

**Canada's Liberals****The Ignatieff revival**

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**At last, a credible opposition leader. Now he needs a few policies**

Bloomberg



WHEN Michael Ignatieff, the interim leader of Canada's Liberal Party, bounded to the stage at a packed fund-raising meeting last month, the choice of musical backing was a 1970s rock hit called "You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet". That was an unsubtle message from party organisers that great things are expected from Mr Ignatieff, a former journalist and Harvard academic. Yet the song was also appropriate for a less flattering reason. More than five months after the Liberals, the main opposition, dumped Stéphane Dion and replaced him with Mr Ignatieff, the new leader has yet to set out where he and the party stand on many issues.

There is plenty of time for that, insists Mr Ignatieff. Details will be revealed "little by little". For now Liberals are relieved that their new leader is hauling them back to political competitiveness after losing the last two federal elections to Stephen Harper, the Conservative prime minister.

In the second of those, in October, Mr Dion presided over the party's worst showing ever. His final gambit was to try to topple Mr Harper's minority government just weeks after the election by forming a disparate and stillborn coalition with the separatist Bloc Québécois and the leftist New Democratic Party (NDP). Mr Harper survived by shutting down Parliament for seven weeks, Mr Dion departed and Canadians quickly became more exercised by recession and job losses than by party shenanigans in Ottawa.

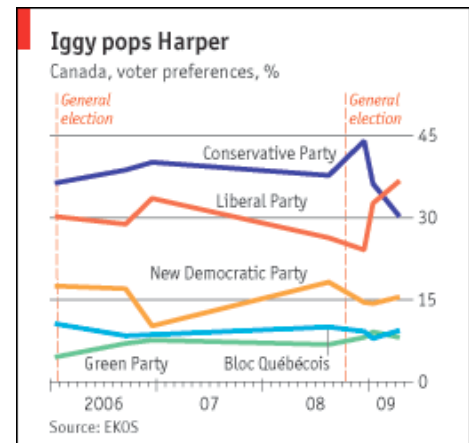
Mr Ignatieff is due to be crowned, unopposed, as the Liberals' permanent leader at a party convention in Vancouver starting on April 30th. The latest opinion polls give his party a significant edge, enough to form a minority government if replicated in an election (see chart).

But what does he stand for? Opposition parties in Canada, as elsewhere, have learnt to their cost that it does not

pay to be too specific before an election. The Conservatives' successful attack on Mr Dion's plan for a carbon tax last year remains a painful memory. Mr Ignatieff ushered the carbon tax out with Mr Dion. He prefers a cap-and-trade system for emissions. And he has also dropped the idea of a coalition with the Bloc Québécois and the NDP.

Mr Ignatieff's message has been vague and general: that the Liberals believe in an activist federal government with a national vision whereas the Conservatives do not. Within this framework, he has suggested strengthening the ties between the east and west of a vast, thinly populated country through a better electricity grid, a high-speed railway from Windsor to Quebec City and a national child-care programme. "The prime minister of Canada has one job and one job only: to hold the country together and leave it stronger, more united, than when he found it," he says. As for foreign policy, Canada should look beyond North America now that "the noon hour" of the United States and its global dominance are over, he argues.

For now the Liberal leader is content to remain an enigma. "People like Ignatieff because he is not Stéphane Dion and he's not Stephen Harper," says Paul Adams of Ekos Research, a polling company. "But he's still not defined in the public mind."



Mr Ignatieff has had other priorities. One has been to reassure Canadians of his commitment to the country despite having spent most of his adult life abroad, in Britain and the United States. When he returned in 2005 and entered politics, he was resented by some as a carpetbagger. To try to change this perception, he published this week "True Patriot Love", a slim volume in which he explores his Canadian roots. "Enthusiastic flag-waving and empty generalisations," said a review in *The National Post*, a conservative newspaper.

The Liberals' other priority has been to repair their party machine. Strict new limits on political donations have hurt the Liberals, who usually looked to business for money, more than the Conservatives, who are better at grass-roots fund-raising. To catch up, the Liberals recently bought software used by Barack Obama's campaign in last year's American election, and have centralised fund-raising. Rocco Rossi, the party's national director, claims that it will pay off its debt within weeks. He is preparing for a possible election in the autumn.

The Conservatives have so far found Mr Ignatieff hard to attack. The Liberal leader surprised some Canadians by defending Alberta's tar sands when their environmental record was attacked by *National Geographic* magazine. That brought criticism from the left. Conservative MPs pounced on a remark that tax increases would be needed to plug the fiscal deficit.

Mr Ignatieff acknowledges that his foes will seek ammunition among his writings and talks during a long career as an intellectual. His frequent use of "we" when addressing audiences in the United States may be turned against him. So too might his flirtation with the use of torture and his support for the war in Iraq (since recanted), a deeply unpopular cause in Canada. The next election may be both closely contested and dirty.