

# Federal Liberals are far from dead

BY LICIA CORBELLA, CALGARY HERALD JUNE 15, 2010

To paraphrase Mark Twain, who was once wrongly declared dead, all of this talk of the demise of the federal Liberal party is "greatly exaggerated."

Yes, the last several years of Canada's natural governing party have been spent in the political wilderness of official opposition during a minority parliament. As a result, many Liberals unaccustomed to not holding power can be heard saying that without a merger between the Liberals and the NDP, the Liberals will be doomed to opposition status into eternity. This is utter nonsense and should not be believed by anyone, least of all the Conservatives, since underestimating one's main opponent is never wise, especially one with as deep roots as the federal Liberal party.

First of all, the numbers aren't exactly stellar for the Conservatives. A recent Nanos poll released on June 8 pegged the Conservatives at 35.6 per cent popularity over the Liberals at 29.2 per cent. Considering that the margin of error is 3.1 per cent plus or minus, that could be viewed as pretty much a tie. This during relatively good times economically for Canada in comparison with the rest of the developed world. What's more, this poll was taken long before the fake lake debate broke. Even if the margin of error is not taken into account, those can hardly be encouraging numbers for Stephen Harper's Conservatives.

Leadership numbers, of course, tell a different story. When asked who would make the best PM, Harper polls at 30.1 per cent to Michael Ignatieff's dismal 17 per cent, which is just slightly above the NDP's Jack Layton at 16 per cent. As election watchers know, leadership numbers are generally a better indication of an election's outcome than party poll numbers. Nik Nanos, of Nanos Research, said during a telephone interview yesterday that "Harper does quite well on perceptions related to competence -- considered a non-ideological trait."

As to a merger, Nanos points out that "when you create a new party, you create a new beast that both attracts and repels people."

As the federal Progressive Conservative and Canadian Alliance merger showed, recalls Nanos, "one plus one never equals two."

Indeed, Nanos says his firm usually asks respondents not just who their first choice is, but their second choice as well. "In our (June 8) poll, 38.7 per cent of committed Liberal voters have the Conservatives as their second choice, which means," says Nanos, "if the Liberals and the NDP merged, what would happen is the old Liberal party, for all intents and purposes, would disappear and a number of Canadians would probably move over to the Conservatives."

Even though both Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff and NDP Leader Jack Layton have denied that there

have been any formal merger talks, at least one prominent Liberal, Warren Kinsella, has sworn an affidavit that there have been serious discussions.

Regardless, what ails the Liberal party is very simple. It is rudderless because it is essentially leaderless. The Liberals replaced one esteemed professor, Stephane Dion, with another, Michael Ignatieff. While apparently intelligent men in lecture halls or writing textbooks or papers, both appear to lack leadership abilities and strategic political smarts.

But Nanos points out that Ignatieff, who isn't well known by most Canadians yet, is suffering from what he calls "the leader of the opposition syndrome" in which it's difficult to get profile: no one listens to you but people are grumbling all the time.

"In 1993, when Jean Chretien was leader of the opposition, there was a lot of grumbling about him being too old, about him being the Trudeau guy, about the infighting with the Paul Martin camp, but," says Nanos, "a strange thing happened on the way to the election."

That may be, but at least Chretien -- who had dictatorial tendencies -- could make a decision and knew how to run a caucus. Time and again, Ignatieff appears unable to make a decision and stick to it. His leadership abilities are suspect.

If the Liberals lose the next federal election -- which definitely won't come this summer but might happen this fall -- there will be another Liberal leadership race and that won't necessarily solve the party's issues since it's very likely the involved Liberal membership will again choose a disastrous leader a la Dion.

Past polls show that when highly competent Liberal leadership contenders like former deputy Liberal PM John Manley or former New Brunswick Premier Frank McKenna are on a list of contenders, Liberal party supporters place them below the likes of Justin Trudeau or Bob Rae, who was a disaster in every way as NDP premier of Ontario from 1990 to 1995.

However, if wise Liberal heads prevail and someone like McKenna or Manley can be convinced to run and win the leadership, Prime Minister Stephen Harper would have a very tough time hanging onto the keys for 24 Sussex Dr.

Like Twain, the Liberals are not dead, just on a long vacation.

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