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# Ignatieff's broom sweeps Dion era clean

**Leader makes clean break from his predecessor, ramps up efforts to revive fundraising, membership**

Mar 09, 2009 04:30 AM

Comments on this story (20)

**BRUCE CAMPION-SMITH**  
**LES WHITTINGTON**  
 OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA – They are the acts of a politician turning the page.

The Green Shift carbon tax that was the centrepiece of the Liberals' election platform? Denounced and ditched.

The coalition pact formed with other opposition parties on Parliament Hill with an eye to toppling the minority Conservatives? Dead and buried.

The decision to give Green Party Leader Elizabeth May a free ride in the last election? Tossed overboard.

Alberta's oil sands? Not so bad after all.

Like the housecleaning that follows a divorce, Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff has been making a clean break from the troubled era – and policies – of predecessor Stéphane Dion.

But the bad memories weren't carted out the back door in the dead of night.

No. This has been a very public cleansing, meant to send a deliberate signal to Canadians that the Liberals understand that the personality and policy they trumpeted in last fall's election were a bust.

"I think we have to demonstrate that we heard the message that what we had on offer was not acceptable. Message received," said Steven MacKinnon, former executive director of the party.

"I think the party did get badly off track," he bluntly admits.

But now, after a series of body blows that have included bitter leadership battles, the sponsorship scandal and a string of federal elections that have depleted party coffers and stamina, Liberals are taking time to reset their compass and rebuild the party.

There's no lack of motivation in the party ranks, thanks to last fall's election, which saw the Liberals drop to 77 seats with one of its worst showings ever in popular support.

"We haven't really paused to breathe new life into what we stand for. Michael is very much of the view that we have to do that now," MacKinnon said.

"The next part is giving meaning to what a Michael Ignatieff-led



JIMMY JEONG/THE CANADIAN PRESS FILE PHOTO  
 Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff, shown in Edmonton Feb. 27, 2009, has wasted little time trying to revive the party in preparation for next election.

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### PICKING A LEADER

OTTAWA – Federal Liberals appear on track to shake up the way they pick their leader, moving to a one-member, one-vote selection process that would give individual party members a greater say.

More than three years after party delegates rejected the change, the idea is under consideration again, said Liberal MP Navdeep Bains, co-chair of the Liberals' special committee on party renewal. Under current rules, a leadership race culminates in a convention where the choice is made by attending delegates, who in turn are selected by party members.

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Liberal party will look like. I think the etchings of that are emerging," said MacKinnon, co-chair of a special committee on party renewal.

To that end, Ignatieff has wasted little time launching efforts to revive party fundraising and membership while kick-starting discussions around the party's platform for the next election.

"He's getting the party organized. He has cranked up the fundraising significantly. He's improving the discipline and performance of the caucus," said Alfred Apps, the Toronto lawyer who is likely to be the next national president of the party.

Ignatieff, his advisers and the Liberal caucus are "working hard at executing a political strategy to help us rebuild where we need to win, which is outside the big cities, Quebec and hopefully, some small, modest breakthroughs in Western Canada."

Indeed, Ignatieff's travels this month, with stops planned for British Columbia, Manitoba and Quebec, plus his recent visit to Alberta, highlight where the party is hoping to make gains. And the Liberal leader is drawing crowds. When Ignatieff spoke in Edmonton on Feb. 27, 800 people paid to attend the event with another 200 on the waiting list, he said. "That sort of thing hasn't been seen in ages," Apps noted. A similar crowd appeared to hear Ignatieff the next day.

Apps, a good friend of Ignatieff, said the leader is "focusing on being an effective opposition for the government" and is working with other Liberals to put together a set of election policies "that will enable us to muscle our way back into the centre" of the political spectrum.

Right now the economic crisis has overtaken all other issues, but the party will also have to develop a range of other policies, including an environmental plan to replace the tax-based Green Shift.

"It didn't sell," Apps says of the carbon-tax idea pushed by Dion.

Another challenge for the new leader is building a list of candidates in all 308 ridings. "There's a lot of people who want to run, so even if we had an electoral emergency, we would be able to field a much stronger slate of candidates" than last time, Apps said.

Liberal MP Navdeep Bains is charged with leading party efforts to write the election platform. And while some Liberals complain that under Dion the party drifted "far too far," Bains said voters care more that government policy has an impact on their day-to-day life.

"I don't think people care, left or right. They want government to be relevant to their lives," he said, suggesting the thrust of the new platform will be job creation while also protecting Canadians hard-hit by the downturn.

"I think a lot of our ideas going forward will reflect that," said Bains (Mississauga-Brampton South).

Though June is cited as one window for a possible election, there's consensus that would be too early, both for the party's own organization and Canadians who likely aren't keen for the distraction of a vote while worrying about their own futures.

But there is also a sense that Liberals will not let the minority Conservatives, who have seen their own political fortunes hit by the economic woes, survive another budget, whenever that comes.

"I think there is a sense of optimism that we can form government," Bains said.

