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LEADERSHIP
Will geek chic be a boon to Iggy 2.0?

The Liberal leader is reintroducing himself just as cultural winds shift in favour of eggheads

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TONDA MACCHARLES
 OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—Michael Ignatieff's supporters are pleased. He eased his way through two comedy sketches on TV that take dead aim at the fact that he's a brain.



FRED CHARTRAND FOR THE TORONTO STAR
 Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff speaks to the Toronto Star in his Parliament Hill office Jan. 19, 2009.

The academic-writer-journalist and now leader of the Liberal party survived, dignity intact, in part because he didn't even try to resist.

Rather, as is *de rigueur* for politicians nowadays, he joined in with a few self-deprecating pokes at his own "intellectual" baggage.

As the country's attention returns to Ottawa next week, Ignatieff has a chance to re-introduce himself as the right leader for the times.

And the stars may be in his favour. Maybe geek *is* chic.

Consider America's embrace of Barack Obama, the elegant, Harvard-educated lawyer. Now consider the unfolding economic crisis and the public's appetite for inspired leadership.

Steven MacKinnon, Ignatieff's leadership campaign director, believes Canadians, like Americans, are looking for smarter leadership and have waning tolerance "for the mediocre."

The sales pitch has begun.

In one skit Ignatieff has even posted on his website, CBC satirist Rick Mercer helps him move into new digs at Stornoway, official residence of the leader of the Opposition.

Then they crack open some beers and riff on whether the Conservatives will tear a strip off him as they did Stéphane Dion, who beat Ignatieff in the 2006 leadership race.

"What are they gonna call ya?" asks Mercer. "Egghead? Nerd? Intellectual?"

"I don't care," shrugs Ignatieff.

"I'm not easily intimidated," says Mercer. "But when I read your c.v. ...," he trails off.

"It's very intimidating," Ignatieff volunteers in a mock sombre tone.

No kidding.

Educated at Upper Canada College, the University of Toronto and Harvard University, Ignatieff last had a day job as director of Hemlock's Care Center for Human Rights Policy before his return to

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Canada to enter politics.

He's taught at Cambridge University and l'École des Hautes Études in Paris. He is the author of 16 books, and has penned a screenplay and articles for leading journals on two continents; he's filmed documentaries, hosted current affairs television broadcasts, received 11 honorary degrees, a Gemini Award and the Governor-General Award for non-fiction. He is about to publish another book, *True Patriot Love: Four Generations in Search of Canada*.

The choice of Ignatieff to replace another intellectual, Dion, is to be confirmed at a May convention. Ignatieff's challenge, however, is immediate: The Conservative government, after its near-death experience in December, unveils a second Throne Speech Monday and a federal budget Tuesday.

And while the Liberal leader hammers the fact that this is Prime Minister Stephen Harper's "last chance" to convince Canadians he can manage the economic crisis, it is also the start of Ignatieff's efforts to persuade them otherwise.

Accomplished as he is, Ignatieff is not an economist. And he is perceived as more to the right than his predecessor Dion and his erstwhile rivals Bob Rae and Dominic LeBlanc.

Ignatieff is seeking to change that.

In an interview with the *Star* this week, the "interim" Liberal leader staked his ground in the political centre, where he said the Liberal party has historically succeeded, "where fiscal responsibility and social responsibility combined."

It was part of a get-to-know-me tour that included a series of cross-country roundtables, a few media scrums, a handful of one-on-one interviews, and cameos with Mercer and *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*.

Canadians can be forgiven for not knowing Ignatieff's story.

He spent 30 years outside the country before coming back to take the Etobicoke-Lakeshore riding and his first shot at party leader.

Canadians can also expect Ignatieff's story to be tweaked as he goes along: He's adept at highlighting different aspects of his personality to suit the purpose or audience.

When asked at his first official news conference in December how an urbanite and former academic could connect with rural Canada, he reached back to summer childhood visits to the Eastern Townships farm of a favourite uncle.

He claimed to be at home in a dairy barn: "I know where I am – I like the smell," he said to laughter.

He didn't mean to be funny. Friends say he has long argued for the Liberals to reconnect with small-town Canada. But the image of Ignatieff revelling in the smell of manure struck many as a stretch.

Still, pollster Nik Nanos says Canadians are looking for a counterpoint to Harper.

In polling lingo, Harper's "negatives" have begun to shift toward personality, not content or policy. The prime minister used to be seen more as a competent manager, but now people increasingly identify him as "arrogant," "power hungry."

"That's an important shift," says Nanos. "That's usually pretty bad news for a politician."

On the other hand, Ignatieff remains a blank slate. That represents an opportunity "but also a vulnerability," says Nanos. Ignatieff's response to Tuesday's budget will be his "coming out."

Observers will measure if he is "overly partisan; is he gratuitous; or is he sticking to what he believes is in the best interests of Canadians."

For now, the Conservatives are holding their fire.

Harper needs Liberal votes to survive the coming weeks. The order has gone out to avoid the kind of personal attacks the party launched against Dion, derided as an Ivory Tower academic out of touch with the "Tim Hortons crowd" that Conservatives claim as their base.

All bets would be off if the Liberal leader attempts to defeat the government on the budget.

The ivory tower critique could surface again. Ignatieff retains the bearing of a professor. He corrects the premise of questions put to him. He quotes Aristotle in scrums.

But the Liberal leader does measure his words more. No more contradictory declarations that he doesn't lose sleep over civilian casualties of Israeli attacks, and days later, that such actions could amount to "war crimes."

Certainly, he learned a lesson about the perils of humour in politics after joking about the virtues of making the puffin, a bird that hides its excrement, the party's mascot.

Ignatieff, however, also recognizes that playing along with Mercer and *22 Minutes'* Geri Hall is part of the spadework of politics.

Posing as "single female voter Avery Adams," Hall gushed to Ignatieff in Halifax, "Are you a little too

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smart for Canadian politics?"

"Now, now. I'm not nearly smart enough," Ignatieff demurs.

"C'mon. Did you lose a bet or something?" she goads him, before asking if he'd ever "thought of doing a calendar?"

"You could be reading a Stephen Hawking book with your shirt off, and, you know, solving Middle East peace issues with your shirt off; just taking your shirt off in a smart way that no one else has ever thought of using pulleys and physics ... "

Now Ignatieff squirms, laughs, and says, "My friend, you don't want to see me with my shirt off."

As she advises him against the coalition – "Three ways never turn out the way you hoped them to" – he beats a hasty retreat

Smart move.

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