

Health care strategy would help Liberals get back in the game

Luring back ethnic vote, capitalizing on lax Conservative policies on the economy and environment would help overcome lagging leadership

BY BARBARA YAFFE, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 21, 2010

Liberals, stuck in the polls at a dismal 28-per-cent support, are calling on their members to gather in five cities across the country next month to help the party craft its long-awaited policy platform.

In another bid to get voters to give the party a second look, leader Michael Ignatieff this week has been visiting Toronto, Calgary and Edmonton to try to win back ethnic voters who have migrated to the Conservative camp.

Ignatieff is holding discussions with Chinese, Pakistani, Korean and African community groups, says a Liberal news release, "to affirm the core values of mutual respect and inclusiveness that are at the heart of the Liberal vision of multiculturalism."

In June -- when Prime Minister Stephen Harper will dominate headlines as chair of a G8 summit in Ontario -- Liberals will sponsor gatherings in Dartmouth, Quebec City, Toronto, Edmonton and Vancouver to firm up policies they'll take into the next election.

A party invitation to members explains: "Between the point where the broad ideas and priorities are identified, and where our policy platform is presented to Canadians, members must weigh in with their views to ensure those policies reflect the values and vision of grass-roots Liberals."

The truth is, the party has been lagging largely because of Ignatieff's unappealing leadership.

A Harris-Decima survey on Tuesday showed Ignatieff is the least popular federal leader by a wide margin.

But this is something Liberals can't do much about; there's no charismatic alternative leader and the party already has switched leaders twice since losing power in 2006.

Hence Liberals are wise to focus on ways they potentially can help their cause -- by luring back the ethnic vote, which traditionally went to Liberals, and presenting policies that offer an alternative to the Harper government.

An early May Nanos poll revealed health care, the economy and the environment are the issues Canadians most care about, which is fortunate for Liberals because Conservatives are neglecting all three.

The poll showed health care has surpassed the economy as the top concern for the first time since late 2009. The medicare system for years has been a victim of benign neglect with no party offering solutions for a scheme most policy experts agree is unsustainable given Canada's aging population.

Liberals should signal that they'll break the logjam with a pledge to undertake formal consultations toward a plan, in Year One of governing, to overhaul medicare to ensure its long-term affordability.

On the economy, the Conservatives are vulnerable to being pegged as free spenders who took Canada back into deficit. Liberals can promise to renew their party's long-standing practice, while in government, of maintaining a contingency fund over and above a balanced budget.

They need to map a detailed strategy for balancing the budget, something the Harper government has done only in the vaguest way.

The environment is another area the Conservatives have neglected.

Liberals should develop a Canadian policy on climate change and commit to implementing it after forming government and selling it to the U.S. Congress and the Obama administration -- instead of waiting for a U.S. plan that's sure to be thwarted by partisan wrangling in Washington.

Liberals should forget about daycare -- a long-promised program they failed to deliver in the past -- and commit to strategies that would enhance pension security for aging boomers.

For good measure, the party should pitch a sexy nation-building project like high-speed rail linking Quebec City to Windsor, Ont., and Calgary to Edmonton.

It's possible none of the above will be sufficient to do the trick for the hapless Liberals, but a roster of relevant policies would at least put them back in the game.

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