

Why the Canadian Liberals elected Stéphane Dion as new leader

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Former federal cabinet minister Stéphane Dion was elected leader of the Liberal Party, the Official Opposition in Canada's parliament, at last weekend's Liberal leadership convention.

On the convention's fourth ballot, Dion scored a decisive 55 to 45 percent victory over Michael Ignatieff, a writer and academic who is one of the most internationally-prominent liberal apologists for the Bush administration's illegal invasion of Iraq and its suppression of democratic rights at home.

Canada's intergovernmental affairs minister from 1996 to 2004, Dion made his political name by spearheading the drive that Canada's ruling elite mounted in the aftermath of the 1995 Quebec referendum to develop a hard-line, antidemocratic strategy—dubbed Plan B—to deal with any future secession crisis.

Like many of the Liberal leadership candidates, Dion denounced the current minority Conservative government for toeing the line of the Bush administration in world affairs and for implementing “ungenerous” socio-economic policies that punish the most vulnerable sections of society.

Ignored in all this is that the current Conservative government is only continuing on the right-wing course blazed by the Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, in which Dion loyally served. During their twelve years in office (1993-2006), the Liberals imposed the biggest social spending cuts in Canadian history, stripped the majority of the unemployed of any entitlement to jobless benefits, implemented massive tax cuts skewed to benefit big business and the well-to-do, joined in US-led wars against Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, and passed draconian anti-terrorism laws that give the state the power to detain people indefinitely without charge.

And while Dion and many of the other leadership candidates criticized the Conservatives for their Afghanistan policy, the Liberals, no less than Stephen Harper's Conservatives, fully support the colonial-style war that the Canadian Armed Forces is waging in southern Afghanistan.

Stealing a page from Al Gore, Dion placed a call for action to protect the environment, especially to reduce greenhouse gasses, at the center of his leadership bid—even adopting green, rather than the traditional Liberal red, as his campaign colors.

Dion was not the first choice of the party establishment. When he entered the leadership race he was given little chance of winning, largely because of his lack of a network of supporters and purported want of charisma. Among the four top-tier candidates—those who won more than 15 percent of the delegates

at membership meetings early in the fall—Dion entered the convention with the support of the fewest sitting Liberal MPs.

But Dion's campaign garnered much favorable media coverage in recent months, and in the run-up to the convention he won the endorsement of several major newspapers including the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional mouthpiece of Canada's banks and brokerage houses, and the *Montreal Gazette*.

A poll conducted shortly before the convention showed that Dion was the second choice of far and away the largest number of Liberal convention delegates—the second choice, it needs be added, in a party that was badly split by the campaign that Martin waged, with the encouragement of the corporate media, to wrest the prime ministership from Chrétien and which has been uncertain how to reposition itself since big business rallied decisively behind the Conservatives during last winter's election campaign.

The corporate media has warmly welcomed Dion's victory. The *Globe* headlined its lead editorial Monday, “The Liberals' smart choice,” while the *Toronto Star*, the daily most identified with the Liberal Party, called “Dion's win decisive, and well-deserved.”

There have been some dissenting voices. Dion is viewed by the Quebec elite, federalist as well as *indépendantiste*, as an implacable opponent of its push for greater constitutional powers for Quebec. From the West, meanwhile, have come complaints that the Liberals have again chosen a Quebecker to be their leader. (Four of the last five Liberal leaders have represented a Quebec riding in parliament.)

When the Liberal leadership race began ten months ago, Ignatieff, who had only recently been lured back to Canada from Harvard University by key figures in the Liberal Party, was deemed the heavy favourite to win the leadership.

But ultimately Ignatieff's candidacy was fatally damaged by two things: his call for Canada's constitution to be reopened to recognize Quebec as a nation; and his identification with a Bush administration, whose attempt to assert US world dominance through the conquest of Iraq has come to be perceived by the US ruling elite as having resulted in an unprecedented fiasco that threatens to seriously damage the long-term interests of US imperialism.

