

Globe editorial

Will the Liberals rediscover the centre?

FROM TUESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

It is unfortunate that Bob Rae has proudly cited his ability to attract NDP adherents as a reason why the federal Liberals should opt for his leadership. Mr. Rae's disastrous economic record as NDP premier of Ontario during the early 1990s remains an uncomfortably vivid memory for many Canadians. So it is not reassuring that he looks to left-of-centre supporters as the potential base for the Liberals' return to power. It is a divisive approach that too many of his seven fellow contenders have echoed.

"It's about the Liberal Party choosing a leader who they think is going to be best able to beat . . . [Prime Minister Stephen] Harper and who the Liberal Party believes is best able to expand the base of the party," Mr. Rae said after an SES Research poll indicated that 29.6 per cent of people who voted NDP in the last election would be more likely to vote Liberal if Mr. Rae were leader. Mr. Rae, in effect, saw great hope for the Liberal Party in the fact that his approach would hold great appeal for Canadians on the left of the political spectrum.

But what sort of Liberal Party does Mr. Rae have in mind? Does Canada really need two parties that appeal to left-of-centre voters? Surely that approach risks alienating moderate voters who have rarely shown huge attraction to NDP policies. The Liberal Party has always straddled the great pragmatic centre of the nation. At its best, it has been fiscally restrained, with savvy economic policies and expertly targeted social policies. Out of power since last January, the Liberals have been struggling to re-establish their electoral appeal.

So far, the results are not encouraging. Sure, many contenders ritually say all the right things about boosting productivity. But they fall back on old means to meet those ends, ranging from the Kelowna accord for aboriginal Canadians, which did little to ameliorate the plight of urban natives, to expansionist daycare policies that the voters rejected in favour of monthly federal cheques. The Conservatives won the last election because their policies made sense to middle-class, middle-of-the-road voters. The Liberals have lost that touch.

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Instead, they have become content to oppose anything that is controversial in Conservative policies, almost reflexively embracing NDP positions. Forget nuance. They oppose the presence of Canadian forces in Afghanistan (despite the fact that their government first sent troops there) and avidly espousing the Kyoto environmental accord (despite their failure to meet the original targets). In effect, the leadership candidates are talking too much about old dreams and old schemes with left-wing appeal. They rarely explain how they would tackle tomorrow's challenges such as wealth creation in a way that makes sense to the average Canadian. They are complacent.

The perceived front-runner, Michael Ignatieff, offers generalities about the need for a business tax regime to attract foreign investment. Mr. Rae would foster a vaguely greener tax system. Gerard Kennedy may talk about the creation of an "enterprise culture" but there are no specifics. Stéphane Dion concentrates too heavily on the environment. Ironically, only Scott Brison, who is well behind those four contenders, has put together a program for wealth creation with populist appeal, such as tax credits that would encourage lower-income people to enter the work force.

The Liberals are wasting a wonderful opportunity. They have fallen back on anti-Harper positions coupled with a reliance on the big-picture buzzwords of yesterday. That is lazy politics and lazy policy because it relies on leftist bromides. If the Liberals do not reclaim their centrist constituency with innovative prescriptions for wealth creation, the Conservatives will be the beneficiaries. And the Liberals will have only themselves to blame for their losses.

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