

Canada's Liberal leadership contest—a race to the right

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This weekend's federal Liberal Party convention in Montreal will choose the new leader of Canada's official opposition and quite possibly the country's next prime minister.

Intense jockeying for the support of delegates has resulted from the fact that none of the eight candidates has succeeded in winning majority-support from the party establishment, its MPs, or dwindling membership, let alone the backing of most of the corporate media. A contest initially characterized by affability and bland debates has become embittered in recent weeks with the exchange of inflammatory statements and heated criticism.

Four candidates, who each captured between 15 and 30 percent of the elected delegates (there are also hundreds of ex officio delegates), are deemed to have a genuine chance of winning the race to succeed Paul Martin, Canada's prime minister from December 2003 to February 2006, as federal Liberal Party leader.

Significantly, just one of the four served in the recently ousted Liberal government and the two front-runners became active in the federal Liberal Party only recently.

The four are: the academic and "liberal thinker" Michael Ignatieff; the former New Democratic Party premier of Ontario, Bob Rae; former Ontario Liberal Education Minister Gerard Kennedy; and former federal Liberal minister Stéphane Dion.

Given the tightness of the race, the election could easily take the form of a scramble for support on a third or fourth ballot.

That the leadership race remains so volatile as it goes into its last weekend reflects deep divisions within the Liberal Party. These divisions have little to do with policy. On the need for omnibus anti-terrorism laws that attack basic democratic rights, on the gutting of social programs and public services so as to pay off government debt and further reduce the tax load of business and the wealthy, on the need to increase military spending, and on the need to continue the Canadian Armed Forces intervention in Afghanistan—there is unanimous agreement among the candidates.

Rather the differences revolve around how to remold the public image of the Liberal Party—a party which has posed as a defender of public services and social programs and identified itself with a purportedly Canadian tradition of international peacekeeping—so as to win back the confidence and favor of the most powerful sections of big business, while simultaneously broadening the party's popular support.

Big business has made clear both through its strong approval of the Conservative government's scuttling of the Liberals' minimal public day-care scheme and its enthusiastic support of the Conservatives' attempt to use the Canadian Armed Forces' intervention in Afghanistan to acclimatize the public to Canada's participation in foreign wars that it expects the Liberals to move still further right.

The Liberals were the principal and preferred governing party of the Canadian bourgeoisie in the twentieth century, because of their ability to present themselves as a party of "all Canadians," including the French-

speaking minority and immigrants, and to lift policies and muster support from the trade union bureaucracy and social-democrats, all with the aim of forging a "national consensus" behind the program of big business.

During the post-war boom, that is during the decades immediately following the Second World War, the Liberals advanced (together with the Progressive Conservatives) a policy of limited social reforms underpinned by Keynesian economic policies, which sought to sustain relative class compromise by mitigating the business cycle and promoting full employment. However, by the late 1960s, as the boom gave way to a series of economic crises, this became increasingly impossible. The Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau came into conflict with an increasingly combative working class.

Under Trudeau the Liberals implemented, under the guise of wage and price-controls, a three-year wage-cutting program and then in the early 1980s a more limited public sector wage control program. In 1978, three years before US President Ronald Reagan fired the air traffic controllers, Trudeau threatened to fire striking postal workers *en masse* if they did not abide by a government back-to-work law.

Trudeau also invoked the War Measures Act under the pretext of fighting FLQ (Front de Libération du Québec) terrorists. The last act of the 1980-84 Liberal government was to pass legislation establishing the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and empowering it to carry out many acts that its predecessor, the RCMP Security Service, had done in contravention of the law.

Returned to power in 1993 on pledges to end the Conservative fixation on the budget deficit, scrap the regressive Good and Services Tax (GST), and renegotiate the North America Free Trade Agreement, the Liberals quickly adopted the program of their Conservative predecessors lock-stock-and-barrel. Then in 1995, the Liberals launched the biggest campaign of public spending cuts in Canadian history, followed five years later by the biggest ever tax cuts. And in response to the coming to power of the Bush administration and Washington's proclamation of a worldwide war on terrorism, the Liberals made Canada a partner in the US-led conquest of Afghanistan and passed a series of anti-terrorism laws that overturned longstanding judicial and democratic principles.

The 1993-2006 Liberal government of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin was far and away the most right-wing in modern Canadian history. Yet increasingly big business grew impatient with the Liberals for, in its view, not pressing forward with sufficient vigor with privatization, deregulation, the dismantling of public and social services, and tax cuts and for "needlessly rankling" Washington.

In an election last January framed by the media almost entirely in terms of Liberal corruption, the Liberals were replaced by the present minority government of Stephen Harper and his Conservatives, a new party formed from an amalgam of the old Progressive Conservatives and the right-wing populist Canadian Alliance party.

