

**Canada****The Liberals try a new leader**

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**Enter Michael Ignatieff, thinker and politician**

HOW very unlike itself Canada is behaving. Earlier this month Stephen Harper, the prime minister, brought his Conservative minority government needlessly to the brink of defeat by provoking the three opposition parties to gang up against him. Only by persuading the governor-general, who acts as Canada's head of state, to approve his extraordinary request to suspend Parliament until the end of January was he able to dodge a confidence vote that he was set to lose. Yet this week it was not Mr Harper who lost his job but his would-be nemesis, Stéphane Dion, the Liberal leader.

Mr Dion, a diffident former academic, led his party to its worst-ever result in a general election in October. He had already said he would go, but not until a convention in May. The party's members of parliament were desperate to have a more electable leader in place when the House of Commons reconvenes on January 26th. They pushed Mr Dion to go immediately. To replace him the party's executive chose by acclamation Michael Ignatieff, a writer and former director of a human-rights centre at Harvard University.

Mr Ignatieff, who will officially be an interim leader until the May convention, failed to win the job in 2006. Then he was widely seen as a carpetbagger, having only recently entered politics after three decades living abroad, mainly in Britain. Almost three years as an MP have removed the newcomer label, increased his support within the party and burnished his speaking skills. Unlike Mr Dion, Mr Ignatieff has mastered the art of the soundbite in both of Canada's official languages, English and French. His initial support for war against Iraq, which most Canadians opposed, has receded as a political issue.

Mr Ignatieff's only serious rival, Bob Rae, a former premier of Ontario when a member of the socialist New Democrats, dropped out without forcing a vote. Though Mr Rae is from the party's left and Mr Ignatieff from its right-wing, the two men have long been personal friends. Mr Ignatieff "will make a great prime minister," said Mr Rae.

Before that can happen, however, there must be an election. It may not come immediately. One of the new opposition leader's first decisions will be whether to try to bring the government down over the budget, due on January 27th. He may well decide not to. Mr Ignatieff has been lukewarm about Mr Dion's plan for a coalition government with the New Democrats and with the backing of the separatist Bloc Québécois. The Liberals are deep in debt and need time to rebuild their finances. They may have little appetite for governing when the economy is worsening.

Mr Harper may also be keen to avoid an early election. The Conservatives are strong in the west, but the prime minister once placed his hopes of winning a parliamentary majority in making gains in Quebec. He has further damaged his party's standing there with some sharp criticism of the Bloc and its involvement in the putative opposition coalition.

That seems to have helped the Parti Québécois (PQ), the Bloc's provincial counterpart, do surprisingly well in an election in Quebec on December 8th. Jean Charest, the province's Liberal premier, won a third term, but with only a slim majority. Opinion polls had predicted a drubbing, but the PQ won 51 of the 125 seats in the provincial assembly, up from 36.

Much now depends on whether Mr Harper has learnt from his brush with political death and adopts a more conciliatory approach to the opposition. He has withdrawn from the government's economic statement the measures that most inflamed the opposition and prompted it to unite. But he has refused to accept any responsibility or express any remorse for the mess he has caused. And in helping to push out the hapless Mr Dion, he has landed himself with a more formidable opponent in Mr Ignatieff.

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