

GO BIG OR GO HOME

David Herle

The 2011 election left the Liberals decimated, reduced to only 7 seats in Quebec and only 11 in Ontario, the two provinces that had provided Liberal majorities for generations. In the West, they won only 4 seats out of 92. In the next Parliament, there will be 15 new seats in Ontario and 12 from the West, all of them in urban and suburban areas. Pollster and former Liberal campaign strategist David Herle writes that the road back for the Liberals runs through Canada's cities.

Le Parti libéral a été laminé aux élections de 2011, n'obtenant que 7 sièges au Québec et 11 en Ontario, deux provinces où il a été majoritaire pendant des générations. Et il a récolté seulement 4 des 92 sièges de l'Ouest. Or le prochain Parlement comptera 15 nouvelles circonscriptions en Ontario et 12 autres dans l'Ouest, toutes en zone urbaine et suburbaine. Pour renouer avec le pouvoir, les libéraux devront donc reconquérir les villes du pays, écrit le sondeur et ancien stratège de campagne du parti David Herle.



The election of May 2, 2011, left the Liberal Party of Canada in ruins, the wreckage strewn from one end of the country to the other. It is left with no meaningful geographic base. From a dominant position in Atlantic Canada it is now just one of three competitors. In Quebec it has been beaten back to outposts of allophone Montreal. In the prairies, it is essentially a fringe movement. In British Columbia only two seats remain from a significant beachhead established in 2004 and 2006 (figure 1).

The Liberals were actually weaker in the 2011 election than their small caucus would indicate. Many current members survived as a consequence of their incumbency and their own personal followings, rather than being elected on the Liberal brand. Hedy Fry, Ralph Goodale, Kevin Lamoureux, Justin Trudeau and Scott Brison are examples of Liberal MPs representing constituencies that there is no reason to believe would have gone Liberal had anybody else been the candidate. Fully half of all the votes for the Liberal Party in Saskatchewan in the last election were cast for Goodale.

Still, many will say doom and gloom scenarios for the Liberals are overstated. After all, didn't the NDP just come from a similar position and rocket right to 103 seats? Didn't the Conservatives get wiped out to only two seats in 1993 and form a government just 13 years later?

Those examples, true as they are, should not offer much solace to Liberals. All political jurisdictions have a party of the right and a party of the left. Few have a party of the centre, which is what the Liberal Party has been throughout Canadian history. Neither Canada nor other Western democracies provide much reason to hope that a centrist

party relegated to third place can regain its status as a potential government. Once polarization is created, it is difficult to undo. There is a reason why *The Strange Death of Liberal England* was circulating among some Liberals in the waning days of the 2011 election.

Little is certain in politics, so the long-term irrelevance of the Liberal Party of Canada is not a foregone conclusion. But history would tell us that the most likely consequence of May 2 is that Canada's "Natural Governing Party" will never form a government again.

The speed of this collapse has seemed breathtaking. Less than two years ago many thought that the Ignatieff-led Liberals could defeat the Harper Conservatives. However, it has happened quickly only for those not paying close attention. The Liberals' demise has resembled Ernest Hemingway's description of his going bankrupt — "gradually, then suddenly."

In fact, the most important factor in the Liberals' relegation did not happen last May but rather in 1984. When Pierre Trudeau stepped down as Liberal leader and Brian Mulroney swept Quebec for the Progressive Conservatives (and, importantly, held it in 1988), the core of the Liberals' electoral strategy disappeared. The political construct of the Liberal Party subsequent to the Diefenbaker rout of 1958 was based on strong showings in Ontario and Quebec, supplemented by some support in Atlantic Canada. The primary reason why Lester Pearson's minorities became Trudeau's majorities was that Liberal support in Quebec increased from strong to dominant. The importance of Quebec voters to the Liberal Party in that era cannot be overstated. In the seven elections during the period of Liberal

hegemony over government from 1963 to 1984, the Liberals won the most seats outside Quebec exactly once, in 1968 (figure 2).

In 1983, Trudeau's principal secretary, Tom Axworthy, outlined the Liberal voting coalition to the national executive of the party. He said it consisted of four key pillars: French speakers, immigrants, young people and women. Each of those has been eroded.

