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## Ignatieff's summer of discontent

GEDDES: The Liberal leader is in a deep political funk with no easy way out

by [John Geddes](#) on Saturday, June 19, 2010 10:01pm - [63 Comments](#)



Mike Cassese/Reuters

Only a true foreign policy wonk would expect to be stirred up by a document called "*Canada in the World: A Global Networks Strategy*." But the platform paper unveiled by Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff with a major speech in Toronto this week tossed more red meat in the direction of his demoralized hard-core partisans than the title hinted.

On its way to detailing a new Liberal approach on everything from Afghanistan to doing business with Asia's economic giants, the paper swerves to slam Stephen Harper in a style more typical of a campaign stump speech than a policy blueprint.

That digression, just four pages into the 24-page paper, indicts the Prime Minister for allegedly embarrassing Canada on climate change, adopting a lopsided pro-Israel stance on the Middle East, neglecting India and China for too long, and inviting a dressing-down recently from U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton by, among other things, excluding abortion funding from a foreign-aid push to promote maternal health in poor countries. But the intended zinger reached way back to before Harper even became PM, sniffing that Canada is being “governed by an ideological tactician who did not travel outside North America before becoming prime minister (except for one trip as leader of the opposition to accompany prime minister Paul Martin to a World War II commemoration).”

The point of bringing up Harper’s lack of wanderlust is, of course, to contrast him with Ignatieff, who spent decades seeing the world, including hot spots like Iraq and Afghanistan, as an author and documentary filmmaker before returning to Canada in 2005 to try his hand at politics. Remember that exotic, intriguing version of Ignatieff? Top Liberal strategists wish more Canadians did. After a year and a half as leader, he’s looking more like a typical floundering opposition politician, with the demoralizing twist that he’s been battling speculation that his party is so feeble it needs to look to a post-election coalition with the NDP as its best hope of regaining power, or even to merging with the NDP outright.

Announcing the foreign policy strategy looked like a bid to play to Ignatieff’s strengths, timed to exploit Tory embarrassment over plans for the G8 and G20 summits in Huntsville, Ont., and Toronto later this month. The Liberal party set the stage for Ignatieff’s “Canada in the World” speech by unleashing radio attack ads, along with a YouTube video, that hammer the government over the \$1.2-billion cost of hosting the meetings of world leaders—including a jaw-dropping \$900-million security bill and frills like the now infamous “fake lake” display at the Toronto summit venue. As well, the Liberals announced that Ignatieff will “barnstorm” the country this summer with a string of campaign-style bus tours, broken only by a five-day trip to China in early July.

None of it will amount to much, though, if Ignatieff can’t find a way to start connecting with Canadians. His party is mired in the mid-20s in polls, trailing the Tories in the low-30s. Pollster Nik Nanos’s regular tracking of Canadians’ preference for prime minister is even worse news for Liberals, with Harper favoured by nearly 30 per cent last month, compared to Ignatieff’s 17 per cent. Yet Nanos says the Liberal leader, unlike his rivals, still has a chance to redefine himself in the popular imagination. “Stephen Harper, Gilles Duceppe and Jack Layton have been around a long time; it’s hard to get excited about them,” Nanos says. “Ignatieff remains the question mark in the whole equation.”

For most Canadians, the answer to that question—should Ignatieff be prime minister?—likely won’t come until he’s subjected to the intense scrutiny of an election run. Still, he’s already test-driving tactics designed to improve his rapport with voters, notably speaking without a formal text, a switch meant to bring out his natural voice. Back when Jean Chrétien was struggling as Liberal leader in opposition in the early 1990s, he also improved his speech-making performance by shifting from prepared texts to less scripted addresses. (Chrétien’s former communications director, Peter Donolo, signed on as Ignatieff’s chief of staff last fall.)

Reaching broad swaths of voters before a campaign might be impossible. But pundits, politicians, and other potential opinion leaders are another sort of audience. The “Canada in the World” policy offers frequent reminders of what a lot of them liked about Ignatieff’s pre-politics persona, when his name was associated with intellectual excitement rather than political frustration.

It calls for making the founding Canadian constitutional objective of “peace, order and good government” the guiding concept behind federal overseas aid—as Ignatieff first proposed in a guest lecture to Foreign Affairs bureaucrats in Ottawa in 2004 when he was still a Harvard professor. And it touts the “responsibility to protect” doctrine for UN-sanctioned intervention, including sending in troops, in states failing to protect their populations from conflict or mass human rights violations—a concept Ignatieff helped frame as a member of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty a decade ago.

Ignatieff’s new positions, however, are more likely to spark debate than his recycled old ones. On Afghanistan, he said that after Canada withdraws from combat next year it should take on the training of Afghan soldiers and police, perhaps establishing a new staff college in Kabul. “Are Canadians content to walk away with the job half done? I think not,” he said. “However difficult it may be to say so, I think there is more work to be done.” On the Middle East, he set up a clash with the Conservatives by accusing Harper of “squandering Canada’s influence in the region” by siding too rigidly with Israel. The Liberal policy urges Israel to ease the blockade of Gaza to allow more building materials through, and opposes Israeli settlement construction in the Palestinian West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Embattled Liberals are hoping the foreign policy push, combined with a hard-hitting attack on the Tories' spending on the G8 and G20 summits, will help Ignatieff turn a corner after a tough spring. Still, some fear all the talk of a merger with the NDP—despite no important, active Liberal publicly backing the idea—has already done lasting harm. “It’s given the Conservatives a ready-made election message,” said veteran Liberal strategist Michael Robinson. “But it’s also been a wake-up call. Liberals are saying, ‘We can’t afford to do this anymore.’ ” Any fresh determination to stay on message, though, will only last if Ignatieff keeps giving Liberals reasons to believe through what’s shaping up for him as a summer of grinding, high-stakes work.

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