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Merger talk hasn't helped Ignatieff

It reminds everyone only that the Liberal leader has been short on ideas and vision

By JOSEE LEGAULT, The Gazette June 11, 2010

All the reports, columns, and rumours flying around this week about a coalition or merger between the federal Liberal Party and the New Democrats created one winner and one loser.

The loser is Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff. All that talk confirmed how shaky his leadership, like his party's support in the polls, has become.

When the most influential of his predecessors, Jean Chretien, brought up the idea of a possible revisiting of the attempted Liberal-NDP coalition of late 2008, knowing full well that Iggy wants none of it, one thing became crystal clear: Ignatieff -himself a product of the Paul Martin clan -now has to watch his back against the Chretien clan, just as much as Stephane Dion had to watch his when Iggy was waiting to succeed him.

Some say Chretien is showing himself to be a bit of a "nervous Nelly" these days by talking up the coalition idea. His sorties certainly signal to Ignatieff that if Harper wins the election, again, Ignatieff's days as Liberal leader might be counted on the fingers of one hand, if Chretien has anything to do with it.

Chretien's message to Iggy: if you don't get that coalition math, we'll find someone else at some point who does.

Now for the winner: Jack Layton. Sure, the growing comparisons between his trouble-free leadership and Ignatieff 's struggles help Layton's already-positive image.

But a recent Angus Reid poll showing that a coalition led by Ignatieff would go down to defeat whereas one led by Layton would have 43 per cent support against 37 per cent for the Tories, seems to support Layton's contention in 2008 that some of his MPs would be ready to govern one day alongside the Liberals.

Yesterday, a CBC-Ekos poll put the NDP at 16.6 per cent, but Tuesday a Nanos poll showed the NDP at 20.7 per cent. Poll results these days are showing a certain volatility out there, but the basic trend remains. Conservatives are still in minority territory. The Grits stand under 30 per cent, with the NPD in third place, gaining some ground.

Ignatieff now also has to contend with NDP attacks. The most visible NDP MP these days is going for the Liberal leader's political jugular. Wednesday, on Radio-Canada's public-affairs show 24 heures en 60 minutes, deputy leader Thomas Mulcair openly questioned the Liberal leader's credibility on some key issues.

"If people are interested," said Mulcair, let them go online. Let them search for "Michael Ignatieff and torture," "Michael Ignatieff and Iraq" ... "He blamed Canada for not going into Iraq. That's the same Michael Ignatieff, the same person."

Such scathing criticisms of the leader of the only party with which the NDP could ever hope to form a coalition can mean only one thing: Even in the eyes of Layton, Ignatieff isn't expected to stick around, should the Liberals fail to get at least a minority victory next time.

Which brings us to the core problem for the Liberals: their current leader. When they ditched Stephane Dion, the non-Chretienites thought they'd found their saviour in a man they thought was a great "public intellectual."

But they eventually found out that Ignatieff was more of an "intellectual in public." Even after he succeeded Dion, he failed to do what he was supposed to have been trained to do: put forth ideas - even, who knows?, some kind of "vision" -for the country he had come back to, after spending decades abroad, because he so wanted to be its prime minister.

And ever since he became leader, he has been promising those ideas, that vision. But Canadians are still waiting and still wondering what exactly does the Liberal Party stand for under Ignatieff ? It's one thing for him to keep repeating that his party is the true progressive alternative, but the claim falls on deaf ears for lack of concrete content.

When you compare this very basic and continued failure of Ignatieff with Stephen Harper's steely determination to stay in power, even with a minority, you know that many Liberals are already wondering who their next "saviour" will be.

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