

Liberal party brand in trouble these days

Elizabeth Thompson

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OTTAWA - It used to be one of the best political brands in the country, a name so synonymous with success it has been dubbed Canada's Natural Governing Party.

As Liberal losses in last Monday's by-elections underlined, the party's brand is in trouble these days - particularly in leader Stephane Dion's home province of Quebec. Polls show the federal Liberals at one of one of their lowest levels in the province in recent years with 23 per cent support overall but only 16 per cent among francophone voters. Volunteers and donors who once flocked to the party now stay away in droves.

Many Liberals blame the sponsorship scandal. Some fault Dion's lacklustre leadership. Others suggest the federal Liberals are being affected by the unpopularity of Quebec Premier Jean Charest's Liberal Party - although provincial Liberals do their own share of finger-pointing, saying they have been hurt by the Chretien-era sponsorship scandal in which they played no role.

Harold Simpkins, a marketing professor at Concordia University and the author of a book titled *Marketing Yourself*, suggests the problem is that no one's really sure what a vote for the Liberals means.

While the Conservatives have tied their brand to strong leadership, the Bloc Quebecois to sovereignty and defending Quebec and the New Democrats to the environment and social justice, the Liberals under Stephane Dion - and Paul Martin before him - haven't really defined what their party stands for, he said.

"The Liberals right now are trying to hold Jello that hasn't quite set in your hands."

Pollster Jean-Marc Leger of Leger Marketing says the Liberal brand used to be the most prestigious political trademark in Quebec, but that is no longer the case.

"It is a brand that is much less strong and it was the case since Meech Lake," said Leger. "That was reinforced by the Plan B (the get-tough-with-sovereignists strategy) and it was reinforced by the sponsorship scandal.

"It's beyond Stephane Dion. It is the Liberal brand that is tarnished."

Nik Nanos, president of SES Research, said parties are often able to renew their images when they select new leaders, but last week's byelections showed that doesn't appear to have been the case with Dion's ascension in 2006.

"I think it is fair to say that there are no Stephane Dion coattails in the province of Quebec at this time," said Nanos, "and I think for the average voter in Quebec they have not seen how the Stephane Dion Liberal Party is any different from the Liberal Party of the past and have just been looking at alternatives."

Alternatives mean looking beyond the traditional Bloc-Liberal choice and exploring other parties such as the Conservatives and New Democrats.

Massimo Pacetti, Liberal MP for the riding of Saint-Leonard-Sant Michel, said many of his constituents have difficulty distinguishing between the federal and provincial level when it comes to the Liberals.

"People are not happy with the provincial Liberals and that is affecting us," said Pacetti.

John Parisella, an advertising executive who recently agreed to advise Charest, dismisses as superficial and "facile" the idea that the overall Liberal brand is in trouble.

"The problem with the Liberal brand in Quebec has very little to do with Jean Charest," said Parisella, pointing out that the provincial Liberals are still in power. "It has a lot to do with the whole sponsorship scandal and the performance of Paul Martin certainly didn't help it."

The Liberal problem is not simply a question of branding, he said.

"It is clear that there is a brand factor... but political parties go through different cycles and political parties - just like any organization - have to take stock of where they are and where they want to go.

"Often political parties feel that all they have to do is change the size or position of the logo and get a new leader and all of a sudden people will come flocking back."

The Liberals have tried that tactic - in the three Quebec by-elections, for example, campaign signs featured green trees in the background behind the face of the candidate and a Liberal logo in black. But like the previous attempt to change the face of the Liberal brand by highlighting leader Paul Martin rather than the party, it appeared to have limited, if any, success.

"That's usually the first tinkering that parties do, change the colours, de-emphasize the party until the party brand has more political juice," said Nanos.

He suggested the Liberals take a page out of Jean Chretien's 1993 playbook. He also had a problem with his personal popularity in Quebec.

"The first thing I would recommend, particularly in the province of Quebec, is to focus more on the team."

One advantage a political party has over a consumer product is that it is easier to change the perception of its brand and the brand is often tied to the perception of its leader, said Simpkins. When he ran for the leadership, Dion had a clear brand as a champion of the environment, he said. One possible solution for the Liberals is to bring their brand in line with that image and couple it with the Liberals' strong reputation built up under Chretien and Martin of fiscal responsibility and eliminating the deficit.

"The niche becomes the environment without the baggage of the quasi-socialist NDP and without the single focus of the Green Party. (They can say) We're the party that will take care of the environment plus we'll be fiscally responsible."

Leger agrees the Liberals have to make it clearer to Canadians who the key members of their team are and what their brand represents.

"What does a Liberal vote mean these days?"

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