From the standpoint of the Canadian ruling class, each of the candidates for the Liberal leadership is in some way wanting—is seen as untested or

too much of a maverick, as too associated with the liberal, social-welfare rhetoric of a bygone era, or as lacking the persona to dupe sufficient numbers of voters into believing the Liberals' claims to be a party of the people.

But big business and the corporate media also recognize that the minority Conservative government of Stephen Harper is extremely weak, that its hold on power is tenuous.

Having won just 36 percent of the popular vote in last January's election, the Conservatives have the smallest popular mandate of any government in Canadian history. Despite flattering press coverage and concerted media attempts to whip up jingoism over the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan, polls show that the Conservatives have not increased their support during the ten months they have held office. Moreover, masses of Canadians are angered by the Conservatives' slavish support for the Bush administration, to say nothing of their retrograde social-conservative views on abortion, gay rights and other issues.

With a federal election very possible in spring of 2007 and all but inevitable in the next 18 months, the choice of Liberal leader is a matter of no small importance to the Canadian elite. Lavish media coverage of the leadership race has been accompanied by a spate of editorials admonishing the official opposition to recognize that "times have changed," that there is no support "in the country"—i.e., the corporate boardrooms of the nation—for "big government" solutions; liberalism must be "remade" for a twenty-first century characterized by the rise of China, India, and other threats to the markets and profits of Canadian business and by the "war on terror."

Whatever the outcome of this week's Liberal leadership race, the emergence of Michael Ignatieff as a leading force in the Liberal Party—he goes into the convention as the acknowledged front-runner—speaks volumes about the direction in which the Liberal Party is heading.

Ignatieff—who has had academic postings at Oxford and Harvard and has published several novels and academic works, including a biography of the British liberal political philosopher and anti-Marxist Isaiah Berlin—has been hailed by the media and his Liberal supporters as an intellectual giant.

Ignatieff, for his part, has staked his claim for the Liberal leadership on his credentials as an expert in human rights and a champion of social justice and minority rights.

The reality is very different: Not only is Ignatieff the Liberal leadership candidate who has been the most vocal in supporting Canada's continuing participation in a colonial-style counter-insurgency in Afghanistan. He has played a prominent role internationally in providing a liberal philosophical fig-leaf for imperialism, writing articles and books and providing media commentary justifying the Bush administration's wars of aggression, including the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq, and arguing in favor of the suppression of civil liberties and the use of torture to combat terrorism.

Ignatieff emerged in 1999 as an apologist for the US-NATO war in the Balkans, bolstering allegations of Serbian genocide in Kosovo in the pages of the *New York Times*. His positions and writings since that time—including his shamefully dishonest work *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in the Age of Terror*—have qualified him for a leadership role in the eyes of the Canadian bourgeoisie as it attempts to stake out a role in the recolonization of the globe.

With a view to grooming him to replace the faltering Paul Martin, prominent Liberals coaxed Ignatieff, who had spent most of the previous three decades abroad, to return to Canada in 2005.

But the barbarity of the US occupation—a recent study calculated over 600,000 deaths attributable to the invasion—and the evident debacle of the Bush administration's attempt to bolster the US's world geo-political position through war, has caused Ignatieff to try to escape responsibility for his role in mustering liberal support for the rape of Iraq

Ignatieff has attempted to justify his support for the Iraq war by claiming that he was revolted by the Hussein regime's oppression of the Kurdish and Shia minorities and he has tried to distance himself from the horror that is contemporary Iraq by saying he didn't realize the war would be waged so badly: "George Bush has made every mistake in Iraq and then some."

Ignatieff goes into the convention with 30 percent delegate support. A few months ago, he was the favorite, if not the prohibitive favorite, to win the Liberal leadership. But he has come under attack for being insufficiently tempered by political experience, after making what the press has disingenuously called "political gaffes."

Following the Israeli bombing of civilians in the Lebanese village of Qana last August, Ignatieff callously commented, "I'm not going to lose sleep over that." Ignatieff no doubt thought his indifference to human suffering would boost his campaign by demonstrating to the establishment that he is not one of those lily-livered liberals who is afraid of using force. But his remarks generated an angry response from the general public, especially in Quebec, which is home to tens of thousands of Lebanese immigrants.

In the following weeks, Ignatieff sought to reverse the public impression that he, like Harper was 100 percent behind the Israeli aggression against Lebanon, by calling Israel's bombing of Lebanese civilians a war crime. This comment elicited an avalanche of unfavorable press commentary—far more commentary than his remarks about Qana had—with the corporate media taking him to task for "flip-flopping," "pandering," and equating Israel with Hezbollah.

