

Can Canadians handle the truth?

Ignatieff seems to think so, or maybe he's just too politically inexperienced to put a spin on his comments

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Talk about the audacity of hope. The newly crowned leader of the federal Liberal Party seems to be hoping that we can handle the truth in politics, despite the considerable body of evidence that we'd prefer to hear fairy tales from our politicians.

Maybe this hope is attributable to the political inexperience that Michael Ignatieff showed a few weeks ago by answering a hypothetical question in public, something politicians are never supposed to do.

The question was about what the Liberals would do to reduce the public debt being run up by deficit spending during the current recession. Ignatieff answered that he wouldn't rule out anything, including tax increases.

Well, duh. If you want to eliminate the deficit and pay down the debt, there are only two ways to do it, and neither of them is pleasant. One is to reduce spending. The other is to increase revenues. Choose your poison.

But we in the press called a penalty on Ignatieff for committing a gaffe, which is what we call it on the rare occasions when a politician blurts out an unpleasant truth.

And the Conservative attack machine that had been so effective against Stéphane Dion and his proposed carbon tax churned out emails and slickly-produced YouTube videos accusing Dion's successor of being another "tax-and-spend" Liberal.

Ignatieff tried to explain that he would raise taxes only as a last resort, but the damage was done. Results of a Nanos Research-Toronto Star-La Presse survey conducted a couple of weeks later suggested that the incident had at least temporarily stalled the Liberals' momentum.

And the survey showed that voters were more likely to have a negative impression of a politician who said that taxes would have to increase in the future to pay for deficit spending during the current economic downturn.

But Ignatieff was not deterred. In an interview Saturday for the Radio-Canada television program *Les Couloirs du pouvoir*, Ignatieff again refused to rule out future tax increases as a last resort.



CREDIT: ANDY CLARK, REUTERS

Michael Ignatieff does not sugar-coat his speeches.

And that's not all. In the same interview, Ignatieff was even more blunt in refusing to pander to Quebec nationalism any more than he already had during the 2006 Liberal leadership campaign by proposing to recognize this province as a nation.

He said he would not make further "concessions" to Quebec, and he repeated something else he had said during that campaign, which is often overlooked: He believes this province already has all the powers it needs, and he is not in favour of amending the constitution to give it more.

Instead, he invited Quebecers to join a national project, and he mentioned the construction of a high-speed rail link between Windsor and Quebec City. Uniting Canada with a train - well, it worked in the 19th century.

In his leadership acceptance speech at the Liberal convention in Vancouver on Saturday, Ignatieff repeated the appeal he first made in Quebec in March to moderate nationalists.

"Be a Quebecer, be a Canadian, be both in whichever way seems right to you," he said. It sounded daring, in a speech to members of the party of Trudeau, Chrétien and Dion from across Canada. But it's really only a slogan, as hollow as his proposal of a purely symbolic recognition of a Quebec nation.

More substantial is Ignatieff's promise in his Vancouver speech of federal leadership to create a national "knowledge society" offering better opportunities for education, job training and literacy. It sounded like the announcement of a federal intrusion into the provincial jurisdiction of education jealously defended by Quebec's political class.

The latest polls show, however, that Ignatieff continues to make gains in this province without making promises. For the time being, at least, it is enough that he is neither Stéphane Dion nor Stephen Harper.

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