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The Hill Times, April 6th, 2009

NEWS STORY

By Abbas Rana and Harris Macleod

Tories to fill in blanks on Ignatieff leadership questions

Conservatives to launch attack ads against Michael Ignatieff this summer, poring over 27 years of information.

Canadians like Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff, they just don't know why and the governing Conservatives see that as an opportunity to fill in the blanks, which they plan to do by running attack ads this summer, says a top Conservative source.

"Notwithstanding Ignatieff's poll numbers, where he's seen as competent and popular, what our polling and focus group testing shows is that people really don't have a solid impression about him. They generally like the guy, but they don't really know anything about him. According to our polling, he's an unknown quantity in the eyes of Canadians. So, since people don't have a locked in, fixed impression about him, there's still a tremendous amount of opportunity to influence what people think about the guy," the Conservative source told *The Hill Times* in a not-for-attribution based interview last week.

The source said that right now the absence of adequate information about Mr. Ignatieff (Etobicoke-Lakeshore, Ont.) is hurting Prime Minister Stephen Harper's (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) image because without a fully fleshed-out alternative, Mr. Harper is compared to an imaginary ideal Prime Minister.

"The media when they cover the government, they say here's what the government is doing and here's how it deviates from perfection," said the Conservative. "It's always Harper vs. the perfect prime minister, and in that battle we always lose, but that's how the daily media coverage goes: Here's how he's not living up to the ideal image."

The source said that by running negative attack ads against Mr. Ignatieff, who has enjoyed months of positive media coverage since he replaced former leader St  phane Dion (Saint-Laurent-Cartierville, Que.) in December, they think Mr. Harper will come off more favourably.

"What the negative campaigning allows us to do is it sharpens the contrast and say, 'It's not Harper versus perfection.' It's Harper versus Ignatieff. Harper may not be perfect but take a look at this guy and that's sort of [how we want to] reframe the debate from the way media frames it. It's pick one Harper or Ignatieff. Because the media can't intuitively create that dichotomy, we have to pay ourselves with the paid media," said the source.

A Canadian Press Harris-Decima poll that came out on March 27 found that 44 per cent of respondents had a favourable view of Harper, while 45 per cent were negative. Meanwhile, Mr. Ignatieff got a favourable rating from 45 per cent, but only 26 per cent held a negative view.

According to a Nanos poll that came out on March 21, the Liberals were in the lead with 36 per cent support, followed by the Conservatives with 33 per cent, the NDP with 13 per cent, and the Bloc with 10 per cent support.

In background and not-for-attribution based interviews, Tories said they are currently undertaking research on Mr. Ignatieff to find suitable material for their attack ads. Tories are reviewing all books, newspaper, magazine and journal articles Mr. Ignatieff has written as well as all videos of public affairs shows Mr. Ignatieff has hosted or participated in during the 27 years between 1978 and 2005 when Mr. Ignatieff lived in the U.K. and in the U.S. as an academic and as a broadcaster and documentary filmmaker.

At the annual Leader's Dinner fundraiser in Toronto last week, Mr. Ignatieff joked with the crowd that he knew what the Conservatives were up to.

"Right now, the Prime Minister and his people are in some basement somewhere going

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through thousands of pages," of books and articles he'd written, he said. "He's looking for that one earth-shattering quote that he thinks will win him the next election."

Liberals have been saying that if the Conservatives launch attack ads against Mr. Ignatieff, they will fight back.

"I suspect that it will be dealt with differently than it's been dealt with in the past," Liberal MP Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton-Canso, N.S.) told *The Hill Times* last week.

Ontario Liberal Sen. David Smith who is also one of the four campaign co-chairs, said that the Liberals are aware that Tories may try to portray Mr. Ignatieff negatively for his work out of the country.

"They can do whatever they want to do. Michael Ignatieff has an exceedingly fine mind who, yes, has spent time in other places, has gained experiences from being in other places but came home and is very committed to public life in Canada. He left opportunities where the income was very good, the prestige was very good, because he wanted to make a commitment to public life in this country and I think the more people who see that side of him the more they appreciate it. If our opponents want to snipe away at that they can go ahead and snipe away at that, I think it's more telling about them than it is about Michael."

