cash from Toronto lawyers, bankers and corporate boards thus enfeebled them in two ways: it created a perception they could be bought, and it isolated them from their base.

Even pre-Gomery, Canadian voters surprised pollsters with their demand for integrity, transparency and accountability in politics. The Liberal openness to charges of "pay to play" politics still hurts in Quebec and among independent voters everywhere. The addiction to big fundraising dinners as a source of campaign financing became so embarrassing to party insiders that the draconian solution of Bill C-24 got wide backroom support — to the amazement of competitors and pundits.

The bill forced Liberals to ape what the Tories and the NDP had been doing for a decade: raising money from thousands of small donors. In addition, each party now gets free bags of taxpayer cash four times a year. This has generated hundreds of thousands of dollars for the Greens, and millions for the Bloc. As one Liberal veteran put it, defending

what appeared to be slicing off one's political nose to spite an offending face, "We were addicted to big dinners and big donors. Only going cold turkey could break the habit."

The policy process godfather, former Trudeau aide and Queen's professor Tom Axworthy, vented his frustration on the eve of the convention. In a thundering attack obtained by the *National Post*, he described the Martin daycare program as "a deathbed repentance," the gun registry as "an administrative disaster" and Martin's response to the sponsorship scandal — naming Gomery — as "bizarre."

He added:

There are serious problems within the Liberal Party that need fixing...There is a deep feeling of disillusionment. Local Liberals feel they have no influence over the party's direction, except to send money and to turn out to vote for MP or leadership delegate selections, where a sea of "instant" Liberals frequently swamps them. I have been asked time and time again the question — "Why should I devote my very scarce free time to a party that never listens to me?" There is no good answer.

To fix this malaise will require a root and branch

You learn what subjects elicit the most cash, which partisan messages deliver turnout and support and, crucially, when your support is cresting or crashing. Individual political donations are the canary in the coal mine for tracking your activists' mood. Liberal dependence on ever-higher amounts of cash from Toronto lawyers, bankers and corporate boards thus enfeebled them in two ways: it created a perception they could be bought, and it isolated them from their base.

reform of all the institutions of the Liberal Party, starting with money. If local members and constituencies are to reacquire the power that they have lost over decades to centralized party structures, they must be the

determining body of how the public subsidy allocated to parties is to be spent.

This is a stunningly candid airing of party dirty laundry by a senior Liberal. Acknowledging the corruption of the nomination process and the anger of the party activists at their leadership is something that is simply not done in polite Liberal circles.

There was more. Axworthy excoriated the Martin government for its management of immigration, defence procurement, AIDS support and Aboriginal health standards! Thinking such thoughts would have been grounds for excommunication when Axworthy ran the PMO.

Finally, in a kidney punch to Liberal core values, one that caused weeks of partisan mirth on Tory blogs, Axworthy said: "Liberalism's dirty secret and it is not so secret these days is that government doesn't seem to work well much of the time."

He added a sharp warning to party leaders: "Liberals must be interested in results, not promises...If progressives do not address how to make government programs truly effective, it will be like entering a race with lead in your shoes."

Dion appears, so far, to have avoided the sort of post-convention underground guerrilla leadership friction that afflicted the party in 1990

and 2003. His moves to bring Ignatieff on as his deputy, and recruit Rae and Scott Brison to craft a platform, were adroit. The platform chairs have an enormous task to complete in only weeks. In addition to a Green ascendancy, a shortage of cash and an

organization heavily out-gunned by the Tories, the party has what some political consultants like to refer to dismissively as content issues.

As the Liberal Party stumbles from its hall of mirrors, it emerges into a Canadian political landscape unlike any before. Some of today's landmarks have challenged the Liberal power monopoly before — a nascent national Conservative coalition, a new political challenger to their left, a resurgent Western “nationalism” — but rarely in combination.

There is a more existential challenge above even this unpleasant alignment of forces. It is the issue that Tom Axworthy alluded to in his thoughtful disquisition on the ills of modern Liberalism and liberal democracy. The party's militants remain grumpy about the degree of reform and renewal they have actually seen take place, after years of mounting bitterness at exclusion from real decision-making about policy or priorities, let alone clean local nominations. He called on Rae, Brison and Dion to convene an emergency national policy conference to help give credence to the new leadership's commitment to a different approach. That seems unrealistic, but they might attempt something akin to Carolyn Bennett's pioneering in electronic town hall policy debate.

This gap between the “reform” promise and the “campaign management” reality will widen very soon. While Dion successfully seized the Kennedy reform banner and is waving it grandly, he now faces some of the grittier tasks that challenge any new leader going into a campaign: who to dump among failed candidates, and who to insert into plum ridings, leaving the unelected as a source of nasty anonymous critiques of his performance. It is hard to be seen as committed to reform while

overturning local democratic choice in favour of a “star” woman candidate, for example. Party activists may believe affirmative action is entirely laudable; just do it to someone else, please.