The most critical pillar was French speakers, primarily but not exclusively in Quebec. French speakers outside Quebec were the most loyal of Liberal voters, with the result that Liberals could count on winning a riding like St. Boniface in Manitoba or being competitive in a Saskatchewan riding like Assiniboia even while being wiped out in the West. In the intervening period, both the loyalty and the proportionate import of those voters have diminished.

The disappearance of French Quebec support for the Liberals was never replaced by another viable electoral strategy. In the 1990s, the Liberals papered over that problem by winning virtually all of Ontario's constituencies on the basis of a moribund NDP and a split conservative vote. While wildly successful for a time, it was not sustainable. As those two temporary phenomena self-corrected, it became clear that there was no credible strategy in place for a Liberal majority government. One can imagine circumstances in which the Liberals might have won more seats than the Conservatives in each of 2006, 2008 and 2011, but one cannot reasonably imagine how the Liberals could have won a majority of seats in any of those elections. The weakness of Liberal fortunes in growing western Canada no longer had any offsetting dominance in another region of the country. This is why Paul Martin placed such emphasis on building support in western Canada. It was not only a moral imperative but an electoral one. With the conservatives uniting, it was axiomatic that seats in Ontario would be lost, and any prospect of majority along with it. In 2004, the

Martin Liberals won the second-highest percentage of seats in Ontario that the Liberal Party had ever won against a united Conservative Party, and it was only enough for a minority.

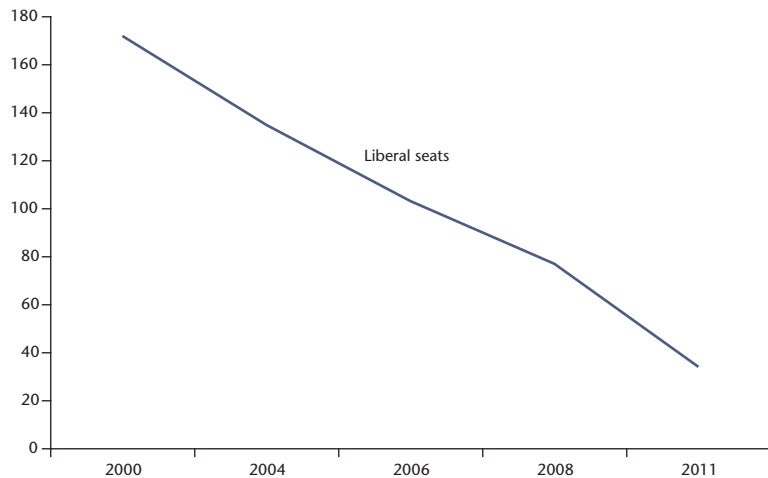
Young Canadians were no longer a viable pillar of electoral strategy because, in large measure, they have stopped voting. Smaller voter turnout in Canadian elections is largely attributable to a precipitous decline in youth participation. Finding a way to increase the voter

turnout in this country would have a dramatic effect on the result of elections, as recent papers by Frank Graves have illustrated.

Female voters remain more drawn to Liberals than men are, but increasing numbers have been looking to the NDP in recent elections with the result that the female voter cohort no longer represents a decisive advantage for the Liberals over the Conservatives.

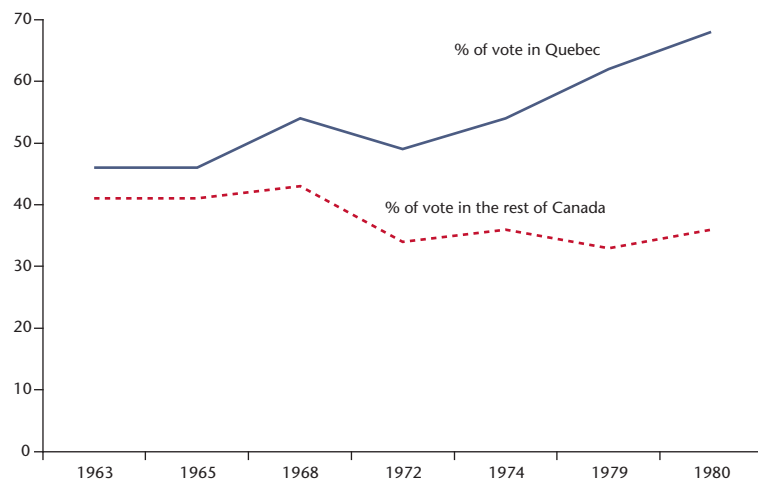
In essence, what the Liberal Party requires is a complete redesign

FIGURE 1. NUMBER OF LIBERAL SEATS FROM 2000 TO 2011



Source: Author.