All of this might have blown over. What has caused much of the Liberal and business establishments to undertake a searching reappraisal of Ignatieff's candidacy is his call for Quebec to be constitutionally recognized as a "nation" within Canada.

Ignatieff has promoted recognition of the "Quebec nation" as a way of strengthening "Canadian unity" and the federal state. But his position has little support within the Canadian ruling class. It fears that reopening the constitutional question will destabilize the federal state and that recognizing Quebec as a nation, even if not accompanied within any redistribution of powers, will politically and possibly legally strengthen the Quebec *indépendantistes* and those who favor greater powers for Quebec within Confederation.

Bob Rae, the former New Democratic Party (NDP) Premier of Ontario, goes into the convention with the second largest delegate support, but his 20 percent delegate support leaves him significantly behind Ignatieff. In recent days Rae has picked up a number of prominent new endorsements. These include some Liberals angered at Ignatieff for "opening up the Quebec which was a constitutional nation can of worms," former finance minister Ralph Goodale, and the *Toronto Star*, the country's most important liberal newspaper.

Rae has longstanding Liberal Party ties. His brother John Rae, a Power Corporation vice-president, was long one of Chrétien's closest advisors.

However, from 1979 to his retirement from politics in 1995, Bob Rae was a key figure in Canada's social-democratic party and from 1990 through 1995, the period during which he headed Ontario's only ever NDP government, he was unquestionably the most publicly prominent and powerful New Democrat in the country.

Elected by workers seeking to protect themselves from a major economic slump, Rae's NDP government came into headlong conflict with the working class. It imposed wage- and job-cutting contracts on one million public sector workers, made making brutal cuts to social spending, and began the implementation of workfare. The right-wing policies of the NDP opened the door for the coming to power of the Harris Conservative government, which massively accelerated the assault on the working class, through sweeping tax and social spending cuts and anti-union laws.

Rae now says his government should have moved to cut spending much

faster and cut far deeper. He denounces his former party as ideologically hide-bound and devoted to perpetual opposition—a characterization that bears little correspondence to the NDP. (The extent of NDP “radicalism” is to call for modest increases in social spending and no further corporate tax cuts.)

Rae was coaxed into seeking the Liberal leadership by a section of the party establishment who hope he can breathe some life into the Liberals’ badly tattered populist credentials. He is regarded as a consummate pragmatist and someone who has proven to be more reliable in his handling of delicate matters—Rae was a member of the agency that oversees the work of CSIS—than Ignatieff. As one commentator put it, some Liberals prefer Rae’s old mistakes to Ignatieff’s new ones.

But, as a direct result of his role as NDP Premier from 1990 to 1995, Rae is not a very popular figure in Ontario, the largest province and home to a majority of sitting Liberal MPs. Among big business, moreover, there is residual hostility to Rae for his previous association with the NDP and his government’s failure to attack the working class even more aggressively

Gerard Kennedy is hoping to convince the Liberal Party that he is the most electable of the candidates, given his youth, good-looks, reputed charm and progressive image. He is also seeking to garner support by making a Canadian nationalist appeal, arguing that he is the only major candidate implacably opposed to recognizing Quebec as a nation, even through a non-binding parliamentary motion.

Kennedy makes much of his record as a former food-bank director, but he was a member of an Ontario Liberal government that has left virtually unchanged the right-wing policies of the Harris government, including the cuts to welfare rates and other punitive policies directed against the poor.

Stéphane Dion finished fourth in the delegate voting in early October, only a percentage point behind the third-place finisher Kennedy. But Dion’s campaign has received a major boost from the corporate media. The *Globe and Mail*, the traditional voice of Bay Street, has endorsed Dion.

A political scientist, Dion was recruited into the Liberal cabinet, after the 1995 Quebec referendum, to lead the federalist counterattack. He has long been hailed by the Canadian elite as the principal architect of the Clarity Act—an anti-democratic law that sets up the Canadian parliament as the sole arbiter of the legitimacy of any future Quebec referendum and which threatens a seceding Quebec with partition.

Nonetheless, Dion’s leadership bid was until recently dismissed by the media as a long shot, because of his reputed lack of charisma. Dion, who served as the Environment Minister for much of Martin’s stint as prime minister, has tried to portray himself as the environmental candidate.

The ruling elite’s difficulty in finding and fashioning a Liberal leader capable of garnering broad support is another indication of the gulf that has opened up between the establishment and the aspirations of the vast majority.

While the most powerful sections of big business continue to back the Harper, as they did in last January’s election, they are determined to see the Liberal Party remolded and reconstituted as an even more right-wing force so as to ensure that behind the fiction of electoral choice their unchallenged political monopoly continues.



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