



Green may prove fatal colour for Harper

Oct. 18, 2006. 01:00 AM

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Stephen Harper would like to be remembered as the prime minister who installed the Conservatives as Canada's natural governing party.

But what if he was the best thing that could have happened to a complacent Liberal party?

In Quebec, one increasingly hears long-time Bloc Québécois supporters musing about making a switch to the Liberals in the next federal election.

That is talk of a kind unheard of in the province since the early '80s.

After the patriation of the Constitution, francophone Quebec deserted the Liberals for the Mulroney Tories and never looked back. When the latter faltered on the constitutional front, voters switched to the Bloc.

After Jean Chrétien's departure, the sponsorship scandal coupled with Paul Martin's uncertain leadership nipped in the bud any chance that Quebecers might return to the Liberals.

While the Liberal leadership campaign is offering the party no perfect solution, its line-up is allowing it to recover quicker in Quebec than most party strategists expected.

Michael Ignatieff is a fresh face with the kind of academic credentials that traditionally get respect in Quebec; Bob Rae is a political figure whom many Quebecers remember as a friend of the province from his time as Ontario premier.

And Stéphane Dion has put his days as the most vilified politician in the province behind him by recasting himself as an environment champion.

But more so than anything else, the sense that Conservative policies are at odds with Quebec values is softening attitudes toward the Liberals.

At this point, the Conservative tilt on foreign policy, on the environment, on law and order, to name just three, is poised to trigger in Quebec the same kind of movement that devastated the Ontario New Democratic Party at the time of the Mike Harris government — but, in this case, at the expense of the Bloc.

Meanwhile, across Canada, an EKOS poll published over the weekend shows that the Liberals are by far the party of choice of young voters.

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Almost 40 per cent of those under age 25 favour the Liberal party; nearly twice as much as do the NDP and three times as much as do the Conservatives.

Those numbers put a lie to the notion that the Liberal party will fade from the landscape to be replaced by the NDP sometime soon.

Judging from the EKOS findings, Canadian voters still tend to become more conservative as they get older, but fewer of them start off as a New Democrat before aging into a Liberal.

Bob Rae's skinny-dipping antics on the CBC, Michael Ignatieff's propensity to play with complex concepts (sometimes at his own expense), Dion's green campaign and Gerard Kennedy's social credentials all play well to a younger audience, and certainly better than the Conservative agenda.

That is particularly true on the environment, the one issue that tends to most galvanize younger voters these days.

Even as the Harper government is counting on its upcoming green plan to give it some environmental credentials, Industry Minister Maxime Bernier is blaming the environmental lobby for rising energy prices, while his labour colleague, Jean-Pierre Blackburn, is making headlines by arguing that renewable development could kill the resources sector.

For years, Reform party founder Preston Manning has been preaching that the right will not have a future in Canada unless it owns the environment issue.

Brian Mulroney has also repeatedly said as much.

Those calls from the Conservatives' senior statesmen are falling on deaf ears.

Harper may be providing the Liberals with an opportunity to replenish their ranks but it remains to be seen whether they will really capitalize on it.

While they do better than average with young voters, the latter are the least likely to actually cast a vote.

That means the current standing of the party in the polls may be inflated by support that will fail to materialize in the ballot box.

And while Bloc supporters muse about giving the Liberals a new look, polls show that they have yet to make the switch.

In Quebec, the sense that the Liberal party went seriously astray over the past decade has hardly dissipated.

Knowing that, whether Quebecers would really consider rallying behind a party led by one such as Dion — he spent last Sunday's leadership debate gloating about the Liberal record, as if all his party had to do if it came back in power would be to pick up where it left off — is an open question.

Chantal Hébert's national affairs column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

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