

Ignatieff launches his charm offensive in Quebec

Liberal leader is trying to woo Quebecers turned off by Harper

JOSEE LEGAULT, The Gazette

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Now that he's settled nice and comfy into Stornoway, Michael Ignatieff has been preparing for his first official test as Liberal leader - to support the Conservative budget tabled on Jan. 27, or else bring down the government.

And Ignatieff has been quite a busy bee. He toured the country doing pre-budget consultations. He warned Stephen Harper that he wouldn't let him define Ignatieff's character with negative ads the way Harper did with Stéphane Dion.

He's also hired the young, promising Kevin Chan from his job as the executive assistant to the powerful clerk of the Privy Council. So Ignatieff gets a guy who has been quite privy to confidential government material while sending out the message that he's seen as a credible alternative all the way up to the Privy Council. Independent Senator Lillian Dyck has also just joined the Liberal caucus, saying Ignatieff "is the best man to lead Canada."

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Iggy has also been keeping everyone guessing about what he might or might not do with the budget. Sometimes, he hints he might vote for it. Other times, that he might not, in which case, he says he's ready for either an election or governing in a coalition with the NDP propped up by the Bloc Québécois, whichever option the governor-general chooses.

Yesterday, in an interview with Le Devoir, he took a more menacing tone. He said he'd vote against the budget if it cuts taxes for the middle class instead of giving financial help to the "most vulnerable and for job creation."

Still, the chances are good that Ignatieff will find some way to avoid defeating the Tories. A recent Nanos poll put the Liberals at 34 per cent with a tiny one-point lead over the Conservatives. Liberals also remain cash-strapped and unprepared for another election. As for the coalition, who knows what the the G-G will do? But more importantly, does Ignatieff really want this coalition? Not likely. He had to be dragged into approving Dion's idea. Since he has become leader, he seems to keep it mainly as a sword to dangle over Harper.

Ignatieff also knows that the coalition is a no-go in the West whereas in the crucial province of Ontario, public opinion is split down the middle. Even Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe and NDP MP Thomas Mulcair sound as if they've seen the writing on the wall. Sending very public messages to Ignatieff, Mulcair says that "either we leave the Conservatives there or we replace them." Duceppe has warned Ignatieff that if the Liberal leader supports the budget, he will lose all credibility the way Dion did.

In the meantime, Ignatieff is busy moving in with his own attempt at la grande séduction. Yesterday in Le Devoir, he made some new and surprising love sounds to Quebecers. He chastised Harper for dividing Canadians by using the

Bloc's support for the coalition to pit the West against Quebec and the Bloc.

Saying he was shocked hearing Harper attack any alliance with the "separatists," Ignatieff added "The Bloc's parliamentarians are colleagues. They are duly elected by the voters of Quebec. They are not traitors, they are not enemies of Canada."

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