Ignatieff argued that recognizing Quebec as nation within Canada could help secure the Quebec National Assembly's endorsement of Canada's 1982 constitution and thereby strengthen the federal state. But Ignatieff's Liberal opponents, the media, and the political establishment in English Canada roundly condemned

the proposal, citing it as proof that Ignatieff was politically untested and unreliable. The most powerful sections of the Canadian ruling class are haunted by the succession of constitutional crises that have rocked the Canadian state over the last three decades and have come to view any reopening of the constitution as fraught with grave dangers. Furthermore, they fear that terming Quebec a nation would give their *indépendantiste* opponents legal and political ammunition in a future secession crisis.

Ironically, Ignatieff's efforts in providing a liberal covering for the imperialist war in Iraq and the assault on democratic rights were what had recommended him to many leading Liberals in the first place. The party establishment is keenly aware of the complaints within corporate Canada that Chrétien and Martin needlessly rankled Washington and of big business' enthusiasm for the Conservatives' attempts to whip up militarism and acclimatize the population to the Canadian Armed Forces waging war.

But the crisis of the Bush administration in the wake of last month's Congressional election has caused Canada's elite pause, just as it is causing other bourgeoisies to reconsider and recalibrate their policies and strategies.

Under conditions where the American people and the US ruling class, albeit for very different reasons, have lost confidence in the Bush administration's Iraq policy, where Canada's own military intervention in Afghanistan is increasingly turning into a quagmire, and where the Canadian population remains overwhelmingly hostile to Bush, Canada's ruling elite reconsidered the wisdom of having both its principal parties led by politicians openly associated with Bush administration and its crimes.

For these reasons, there was a shift away from Ignatieff both within the Liberal Party and the corporate media.

By maintaining some distance between themselves and Bush and Harper, the Liberals are positioning themselves to play the role they have traditionally played: posturing as opponents of a right-wing agenda, then implementing its central tenets. Time and again between 1993 and 2006, the Chrétien-Martin Liberals imposed the right-wing policy prescriptions of the Reform, Canadian Alliance and Conservative parties.

Like Ignatieff, Bob Rae, the third place finisher in the leadership contest, was a newcomer to the Liberal Party.

As the New Democratic Party Premier of Ontario between 1990 and 1995, Rae slashed social spending, imposed wage-and job-cutting contrasts on one million public sector workers, and pioneered workfare. The last years of his government were punctuated by massive working class opposition.

But such is the erosion of the traditional base of support for the Liberal Party, the Canadian ruling class' principal governing party since 1896, that many Liberals believed that this renegade social democrat was their best bet to return to power. On the third ballot, Rae won the votes of almost 30 percent of the delegates.

While the media explains the drop in Liberal membership and allegiance to Liberal "arrogance" and a series of scandals, most of them relatively minor, the real reason for the at-best flaccid popular support for the Liberals is the ever-growing gulf between

the big business agenda they have implemented when in office and the needs and aspirations of working people.

For decades the Liberals, and all the other parties including the trade union-supported Parti Québécois and NDP, have been taking a wrecking ball to social and public services. The Trudeau Liberal government, held up as the apex of Canadian liberalism, came into a frontal collision with the working class.

In an attempt to rally electoral support, Dion is ratcheting up liberal rhetoric, promising progressive policies and a commitment to social justice. But he already has a long record as a minister in Canada's most right-wing federal government—at least until the advent of the Harper regime—since the Great Depression.

Dion's principal claim to fame, the Clarity Act, sets up the federal parliament as the sole arbiter as to whether the results of any future Quebec referendum constitutes a mandate for secession and threatens a seceding Quebec with partition—a threat which given the long and tragic histories of partitions in the 20th century has a strong stench of violence about it.

Dion no doubt hopes his environmental program will be mistakenly understood by sections of the electorate as directed against rapacious corporate interests. But when before business audiences he has been at pains to make clear that his environmental agenda is meant to boost, not hurt, Canadian business. Declares Dion, "We will export our [environmental] know-how and we will make mega-tonnes of money."

While hoping Dion can restore some popular credibility to the Liberals, thereby rendering it a more effective instrument for molding and manipulating public opinion, the corporate media is also cautioning him not to get too carried away with promises to improve the lot of working people, no matter how vague. "Mr. Dion," affirmed the *Globe and Mail*, "should recognize the breadth of the Liberal Party by tacking to the economic center and taking a step back from the pinkish tinge of some of his collective policies."



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