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John Ivison: The pressure is on Ignatieff to stop Liberal freefall

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[John Ivison](#), [Stephen Harper](#), [Michael Ignatieff](#), [Canadian politics](#), [polls](#), [Liberal party](#)



If Michael Ignatieff was wondering why a new poll has the Liberal Party back in Stéphane Dion territory, he just had to peruse the newspapers. While Stephen Harper was pictured jamming with Canadian rocker Bryan Adams, the Liberal leader was turning himself into a pretzel trying to explain why Canadians aren't really interested in seeing politicians' restaurant receipts. "Oh yes we are," said the 88% of Canadians who would quite like to know how their \$500-million

is being spent by MPs.

To be fair, politicians on all sides of the House are reluctant to publicly reconcile their gross eating habits with their net income. They have seen this movie before when the reputation of former Privacy Commissioner George Radwanski was shredded over mis-spending allegations. But while one national leader was out in front of the cameras this week claiming that "there's accountability that is in itself a waste of public money", the other big party leader was taking softballs in a tightly scripted townhall where questions were screened. In many ways it was typical of Mr. Ignatieff's failure to put clear blue water between himself and Mr. Harper – he said he'll discuss the issue but a decision would need all-party support. "It was a stutter step toward some ill-defined conclusion," said one Liberal.

The EKOS poll had the Grits at 25%, nearly 10 points behind the Conservatives. Mr. Ignatieff could probably add a couple of points to his popularity if he were to pledge that all Liberal MPs would immediately release their expenses.

But while that might go down well with voters, it would probably create a climate of regicide within the Liberal Party. "He's afraid of his caucus," said someone familiar with the leader's inner circle.

Make no mistake, Liberals from the grassroots to the upper echelons of the party are, if not openly disgruntled, certainly far from grunted. Mr. Ignatieff has already fired one group of top advisors yet his poll numbers are still dropping. "After a while, people start to look at the leader and say: 'You're the problem'," said one senior Liberal.

A number of Grits said that the mood in the room at a fund-raiser in

Toronto last Monday was “awful”. “No-one was excited, no-one was clapping - it was brutally bad,” said one Liberal. The mood was hardly lightened by a Harris-Decima poll that suggested Mr. Ignatieff is the least popular of the national leaders, with only one quarter of Canadians having a favourable impression, against more than half who have a negative impression.

The one thing that Liberals at all levels of the party agree on, is that Mr. Ignatieff has to offer more specifics on how he is different from Mr. Harper and what a Liberal government would offer Canadians. “Embarrassing the government is what the Libs are all about. Offering alternatives in the form of good governing is non-existent,” said one life-long grass-roots Liberal.

“Ignatieff hasn’t unveiled any substance yet and until he does, he can’t move anywhere. As such, Harper is the only game in town,” said one senior insider. “Saying that what the government is doing is bad won’t change anyone’s vote.”

The speech in Toronto talked briefly about Liberal priorities - learning, care and Canadian leadership in the world - but even those who heard it didn’t come away convinced. “As far as I can tell, we’re opposed to corporate tax cuts and are pro-abortion,” said one person who was there.

So is Mr. Ignatieff’s coat hanging on a wobbly peg? Party insiders say there are no rumblings of insurrection as yet. “Everyone’s afraid of [chief of staff, Peter] Donolo,” said one Liberal. Apparently, the fear of losing their jobs is still greater than the hope of stealing the leader’s.

It’s not all doom and gloom for the Liberal leader. He is, by no means, the only one who has made mistakes. The Grits have succeeded in manoeuvring the Conservatives into taking positions that may excite their base, and raise funds, but risk portraying them as out-of-step with moderate, mainstream Canadians.

On abortion, Gay Pride parades, the CBC and access to information the Conservatives have been shifted to the right. A recent Nanos poll suggested that, while Mr. Harper maintains a healthy lead when it comes to leadership indicators such as trust, competence and vision for Canada, in each area his support has slipped since the last poll in early February. “I think there are worries about the growing, possibly hardening, negatives on the Prime Minister, that are showing up in the Nanos polls,” said one senior Conservative.

This concern was underlined yesterday when senior officials made it known said that the government would “very strongly recommend” Conservative MPs vote against a private members’ bill from caucus member, Rod Bruinooog, that would make it an offence to coerce a woman to have an abortion. This heavy-handedness is completely at odds with official party policy which states that on issues of moral conscience such as abortion and euthanasia, MPs have the right to a free vote and is likely to cause considerable anger.

Still, it is the Liberal leader who has most to fear from his caucus. It scarcely seems credible that polls only 12 months ago gave him a five point lead over Mr. Harper.

Perhaps he should invite Bryan Adams over to Stornoway to re-work one of his classics - one that this time harks back to that sunny Summer of ‘09.