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That old Liberal swagger is back

Election-loss gloom is finally lifting Harper Tories now seen as vulnerable

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OTTAWA—The scene could have been plucked straight from the Liberals' headier days of government 10 years ago.

Jean Chrétien was working the elegant, panelled room in Ottawa's Rideau Club, TV camera lights trailing behind him. Dozens and dozens of loyal Liberals, political aides and bureaucrats gathered in small clutches, smiling and gossiping over canapés and wine.

Canada's top public servant, Privy Council clerk Kevin Lynch, waded into the room nodding and waving.

The occasion was a book launch last week for Chrétien's long-time adviser, Eddie Goldenberg. But there was a stronger, celebratory subtext to the evening — the Liberals feel they're finally getting their game back. And a faint, though still elusive, scent of power is wafting around them again.

It's hard to imagine a Conservative gathering drawing this kind of high-wattage crowd when they were in opposition just a year ago.

Chrétien, in fact, was telling people that power never should have slipped from Liberal hands. With his usual braggadocio, Chrétien told at least a couple of people that if he'd been at the helm in the last election, Stephen Harper wouldn't be prime minister today.

Many Liberals might not agree with that, but the gloom and desperation that surrounded them after the January election seems to have dissipated over the past few weeks. There are three main reasons for the lightened mood.

First, the Liberal leadership race is moving into its final, more exciting phase leading up to the vote on the first weekend of December. The recent "super weekend" of delegate selection for the convention mobilized thousands of partisans and volunteers, even if sparse turnout was an issue in places such as Quebec. Second, the parliamentary wing of the party is having more success getting into the media. Liberal House leader Ralph Goodale says that while the party hasn't measured it exactly, the MPs all feel now that they're getting news coverage — TV, radio and print — on most days. In the spring, Goodale says, long dismal weeks went by without one newspaper mention of Liberal questions in the Commons.



RICHARD LAM/CP FILE PHOTO

Leadership hopefuls, from left, Gerard Kennedy, Bob Rae, Michael Ignatieff and Stéphane Dion appear at a debate last month in Vancouver. Liberals are starting to dream of a swift return to power.

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Third, the Harper government is playing into their hands. With policies and announcements that seemed more designed to appeal to the Tory base than the wide electorate — revisiting same-sex marriage, cuts to spending on social and minority-protection programs, for instance — Liberals are finding the government an easy target for opposition indignation.

Moreover, the NDP's continuing strategy of playing nice with the Tories in league against the Liberals also leaves the field clear for the Grits to be the sole voice of the outraged left.

There are some ways to quantify the heightened Liberal spirits. Party president Mike Eizenga, who's also in charge of election readiness, says he's getting more people interested in running as candidates than he did in the spring. A full 20,000 people sent in forms to Liberal headquarters to offer their names for the approximately 4,000 delegate spots available for the December leadership convention.

"The troops are talking about the difference between spring and now," Eizenga says.

Goodale says the Liberals had to learn how to be in opposition and agrees that the party was simply too demoralized after a "truly wretched election" to be effective in the spring. But over the summer, Goodale says, a small knot of Liberal strategists "went back to school" and identified five areas of vulnerability to fuel their attacks on the Tories this fall.

Those weak spots, according to the Liberals, are:

- Harper's ideological alliance and affinity with U.S. President George W. Bush.
- Ethics — the difference between what the Tories preached in opposition and what they're doing in power.
- Treating the voters as stupid. Telling them, for instance, that the Conservatives are reducing taxes when they're actually increasing them, or changing their story on whether they actually promised to deliver a medical wait-times guarantee.
- The appeal to the Conservatives' base or "narrow-casting," as Goodale calls this government's style.
- The lack of an economic plan. Liberals are now convinced the Tories have no long-term economic agenda after fulfilling their election promises.

The Liberals' choice of these areas for focus raises some eyebrows among tacticians for other parties. Brad Lavigne, the New Democrats' communications director, says he is shocked every time the Liberals decide to go after the Tories on ethics, because he's sure it just reminds people of all the ethics controversies of the Liberals' days in power.

Lavigne says the Liberals are merely delusional. "I'd say it's time to refill that punch bowl because they've obviously drunk it dry if they think they're doing better," he says.

He notes that while the Liberals have been celebrating their expanded spirits, Canada's environment commissioner has slammed their record, leadership candidate Joe Volpe has been fined \$20,000 by the party for campaign abuses, and Quebecers, judging from low-turnout figures for super weekend, hardly seem ready to run back into the arms of the Liberals again.

Tim Powers, a Conservative lobbyist and strategist, agrees the Liberals may be getting a little ahead of themselves if they think their period in purgatory is ending. "I strongly encourage them to continue down the garden path. ... Inflated Liberal confidence leads to inflated Liberal arrogance, which leads to more of the same from the Liberals."

Powers says he hasn't seen one concrete sign of change in the Liberal party. Nor does he agree with the charge that Tories are governing merely for their hard-conservative base. He cites the coming Green Plan announcement, due this month, and Environment Minister Rona Ambrose's recent talks with the auto and energy sectors.

"In the span of seven days Rona Ambrose has both the energy and auto sectors agreeing that they need to accept measures that will better the Canadian environment. In a very short time, the differences in policy will be clear," Powers says.

But Lavigne suspects the Tories are simply securing their vote while they wait for the Liberals to choose a new leader. NDP strategists say that same mentality is at work in their party this fall.

Goodale, however, believes there's a far simpler equation at work. The Liberals are getting stronger because the government is getting weaker.

"It's no longer a hypothetical government," Goodale says. People, he insists, are starting to see through the "flimsy" promises on which the Tories have delivered — the vaunted GST cut this summer didn't make any appreciable difference in people's pocketbooks, Goodale says, and the \$100 cheques for child care aren't doing much to make daycare more available.

Goodale says the Liberals seem to have lost their defeatist posture. He hears fewer Liberals talking dismally about having to choose a leader to preside over a long time in the wilderness. There's a sense, he says, that the party wants to choose a potential prime minister now and not a mere caretaker.

How does that bear out with the polling reality? Nik Nanos, of SES Research, has been one of the most accurate pollsters in predicting election outcomes in recent years. He says it's volatile out there, but agrees there's a prospect for this Liberal "time out" to be a short one.

"For the Conservatives, many voters are willing to give them a chance but the jury is still out," says Nanos. "The game, for all intents and purposes, is still in Quebec. If the Conservatives cannot pick up steam in Canada's second largest province then mathematically it will be difficult to form a majority government. Conversely, if the new Liberal leader can make inroads in Quebec, the Liberals will quite quickly be back in the game and will be able to challenge the Conservatives."

No matter what, says Nanos, a new Liberal leader and a revitalized opposition are going to have a "tremendous impact" on the political dynamic in months ahead.



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