But MacKinnon concedes the Liberals have a lot of work ahead to match the Conservatives' fine-tuned election machine and the fundraising effort behind it.

Last year, Liberals raised \$6.2 million, a far cry from the \$21 million collected by the Conservatives. But Liberal organizers take some solace that in the last three weeks of December, after Ignatieff took over as interim leader, the party raised more than \$1.1 million. And they say that momentum has carried into this year.

Observers agree Ignatieff has very quickly put the Liberals in a position where they are competitive again with Stephen Harper's Conservatives. Pollster Nik Nanos said polling shows potential for growth.

"Just by changing leaders the Liberals have opened up some new opportunities, specifically in Quebec," Nanos said.

Ignatieff has enjoyed an advantage because expectations of the Liberals had fallen so low during the fall election campaign, he said.

"He's stepped into a void and it's probably likely that any of the other leadership contenders would have enjoyed a similar bump just because they're not Stéphane Dion."

But the new leader still has a way to go in establishing himself in the minds of voters, he added.

But after countrywide consultations in recent weeks, Bains said he detects a growing mood in party ranks to change the process and let individual members make the choice of party leader.

"There's a growing momentum to go this way," he said.

And for a party anxious to revive its membership and its fundraising, moving to a one-member, one-vote process is also seen as a sales pitch to woo new members.

"We want to make membership more meaningful," Bains said.

The final decision would be made by delegates at the convention in Vancouver next month.

— Bruce Campion-Smith

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"He's still just a name, and this is the core challenge that all leaders of the opposition have."

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#### Dion Video

The video produced by the Liberals on December 3rd in response to Harpers's address to the nation that was deliver late, out of focus and on the wrong format should be something Iggy looks at. The senior communications staff & who ever shot the video should be bounced. If you can't throw a video together how can you run a country?

Submitted by Phuket at 7:57 AM Monday, March 09 2009

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#### housecleaning

What do you know about the housecleaning that occurs after a divorce? Choose your similies more carefully.

Submitted by sid1959 at 7:53 AM Monday, March 09 2009

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#### Coalition

The coalition is not dead. Believe me, if it were to his advantage, Ignatieff would revive it in two seconds. I am happy, however, to be seeing less of Layton and May. May, unfortunately, will never completely go away.

Submitted by forevergreen2000 at 7:50 AM Monday, March 09 2009

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#### Re: Sponsorship Scandal mentioned in this article

Stop living in the past, now the real problem is The harpersinkingship scandal

Submitted by brainlessnuck at 7:47 AM Monday, March 09 2009

[Agree](#) 5 | [Disagree](#) 7 | [Alert a moderator](#)

#### Missing in action

Where was Iggy during the last 20 years???

Submitted by punkbuster at 7:46 AM Monday, March 09 2009

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#### Dion was the Star Choice for P.M.

Let's not forget that this newspaper supported Dion as P.M. in both formats: the peoples choice and Layton's choice.

Submitted by Templeton Jones at 7:36 AM Monday, March 09 2009

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### **I admire Dion**

Dion stood for a lot of things I believed in but both the Conservatives and NDP hammered him outside of election time with their not a leader attacks and then they both came out swinging against carbon taxes. Canadians sided with the Conservatives and NDP and the Liberals have to learn from that.

Submitted by CaTe at 7:24 AM Monday, March 09 2009

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### **Gone but not forgotten**

Dion's carbon tax policy, supported and promoted by the Liberals in the last election, is still lurking in the Liberal Party as a hidden agenda. Three months ago, they supported it; if elected, the Liberals still might try to bring it in via the backdoor by adding a 50 cent a litre "Dion" tax to gasoline. Iggy should clearly state that he opposes the hidden agenda and will not introduce any form of carbon tax.

Submitted by Marching On at 7:12 AM Monday, March 09 2009

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### **i agree with the comment made some time back**

ignatieff is no dion- dion was a Liberal.

Submitted by gonzo at 7:02 AM Monday, March 09 2009

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### **Quebec?**

I doubt he will make much headway there now. He burnt that bridge when he set aside the alliance with the bloc. The only way anyone will get seats in Quebec is to disallow the bloc as a federal party. Nobody knows much about Ignatieff other than he spent a lot of time in the USA. I hope they don't force an election but if they do I think they will lose because of the fact that no one wants an election at this time.

Submitted by old man at 6:53 AM Monday, March 09 2009

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### **Cuts Need to Go to the Core**

It's all well and good for Ignatieff to make a clean sweep of policy, and to some extent the influence of some of his fellow politicians, but until the Party itself conducts a clean sweep, including the highly influential "back room boys" who continue to pull the same old strings, the re-making of the Liberal party will not be complete.

Submitted by currymac at 6:44 AM Monday, March 09 2009

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### **Revived what?**

It is not the Liberal party anymore. Too bad Bob Rae withdrew from the race. Too bad Canadians didn't understand Dion. Too bad Canada, now we get harper-lite.

Submitted by Rowan Kelly at 6:21 AM Monday, March 09 2009

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