

IGNATIEFF'S NEW MAXIM: TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE

Liberal Leader's reputation as a global thinker is his strength, not a liability, his new team of advisers argues as they tackle ways for the party to start fresh and reconnect with younger Canadians

John Ibbitson and Michael Valpy
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In the old days, he was Michael. Now he's Mr. Ignatieff.

The new crew running the Liberal Leader's office has a mission: to get voters to take a second look at the most unpopular Liberal leader since, well, the last one.

To accomplish it, Mr. Ignatieff's new chief of staff, Peter Donolo, has imposed an office dress code and installed a disciplined team of operatives who are encouraging Mr. Ignatieff to try something radical: being himself.

Among senior staff, the feeling was that previous advisers had played down Mr. Ignatieff's reputation as a globally respected thinker, fearing that it would isolate him from less affluent and educated voters. That, the new team decided, was a mistake.

"He got to where he was because there was something special about him," one Liberal explained. "And that something got lost. And he became just another politician."

The Globe interviewed several figures close to the leader. They agreed to speak with unusual candour in exchange for anonymity.

When Mr. Ignatieff realized in September and October how much trouble he was in, he initiated a wide-ranging consultation within the party.

He was not specifically pushed to get rid of the inner circle in the leader's office and start afresh. But in the words of one top Liberal: "Peter was everyone's dream date."

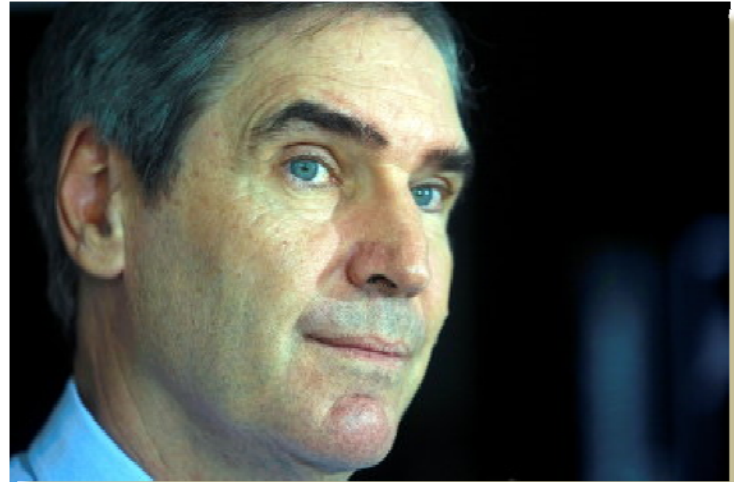


Figure 1 Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff listens to a question while speaking to students on Monday, January 11, 2010 in at the Dartmouth waterfront campus of the Nova Scotia Community College. The Canadian Press

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Most people thought Mr. Donolo would say no. Jean Chrétien's former director of communications is a shrewd political analyst, but he has a young family and was gainfully employed running the polling firm Strategic Counsel in Toronto.

But Mr. Donolo is said to believe strongly that voters are volatile, that Mr. Ignatieff wasn't getting the advice he needed, and that the Liberals' dire situation could be reversed. He agreed to take the job, on condition he could run the office his way and bring on new staff.

A team of hardened veterans with a flow chart as vertical as Dubai's Burj Khalifa replaced an office of young advisers with little experience in the Big Show who had embraced an informal, horizontal, power structure.

New principal secretary Jean Marc Fournier served for years as an adviser and cabinet minister for Quebec Premier Jean Charest; chief operating officer Patricia Sorbara was an adviser to David Peterson when he was Ontario's premier; Brian Bohunicky worked for cabinet minister Lloyd Axworthy during the Chrétien years; director of communications Mario Laguë and executive assistant Jim Pimblett held similar jobs for Paul Martin when he was prime minister.

Mr. Ignatieff is already feeling better about his job and his prospects. His schedule was scaled back, to let him rest and concentrate on the one or two major events of the day.

2:

The new crew also sent Mr. Ignatieff on a university tour last week, in an effort to connect with the Millennial generation voters who galvanized each other in the United States, helping Barack Obama get elected president, and to restore the morale of a leader who is never happier than when he's talking to students.

Midweek, he faced 500 students on the suburban Mississauga campus of the University of Toronto. They reflected the multiethnic mix that dominates the campuses of most of Canada's major urban universities.

Mr. Ignatieff was relaxed, pacing energetically back and forth in front of his audience without tie or jacket. He connects well with students, though his answers for the most part were a fuzzy pastiche of "We need to do X" and "We should do Y."

When one student said it was hard to discern what he stood for and asked him to define his political values, Mr. Ignatieff appeared to consider the question and then declared: "I'm passionate about freedom."

And after Mr. Ignatieff gave what Walied Khogali considered a wiggly answer to his question about Israel and the Palestinian territories, the fourth-year economics student said: "I get more straightforward answers from my professors."

Recent polls have pushed the Conservatives down into Liberal territory, mostly thanks to public anger over Prime Minister Stephen Harper's decision to prorogue Parliament. The Liberal party reacted nimbly to prorogation, whipping together an ad campaign.

"What is he covering up?" one ad asks of Mr. Harper.

But voter anger may fade, especially in the wake of the government's aggressive, impressive response to the crisis in Haiti.

There's a larger issue. The Liberal Party doesn't really have any policies right now. A broad, centrist party, it governed for decades by providing competent, fiscally responsible, socially progressive government.

But that's what the Conservatives mostly provide, at least on good days. The two parties have switched places. While the Liberals once counted on winning Quebec, and then assembling a government from whatever they could pick up in Ontario and elsewhere, today the Conservatives know they own the West, and can assemble a government from whatever they pick up in Ontario and elsewhere.

If the Liberals are to win a federal election, they must stand for something that the Conservatives don't stand for, and that appeals to a broad swath of Canadians. But this leader has been timid, afraid the Conservatives will deride his ideas or, worse, steal them.

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This will change. The Liberals are talking up a "thinker's conference" in Montreal in March, which aims to inspire the party the way similar conferences in Kingston and Aylmer helped guide the thinking of the Pearson and Chrétien government.

Yes, the Liberal Leader's office is doing a better job. Yes, Mr. Ignatieff looks healthier and happier than he has in months. Yes, prorogation cost the Conservatives votes.

But who really believes that's enough? How many generations of political software will this leader and this party need to go through before voters finally punch "Install?"