Sen. Smith said that their selling point about Mr. Ignatieff would be that he's trying to reach out to Canadians in all parts of the country.

"First of all there's a very fine mind there that's a small 'l' social liberal that's committed to these traditions of what the Liberal Party is all about that wants to see strong national programs, and also that has very much a national perspective and wants to see the Liberal Party represent not just people in the cities. He is very, very serious, and very committed to reaching out to some of these areas in Western Canada in particular that haven't been electing Liberal MPs for a long time. He's not remotely thinking of spending all his time in the cities, there's a very, very conscious effort on his part to go out to these areas out West that haven't seen a lot of Liberal leaders in recent years and let them have a close look, listen to them, understand what he's talking about, and appreciate the values that they share, and that's very genuine."

Before Mr. Ignatieff, the cash-rich Conservatives ran attack ads against Mr. Dion after he became party leader, which were successful in painting a picture of Mr. Dion as a weak leader that he was never able to shake. Dion-Liberals could not respond with their own ads against Mr. Harper because they lacked adequate funds, but now the Ignatieff Liberals are hosting fundraisers across the country to try and quickly replenish the party's coffers.

Meanwhile, Hill insiders have been speculating about two possible scenarios about the possibility of the next federal election—one scenario would see the Grits defeat the government after the April 30 to May 3 Liberal leadership and policy convention in Vancouver, B.C., and the second scenario would be to go in the fall.

Liberal insiders told *The Hill Times* that Mr. Ignatieff is torn between those who say they have the momentum now and should pull the plug to capitalize on this opportunity, and those who argue that he should use the summer to raise money and build the party infrastructure for a successful election campaign. Another complicating factor that Liberals say could happen is that Prime Minister may pre-empt the Liberal leader by engineering his own defeat in order to fight the Liberals before they're ready.

"The ducks are lined up. Harper's got a consideration that he can't sit back and concede the territory to Ignatieff to raise more money and build up the organization and bring him down. The other side of it is that Ignatieff can't go along being supportive and there are certainly people in the Liberal ranks that are saying that there's no bad time to bring down a government, and they're strong believers in that," one top Liberal told *The Hill Times*.

Another Alberta-based Liberal, who did not want to be identified, had a different opinion.


"Canadians want their politicians to focus on the economy. It's not about politics and power. It can hamper anyone. Canadians are starting to warm up or they're starting to get to know Ignatieff and it's heading in a positive direction, so do you really want to rush into an election? I would think June, July would be a good time for him to travel and continue to raise money, build the organization, recruit candidates and get a better public profile."

The source said that one of the issues that Liberals have to be mindful about is that if they decide to defeat the government too soon, there could be a backlash from Canadians.

"That's one of the things that Ignatieff has to be very sensitive to is that the election call is not politically expedient. Whatever the issue is, it has to be serious enough that there is no possible philosophic way that the Liberals could support it. But if it's one of those wishy washy type things and they decide 'Oh, well, maybe we should go for it' and they guess wrong, they're going to get whacked."

To defeat the government, Liberals would need the support of the NDP and the Bloc.


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Conservatives currently have 143 seats, Liberals 77, Bloc 49, NDP 37 and there are two independent MPs.

In an interview last week, NDP deputy House leader Joe Comartin (Windsor-Tecumseh, Ont.) told *The Hill Times* that his party stands by its position that the Conservatives have failed to do an effective job in addressing the economic concerns of Canadians, so in case of a confidence vote, they will vote against the government.

"Our position has been that this government simply doesn't have credibility on the economic issues in particular so barring them shifting their position dramatically on the economy, if it did come to a confidence vote, we would be bringing them down at the first opportunity. I have to say, I have no confidence on the backbone of the Liberal Party that they will try to bring the government down at the earliest before the fall and probably next year, that will be the earliest."

But Bloc MP Meili Faille (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, Que.) told *The Hill Times* that her party will make a decision on how to vote after reviewing the content of the confidence vote.

"It all depends. The way we work, as you know, is we always work issue by issue. Certainly, there are irritants and very strong difficulty for the current government to commit to Quebec's interests and in various portfolios as we've seen this week and last week on many issues. Certainly, if there's a confidence vote, we'd have to wait in the balance as to where we stand at that time."

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