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Ignatieff vows a new course

'Front-running didn't work so well for me,' says Liberal again facing Rae in leadership race

Nov 14, 2008 04:30 AM

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LES WHITTINGTON
OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—Two late-to-the-show Liberals from Toronto — Michael Ignatieff and Bob Rae — are once again facing off in a battle for the hearts and minds of their party.



VINCE TALOTTA/TORONTO STAR
Michael Ignatieff celebrates his election win in Etobicoke, Oct. 14, 2008. Ignatieff is a front-runner in the Liberal leadership contest.

The clash between the two old friends for the Liberal leadership is shaping up as a dramatic showdown that could leave the party united and strong behind a new standard bearer — or divided and unprepared for the next election.

Ignatieff, 61, the former Harvard professor and author who is now the MP for Etobicoke-Lakeshore, made it official yesterday, saying simply "I am in."

Rae, 60, who represents Toronto Centre, has already declared his candidacy for the party's top job.

Ignatieff said he plans to run a more effective campaign than he did in the 2006 leadership race, where he led the voting at the convention until he lost on the final ballot.

"Front-running didn't work so well for me last time. I want to avoid all those obvious front-runner mistakes that you make," he told reporters, without revealing his new strategy.

The race, which culminates in a party vote in Vancouver in early May, will in some ways be a repeat of the 2006 affair, when Ignatieff and Rae went into the Liberal convention in Montreal as the favourites among the delegates.

The difference this time is the party wants to avoid a wide field of contenders that can lead to an unexpected result in the rough-and-tumble of voting rounds, as happened last time when the split over Ignatieff and Rae allowed dark horse Stéphane Dion to win.

To avoid that kind of scenario, the party has set a high entrance fee — \$90,000 compared with \$50,000 in 2006. Rank-and-file members have made it clear they have little patience for a long, meandering campaign.

"There will be a dark horse phobia this time," said pollster Nik Nanos. "They're not going to repeat what happened last time."

This mood is reflected in the roster of no-shows so far. The only other officially committed candidate is New Brunswick MP Dominic LeBlanc, 40, widely seen as playing for future leadership stakes.

Among those who have decided not to jump in are Parkdale-High Park MP Gerard Kennedy, the Kingmaker in 2006; and Willowdale MP Martha Hall Findlay, who ran a celebrated grassroots campaign two years ago. Montreal MP Denis Coderre and Ottawa MP David McGuinty are also sitting it out, as are prominent Liberals such as former New Brunswick premier Frank McKenna and former deputy prime minister John Manley.

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As this campaign kicks off, Ignatieff is given the edge over Rae in organizational clout and support among the Liberal establishment. Having bided his time on the opposition benches since 2006, Ignatieff believes he has surmounted his biggest drawback – the sense of entitlement his campaign seem to exude when, as a novice MP, he challenged for the party's top job after living outside Canada for more than two decades.

Rae is admired by Liberals as a passionate, compelling figure burnished by long public experience and national stature. But many Liberals still wonder whether the former Ontario NDP premier would be an advantage or hindrance in Ontario, where he is associated with hard times in the early 1990s.

As with Ignatieff, Rae has devoted a lot of energy trying to get beyond his latecomer status in the party, which he did not join until shortly before his 2006 leadership bid.

"Both of them have now established their bona fides," said Nelson Wiseman, a political scientist at the University of Toronto. "Rae got elected (as a Liberal MP) and has played a good party game, and Ignatieff has now been in the country for more than a cup of coffee."

Rae, a onetime university roommate of Ignatieff, said last month that the two men have informally agreed to keep hostilities in check this time. Ignatieff said yesterday he wants to avoid the bitter, polarizing campaign waged two years ago.

"This isn't about us. It isn't about Bob. It isn't about me. It isn't about Dominic," Ignatieff told reporters. "It's about the future of an institution that all of us hold very dear in our hearts and want to renew and want to lead to victory in the next election."

The potential for a bruising clash cannot be denied as the candidates and their supporters line up. While the battle lines of the longstanding feud between backers of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin are somewhat blurred, many former Martin backers are in the Ignatieff camp while the Rae forces include some key former Chrétienites. The lingering animosity between the former camps has not fully dissipated.

And, given the two leading candidates' ages, this is almost certainly their last chance at the leadership.

"What's going to be interesting to watch is whether both Ignatieff and Rae put the interests of the party ahead of their own personal ambitions," Nanos said.

"Because of the drubbing the Liberals received in the last election, I don't think they could really afford to have a very divisive leadership campaign. If the party can't unite behind a leader, what makes them think that Canadians would unite behind the party in an election?"

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What a joke

Iggy,a part-time canadian and full time school boy,or Bobby,a full fledged economic disaster that talks.Must really suck to be a lightweight lefty these days.

Submitted By keenaster128 at 7:56 PM Thursday, November 20 2008

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Ignatieff or Rae, that's the question?

The fact is that the leadership campaign is not only for a leader of the Liberal Party but very much so for the Future PM of Canada. Thus, neither Ignatieff or Rae will be able to persuade the voters that they sre good enough to be the next PM of Canada. Paul Martin would win a majority if he would join the race!

Submitted By Rhodozembla at 6:19 PM Thursday, November 20 2008

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Dear Bob

Bob you are absolutely right 49% of the time.You had enough sense to flee the communists years ago and join the New Reds'. I swear this oath to you , Ignatieff will never get my family's vote.

Submitted By Confusious at 6:07 PM Thursday, November 20 2008

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