

LIBERAL LEADERSHIP PUNDITS PANEL

December 7, 2006

In this commentary, the Campbell Strategies/Media Profile Pundits Panel, comprised of a former MP and Liberal apologist, a Convention commentator and shameless 'Trudeauite,' and a former Tory staffer and Conservative 'true believer,' provide perspective on the election of Stéphane Dion as the Liberal Party leader.

WATCH OUT

Stéphane Dion arrives on the scene with few political debts. His stunning victory was a testament to pluck and determination (not the machinations of backroom pols) and the discipline of Gerard Kennedy's delegates. When he began his quest to become leader, political pros dismissed the effort as quixotic. It is these same pros who flocked to Ignatieff or Rae, but saw the world as they had come to know it fade into the sunset.

The Dion/Kennedy victory constitutes a sea change in the leadership of the Liberal Party of Canada as the torch 'is passed to a new generation'. It is hard to see where there will be room in the Dion universe for the other candidates for leader. While Dion had few MPs in his camp at the start, Kennedy had many and they are young and hungry. They will expect to play a role in the Dion/Kennedy team and have little patience for other more seasoned Party stalwarts who ignored them.

The long leadership race shone a light on the Liberal Party as a very strong field of candidates battled it out. The Convention showed the nation the Liberal Party at its best, a roiling big tent confident that successful governments are activist. The resilience of the Liberal Party was evident in Montreal and the Party is restless and alive again after last year's defeat. Party members left the Convention energized and motivated and spoiling for a fight.

The media's focus on Dion's 'electability' was predictable. But just as Dion surprised the political pros in his own Party, he may surprise the Opposition. Canadians may well warm to this likeable geek (he is surprisingly popular with the women). Canadians will come to know him and appreciate his candour and his desire to shake us out of our complacency about the

environment, about the role of government, about Quebec. In Quebec, voters may well take to him because he (and the Liberals) are closest to them on issues they really most care about – social policy, the environment. Quebec media will pillory him, but the Quebec electorate will recognize and respect his toughness. Quebecers like a good fight played out in public over their divided soul. Dion will ably defend the Federalist cause – it is not clear if any separatist leader in Quebec today can hold a candle to him. One thing for sure, they will not scare him or outsmart him and Quebec voters may well reward him for that.

Neither Dion or Kennedy has held any economic portfolios and that should give the business community pause. Come to think of it, neither have any of the other leadership hopefuls except Scott Brison (and he pointedly supported Ignatieff) and Bob Rae! The MPs around Gerard Kennedy are also lean in that capacity. That said, there is talent to draw on in veterans such as Ralph Goodale.

All good leaders have a basic organizing principle. For Prime Minister Harper, it may be 'stick to your knitting' which leads to a narrow view of the role of the Federal Government. For Stéphane Dion, it is his *three pillar approach* 'weaving together... economic prosperity, social justice and environmental sustainability' and that signals a big role for the Federal Government. It is hard to know what this will mean for the business community except that we would expect all policies to be put through an environmental screen – initiatives that promote sustainability or environmental efficiency would be expected to get the nod from a Dion government. Know this about dealing with Mr. Dion – best to get to him before he has made up his mind about something.

Barry Campbell

THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD

The little engine that could (Dion's camp) chugged past one of the best tuned, highest energy campaigns I have ever seen (Ignatieff's camp) to win the Liberal Leadership this past weekend. Sorting out the implications of this surprise victory will take many months as Dion reassembles strong elements of the Party from the two front runner campaigns who saw their well laid plans for power rudely shattered.

Make no mistake the majority of the Liberal establishment endorsed either Rae or Ignatieff. That they miss-read the mood of the Party, and were surprised and shocked by the critical, but much speculated on move by Kennedy to Dion, is a hard won lesson in heart and basic Liberal family values trumping organization.

Underestimating a man who ten years ago stood alone in front of university classrooms and knew nothing of politics or political organization was a major determinant of this Convention. Once thoroughly exposed to the Convention, he came to represent the steady, experienced federal Cabinet Minister, the Chrétien fixer, the man whose last environment portfolio set him up to be the advocate for one of the single most worrisome issues for Canadians.

The brilliant strategy of having his supporters literally turn green with emerald t-shirts the day of the vote cemented this connection. Mark Marissen, a highly political, tough minded former Martin organizer in BC, was Dion's national campaign director and deserves credit for a disciplined strategy in both image and content throughout.

Dion also came off as a true Liberal, not a born-again or late-flowering Liberal like the two front runners. In my mind, this was defining on the last ballot, and brought in former Chrétienites and many, many others in the stalled Rae campaign. Low risk, more likeable, lots of Gallic charm and better English than many had predicted all combined to make him acceptable and winnable.

