

Ottawa Citizen, April 7, 2006

Party Loyalty is Dead

Today's cynical voters actually care more about issues than yesterday's partisans, so a campaign of ideas for the Liberal leadership could win some back

By Allan Gregg

Scant weeks before Auditor General Sheila Fraser transferred her “outrage” over the sponsorship scandal to the Canadian electorate, private polling suggested that Paul Martin and his Liberal party were headed toward the largest electoral majority on record. Twenty-six months later, his term in government has been relegated to a modest footnote in Canadian history books, Stephen Harper occupies his office in the Langevin block and, as his former followers set out to elect his successor, the very future of the Liberal party has become a question mark.

Without doubt, this massive change in fortune underscores the incendiary impact of the Gomery inquiry. In no small measure it probably also reflects tactical and strategic errors that Mr. Martin's Liberals made while in government and over the course of two federal campaigns. Much more telling however, Mr. Martin's descent reflects a political culture where attachment to partisan choice is so tenuous that no political party's fortunes can be guaranteed beyond the next calendar year.

Indeed, it is this very rampant cynicism and widespread disengagement from the political process that has been cited as the principal reason why many Liberal heavyweights — ranging from Frank McKenna to John Manley and Brian Tobin and Allan Rock — chose to keep their hats firmly on their heads, and out of the Liberal leadership ring. The rhetorical questions explaining their withdrawal were: “Why subject a sterling reputation to the tarnish of media and public ridicule?” Or, “Why forsake the comforts of corporate directorships for the fickle lash of electoral politics?”

Historically, political aspirants faced their futures with at least a measure of certainty. Since most voters identified with one of the parties — that is, they thought of themselves as Liberals, Progressive Conservatives or New Democrats — they viewed political events through highly selective filters. In short, it was their identity rather than a deliberative processing of information that informed and shaped their voting choices. Absent that identity — as is the case for a majority of voters today — partisan loyalties are brittle and voter preferences ebb and flow based on public reaction to news events. In the end, electoral volatility has become the hallmark of our political system.

While this change in our political culture has stripped the Liberal party of its permanent status as Canada's "natural governing party," incorporating this new reality into how they organize and structure their leadership race can assist in their revitalization.

Because voters no longer rely on partisan identification to pre-ordain their voting choices, they actually need and seek out new information to make political decisions. This is the irony of the current climate of cynicism. Far from being uninterested or unmoved by political events, all the current evidence suggests that voters are actually following politics more closely than ever and basing their ballots on (relatively) rational calculations of the options available to them.

The Liberals' "brand" has been badly stained over the course of their last tenure. Asked which party is the "least honest," "most complacent," and "least accountable," respondents to surveys now routinely cite the Liberals. Even more damning, the last federal election also witnessed a perilous decline in the number of Canadians who claimed the Liberals "best represent values closest to your own" and are "best able to handle the taxpayer's money wisely."

Demographically, the Liberal party started the campaign with a 10-point lead among high-income earners and ended up 27 points behind the Conservatives in that category. The Liberals also lost their historic hegemony among visible-minority and first-time voters. As a consequence of this realignment, the Liberals now find themselves in third place in (former) bastion Quebec, an endangered species in the Prairies, hanging on in Atlantic Canada by dint of little more than popular incumbents, and scrambling to remain competitive in smaller cities and suburbs everywhere but Ontario.

Any marketer will tell you that repairing brand image is a long, disciplined and painstaking exercise. They will also tell you, however, that the best vehicle for establishing brand attributes is through personalities — that consumers (or voters) find it far easier to evaluate, ascribe characteristics to and make decisions about individuals than institutions.

The leadership race that officially kicks off today and the upcoming leadership convention therefore afford the Liberals a rare opportunity to repair the damage they have wrought upon themselves.

The fact that their "strongmen" have taken a pass on the race should be seen as a stroke of fortune. Not only does a contest of "new(er)" faces allow them to distance themselves from the legacy that now plagues them, but the fact that there is no obvious front-runner will add excitement and drama — and therefore attention — to the contest.

Following the same logic, the more contenders for the Liberal crown, the merrier. A large field, representing a panoply of backgrounds and perspectives, will broaden the image of the party, as well as the interests and values that it is seen to represent.

In fact, the current Liberal leadership campaign is starting to look strikingly similar to the 1976 Progressive Conservative contest. While some may quibble about the wisdom of the final choice of Joe Clark and the repercussions that outcome had on the Tories' long-term fortunes, there was no question that, at the time, the robust and varied slate of

candidates caused Canadians to take a second look at an option they previously were loath to consider.

A large and diverse coterie of contenders, with no obvious frontrunner, may be the table-stakes of political renewal but, by itself, will be insufficient to lead the Liberals back on the road to power. To do this, they will have to demonstrate to three broad constituencies — Quebecers, high-income earners and suburban dwellers — that they have policies and ideas that will bring these groups back into their fold. Each form an integral part of the historic coalition that made the Liberals perennial victors at the polls but all now harbour serious misgivings about their former allegiance to the Liberals.

For this reason, Liberals would also be well advised to focus as much on policy and policy debates as possible in the run-up and at the actual convention itself. In an era when leadership races have become little more than exercises in fundraising and organization, the advice to pursue policy may appear naive or Pollyanna-ish. But if the last federal election taught us anything, it is that when a party wants to repair its image, ideas matter and can be the most effective antidote against a climate of cynicism.

And if the Liberals don't believe me, they should ask Stephen Harper.