FIGURE 2. LIBERAL PERCENTAGE OF POPULAR VOTE IN QUEBEC AND REST OF CANADA FROM 1963 TO 1980



Source: Author.

of its voting coalition. Where should it look? I suggest that the answer has two parts — geographic and issue based.

Geographically, the first place Liberals should seek competitive advantage is back in Quebec. Nowhere in Canada is voter alignment more fluid than in Quebec. Quebec voters showed growing fatigue with the Bloc Québécois for some time prior to the 2011 election. The Liberals under Jean Chré-

to 45 seats in Quebec would provide the foundation of a potential government.

The second geographic base that Liberals should seek to dominate is urban Canada, including the suburbs. This is obviously, as the most recent census demonstrated, where all the population growth will be. As a result it is also, as the most recent addition of seats to the House of Commons demonstrated, going to be of growing importance politically.

Less than two years ago many thought that the Ignatieff-led Liberals could defeat the Harper Conservatives. However, it has happened quickly only for those not paying close attention. The Liberals demise has resembled Ernest Hemingway's description of his going bankrupt — "gradually, then suddenly."

tien had demonstrated growing support in the province over the 1990s culminating in 36 seats in 2000. Polls indicated that the province was prepared to embrace the Liberals wholeheartedly under the leadership of Paul Martin until the sponsorship scandal emerged and took over federal politics in Quebec. The Bloc Québécois were given another three elections of life but it is important to remember that the Liberals were a growing force in Quebec less than a decade ago.

Although there is a strong basis of support for social democracy in Quebec, nobody — not even the NDP — suggests that the results of the 2011 election represent a conversion of Quebecers to the NDP. The secret to their success more likely lies in a combination of a sense that the Bloc had outlived any purpose, a deep alienation from the Harper Conservatives, and in Jack Layton, a leader who had strong appeal. Both the Bloc and Layton are gone, only the alienation from the Conservatives remains. If the NDP holds on to its Quebec seats, it becomes difficult to see any road back to government for the Liberals. If the Liberals can take advantage of the vacuum that now exists in Quebec, they can create a regional base from which to grow. While the days of 74 out of 75 seats are unlikely to come back, a stable base of 40

It is also the only route to relevance in western Canada. As the population growth moves westward, Liberals can no longer avert their gaze from the impossibility of winning elections while being marginal in western Canada. However, vast geographic swaths of western Canada — rural and small town West — are unwinnable for Liberals. The party would be foolish to waste time or resources in any serious effort to do so.

The urban West is another story altogether. It represents much more potential for Liberals. It is not without historical precedent. In 1993 the Chrétien-led Liberals won 18 seats in Winnipeg, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon, Vancouver and Victoria. That embryonic base was not tended, and the Reform Party drove most of it away in the next election. Paul Martin cultivated support in western Canada as finance minister, as a leadership candidate and as prime minister. In the 2004 election, while the Liberal Party was losing votes elsewhere due to the sponsorship issue and fatigue with Liberals after 11 years in office, the Liberals were as strong as the Conservatives or NDP in the urban West outside of Harper's home base of Alberta, although seat distribution did not fully reflect that.

In order to win back urban voters in western Canada or in Quebec and Ontario, the party will need to embrace urban Canada unequivocally. This is not to say that the Liberal Party should not run candidates in all ridings and give local candidates the resources to run vigorous local campaigns. But the scarce resources of platform commitments, advertising dollars and leader's tours should be ruthlessly focused on winnable ridings. In most parts of the country, that will be urban areas. The Conservatives are trying to knit together the interests of rural and suburban Canada and leave the Liberals and NDP to fight over the inner cities. To find majority governments, the Liberals need to pull the suburbs together with the cities and leave the Conservatives stranded in rural Canada. These are the natural places for Liberals to win. Urban Canada is where the values and beliefs of the Liberal Party and the citizenry most intersect.