Perceived win-ability in English Canada, however, may not translate in Quebec in the medium term. Veteran organizers from la Belle Provence were shaking their heads in disbelief and ruminating on the huge challenge of transforming a politician who is widely disliked there into a standard bearer.

Against these concerns, Dion's very focused 'on message' approach to politics may have struck chords that transcend regional divides. Positioning environmental sustainability as the "third pillar" of his platform—along with economic vitality and social justice—Dion offers a broad and appealing national vision. As Michael Adams of Enviro-nics points out, Canadians are among the most ecologically conscious people in the world, a consciousness not being reflected by our current government. Moreover he writes, "Environmentalism is a timely priority because it is necessarily an international one. Mr. Dion's vision is not just bigger than Quebec, it's bigger than Canada. Quebecers and the rest of Canada are very much aligned in their concern for the planet; most would like to see Canada be a leader in global environmental action. Environmentalism presents questions of balance, harmony, deconsumption, and cooperation—all of which transcend political boundaries and historical quarrels."¹

Dion also is welcoming his rivals into the fold in an unusually sincere and functional manner. He proudly presented the other candidates as the Liberal "dream team" following his victory and he astutely had a high profile session with them on Sunday – a post convention first. Ignatieff is suddenly asking high profile questions in the house. Dion's claim as the candidate of party unity is proving true. There is little doubt he will need those he defeated and some of their veteran organizers and strategists to turn him and his little team into a national vote getting machine.

Kennedy brings to the table a dedication to renewal which the Party desperately needs in Quebec and the West particularly (Dion had a good organization in BC and Kennedy was very strong in Alberta). It remains to be seen whether the new generation that surrounded both can be transformed into permanent party militants.

In conclusion, risk assessment by delegates helped Dion – the sought after messiahs from outside, each in their own way, were not safe or even convincing choices. However, the risks for the Party going forward remain serious.

Patrick Gossage

¹ Michael Adams, 'Can anyone stop this man from winning all 308 seats?' www.michaeladams.typepad.com, December 4, 2006.

1976 REDUX

For Conservatives the recent Liberal Convention brought back memories of our 1976 leadership race, and sadly for the Grits, the result looks strikingly similar. As with the Tories of yesteryear, the Liberals have elected their own Joe Clark. Like the ill-fated Mr. Clark, Mr. Dion moved from third to first largely because of who he was not. Mr. Dion was not the NDP convert, nor was he the academic parachuted in from abroad to save the country and Party from the damage caused by a long line of past leaders. The newspaper headlines could have easily been 'Stéphan Who'.

While thirty years apart, the similarities are striking and go beyond the results. In 1976, Conservative stalwarts could not accept a former provincial Liberal Minister (Claude Wagner) as one of their own; nor were the rank and file ready to embrace a new guy named Brian Mulroney. Back then there was also a dramatic crossing

of the floor by a leadership candidate from Ontario; Sinclair Stevens played Gerard Kennedy's role as he walked to Alberta's Joe Clark. It took the Conservatives seven years to finally choose the right leader for the Party and ultimately the country. The questions I'm sure plaguing many Liberals must be: did they make the same mistake as the Conservatives of 1976?

As my sanctimonious Liberal friends recast Mr. Dion in the role of saviour, Prime Minister Harper will continue to build his base by focusing on the needs of working Canadians and the many cultural communities tired of unfulfilled Liberal promises. In Ontario, Quebec and B.C. it means breaking into many of the bedroom communities around the large urban areas and continuing to show a Prime Minister and Government who are principled, responsible and accountable.

Paul J. Brown

THE CAMPBELL STRATEGIES / MEDIA PROFILE TEAM

Campbell Strategies provides a broad range of government relations services covering all levels of government. Our unique experience enables us to effectively bridge the gap between the public and private sectors and assist our clients to communicate effectively in the political environment.

Barry Campbell served as a Member of the Parliament in the Liberal Government from 1993 to 1997. He served as Parliamentary Secretary to the former Minister of Finance, the Rt. Hon. Paul Martin.

Paul Brown was Co-Chair of the 2006 Conservative Federal Election Campaign for Ontario. From 1984 to 1988, he served in the Conservative Government of Canada as Policy Advisor to the Industry Minister, Executive Assistant to the President of the Treasury Board, and Chief of Staff to the Minister of Labour.

Media Profile offers proactive media relations with a knowledgeable approach to developing beneficial relationships with the media and ultimately building a more positive image for its corporate clients. Media Profile also has extensive experience in preparing crisis plans and in managing crisis communications. Through its IR Profile division, Media Profile provides a comprehensive package of investor and business media relations services to publicly traded companies.

Patrick Gossage is one of Canada's most highly respected communications practitioners. He served as Prime Minister Trudeau's press secretary from 1976 to 1982 and Minister of Information at the Canadian Embassy in Washington.

Visit our websites at: www.campbellstrategies.com and www.mediaprofile.com.