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News Columnists**Greg Weston**

Sun, December 3, 2006

**Dion's party crashers****Unlikely win a victory for new guard -- and possibly Harper**

By Greg Weston

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MONTREAL -- And the winner is? Stephen Harper.

The prime minister should be laughing all the way to the polls after the federal Liberals crowned Stephane Dion their new leader in a wildly unpredictable upset here yesterday.

In choosing the professorial Quebec MP to lead the Grits into the next election, the Liberal party has taken a turn for the bland, if not towards an electoral abyss.

While all of the four frontrunners in the race have considerable political handicaps, Dion's lack of charisma, his broken English and relatively low public profile outside his native Quebec will combine to make him a hard sell in parts of the Maritimes and from Ontario west.

Even in Quebec, Dion's hardline and often strident handling of the unity file has made him a highly polarizing figure and a favourite target of the separatists, a choice for Liberal leader that one Montreal columnist calls "a wet-dream for the Bloc Quebecois."

For a pragmatic party that values power over all else, the road back into office is anything but clear with Dion at the wheel.

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A recent SES Research poll for Sun Media suggested that among Canadians who voted Liberal in the last election, Dion's leadership of the party will turn off as many electors as it will attract.

Among Canadians who supported the other parties -- voters the Grits need to poach in order to beat Harper's Conservatives -- the SES poll showed Dion is a liability across the board.

Even Greens express no affinity for the former environment minister, with 27% of those polled saying they would be less likely to support the Liberals with Dion as leader, compared to only 6% who would be more inclined to vote Grit.

But perhaps the most devastating effect of Dion's victory yesterday was the wide and bloody schism it has created in an already fractured party.

The split was palpable even as Dion's winning fourth-ballot support was announced in the packed convention hall, the roaring enthusiasm of his supporters clearly not shared by the thousands of Liberals who sat on their hands, and quietly began leaving before the victory speech.

Lesser of evils?

With the next election likely only months away, there won't be much time for healing among those who would lead the Grits into battle -- namely, the 5,000-odd Liberal organizers, candidates, MPs and other party stalwarts at the convention, almost 82% of whom arrived here backing candidates other than Dion as their first choice for leader.

So, what the heck were they thinking?

Some no doubt concluded Dion was the lesser of evils among the other frontrunners -- Michael Ignatieff, the accident-prone academic; Gerard Kennedy, the former Ontario minister with no Quebec appeal; and Bob Rae, the former NDP premier who rode the country's largest provincial economy into the tank in the 1990s.

But there was something much more powerful at work amid all the hoopla on the floor of the convention, something not seen in decades of leadership races.

The Liberal grassroots staged a full-scale revolt, seizing control of the party from the establishment that has forever passed the Grit machine from one group of old-guard insiders to another, every time the leadership changed.

This time, two of the frontrunners were poised to make it happen again -- Rae's senior organization looked like a Jean Chretien reunion; Ignatieff was backed by dozens of MPs, senators and a small army of Grit backroomers.

By comparison, Dion's campaign looked like a coalition of outsiders.

But no one went after delegates with a platform of "reform and renewal" more than Kennedy, promising to put control of Gritdom back in the hands of the long-abused rank-and-file, the door-knockers, stamp-lickers, little Libs and others cherished in elections and quickly forgotten.

New blood

As Kennedy said in his keynote speech on the eve of the voting, what the Liberal party needs more than a new leader is a new party.

They should be careful what they wish for.

In a deal sealed in the early hours of yesterday morning, Kennedy suddenly threw his support behind Dion after the second ballot, carrying the vast majority of his delegates with him.

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The move vaulted Dion ahead of Rae on the third ballot, and ultimately sealed Ignatieff's defeat in the final vote.

While Dion and Kennedy may have successfully rid the palace of the old guard, there is only one problem.

The vanquished happen to include virtually all of the party's experienced election organizers. Oops.

Harper cabinet minister John Baird dropped by the convention, and crowed that the Conservatives are "thrilled the Liberals have a new leader."

No kidding.

Letters to the editor should be sent to feedback@ott.sunpub.com.

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