To this probationary ambivalence about the party's new direction among key members of its base, one needs to add Axworthy's second angst: failure to deliver. His admission that a key challenge of modern government is its weakening grasp on performance, despite vast resources, authority and policy and tech-

Harper has two advantages today that he did not have in the last round: perceived competence at governing, and a demonstrated willingness to tack to the centre as part of that commitment to power. Whether one recalls his and Jim Flaherty's masterful *volte-face* on income trusts, or the no-fingerprints, orchestrated defeat of the government's own motion on same-sex marriage, Harper has demonstrated in one year a better grasp of the challenge of governing Canada than any incoming new prime minister since Mulroney or perhaps Trudeau. Unlike Chrétien or Martin, who had after all been at the centre of power for more than a decade before moving into 24 Sussex, Harper had little previous experience of the disciplines of power.

nology levers, may have earned him a series of sarcastic raspberries from Conservative critics. But his courage in acknowledging this core failure in the eyes of voters, especially the affluent and well educated in the traditional democracies worldwide, took guts.

Canadian Conservatives would be wiser to stifle their smart-aleck reaction a little. It is hard to look at the experience of George Bush or Silvio Berlusconi, or even French and German conservatives, without gasping at the wreckage they

have left around them: fiscally, militarily, in societal and environmental terms. And the whiff of rot around American conservatism is not merely aging pork, or greenhouse gas, or hypocrisy. It is the stink of corruption, the very Democratic excess they swept to power to erase.

For now the Harper government owns none of those legacies of being too long in power. They will be able to cling to the perceived energy and dynamism of “new government” for a few months longer. Canadian Conservatives should probably not lean on milking the Gomery file for much more. Dion's naïve sincerity about politics makes Harper's continuing use of the “sleaze” attack lines of a year ago seem laughable.

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The roller coaster called Canadian politics is speeding up again. There are some really stomach-churning loop-de-loops just around the bend for all the players.

Such as: the Tories deliver a slimmed-down fiscal imbalance solution, focused on Quebec, ignoring the howls from Saskatchewan and Ontario; Flaherty unveils a budget that includes

more tactically brilliant lollipops for narrowly targeted chunks of voters, tackles big-picture issues like capital gains and income-splitting, and delivers a further cut in GST; Jean Charest calls a spring election building on the momentum he has built in the face of Boisclair's peculiar vulgarities and regular pratfalls; Layton's and Harper's designates quietly build an answer to May and Canada's first green Liberal in a tough new *Clean Air Act*, with some Kyoto II language as a sweetener; Duceppe, panicked, ramps up the anti-war rhetoric, and succeeds in dividing both the Liberal caucus and the country; Afghanistan, following the bloody cycle of its recent history, delivers new atrocities and Canadian casualties; Duceppe loses a February vote in the House which the government, quite appropriately, has said it would refuse to see as a matter of confidence; Charest wins in Quebec, and Harper engineers his own defeat for a campaign in May or June.

It will be an election as fascinating as any since Trudeau's anti-inflation-led resurrection in 1974 or the free trade campaign of 1988. The lessons of those battles will echo: asked to make tough choices about issues that average voters are ill-equipped to judge expertly, they will choose character, competence and leadership over policy. They will choose the leader who best attacks and survives counter-attack, and feels both believable and sincere.

This is a nail-biting prospect for all those savvy Liberals who were clear enough about Stéphane Dion's deficits, pre-convention, as a brittle, disorganized and often painfully didactic cabinet minister not to have supported the idea of his being leadership material. Is he then Joe Clark or Kim Campbell? Or is he John Turner, who despite fighting an honourable campaign, got steam-rolled by Tory muscle, money and disciplined campaign management? Or can Dion find the narrow path through the political minefield that leads to even a minority victory?

Given that both the last two federal campaigns left forecasters red-faced at how badly they anticipated voters' choices, and given that the two national parties, according to most recent polls, seem roughly tied in the mid-30s — with the three smaller contenders

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equally sharing the remaining third of the electorate — it's a fool's game to try to handicap the next competitive battle.

Some of the ingredients of success and warning flags are clear, however:

- A flawless debate performance by Harper against a nervous new Liberal leader, who many Canadians will often find hard to understand, could echo positively for the Tories through to election day.
- A blistering attack on the Liberal and Tory environmental records by Elizabeth May, near campaign end, as she realizes she is being jammed by the titans, may give permission to defect for many conflicted voters, hurting New Democrats hardest but Liberal hopes as well.
- Layton will continue to demean Liberal performance, and defend his green agenda deal with Harper. His "entente cordiale" with the Tories may even lead to some Conservative support in the urban West, to block Liberal gains. This will provoke a tough Liberal counter-attack, probably featuring Rae, and further splits with trade union and "progressive" allies.
- Duceppe may be seen to dishonour the sacrifice of young Canadians, if he is not careful in his handling of Afghanistan. A fran-

cophone-led counter-attack by someone like Roméo Dallaire, for example, could be devastating.

- If Dion can capture the passion and the naive *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* conviction that was so compelling to young Liberal dele-

gates, in a broader vision of social justice, for Canadians hungry for sincerity and integrity, he may have found the language to make them squeamish about buying the Harper appeal to their self-interest.

It is safe to predict that the Harper team will again fight a near flawless, highly polished, shrewdly targeted campaign. Whether he can stay unswervingly on script is less sure.

One electoral outcome is bankable. This rare level of jockeying for the same political terrain among the old players, the intense struggle for elbow room by the new, claims of new policy visions by all, is great for Canadian democracy. Rarely will so many voters have had such real and competitive choices at the riding level. Rarely will so many voters' decisions be so key to who leads the next government. Rarely will there have been a campaign with such clearly framed and clearly opposing views on some monumental choices facing the country. Wherever the political kaleidoscope stops turning, that's a good thing.

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