However, an urban strategy cannot be a Toronto and anglophone/allophone Montreal strategy. It cannot succeed without winning in Halifax, Quebec City and Edmonton. But those voters will not come easily. If you live in Edmonton or Regina, you will share issue priorities and much of your world view with residents of cities across Canada. But you will also have grown up thinking of the Liberal Party as something somewhat foreign, something run by people from eastern Canada in the interests of eastern Canada. If you live in Quebec City or Laval, you are going to be influenced by the history and mythology about Liberals and Quebec nationalism going back to "the night of the long knives" at the 1981 First Ministers' Conference, if not further.

To be successful, the Liberals will have to put a proposition to urban/suburban Canada that is so compelling it trumps those other historical perceptions, even redefining itself in the

process. It needs to effect a political realignment away from regional cleavages by uniting urban residents across the country.

This cannot be done while trying to make a strong appeal to rural Canada at the same time. Being all things to all people appeals to the brokerage instinct in many Liberals. But it won't work. Anybody in marketing knows the adage "The essence of positioning is sacrifice." Liberals cannot make a compelling enough case to urban Canada if they are trying to make just as strong a case to rural Canada. If you try to mollify rural Canada on the gun registry, you lose gun control as a vote driver in urban areas, and still lose in the rural areas. You won't have the resources to transform transit in urban Canada if you are devoting significant chunks of your platform to rural issues.

This is not dirty politics. It's winning politics.

The Conservatives are not going to try to win Toronto-Danforth. The US Democrats don't put emphasis on Mississippi. Not everybody will vote for you. Some people are inclined your way and others are inclined against you. Rural Canada is inclined against the Liberal Party. Urban Canada is inclined toward it. The suburbs are being pulled in different directions. Go fishing where the fish are.

A close examination of opinion research provides some guidance on what issues will create that strong appeal to urban Canada.

The first and most urgent task for the Liberal Party is to get busy on restoring its credibility with Canadians on economic issues. Economic management is not something historically associated with the Liberal Party. Creating that as a competitive edge against the Conservatives was the most important political accomplishment of the Chrétien/Martin team. Assuming it could be taken for granted, and therefore cavalierly throwing it away, was the worst error of judgement of the Dion/Ignatieff tenures. First, Canadians won't elect a party they do not trust with the econ-

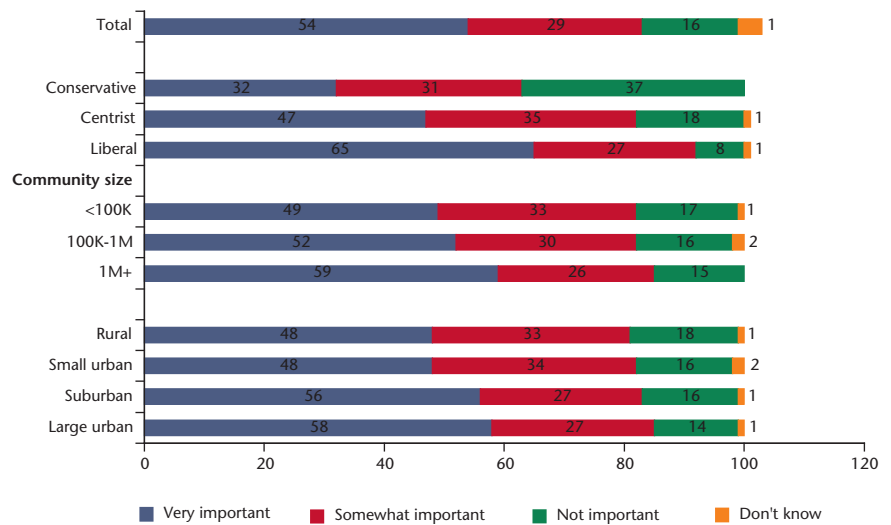
omy. Second, since 2008 and as far in the future as the eye can see, everything political will essentially be about the economy. Third, economic management and understanding needs to be a core differentiator between Liberals and New Democrats.

Liberals will need to talk to their voters about providing economic security to the middle class and upward mobility for the working class. To do that, people need to believe Liberals know what they are talking

about. From 1993 to 2006, Canadians believed that. Now they do not.

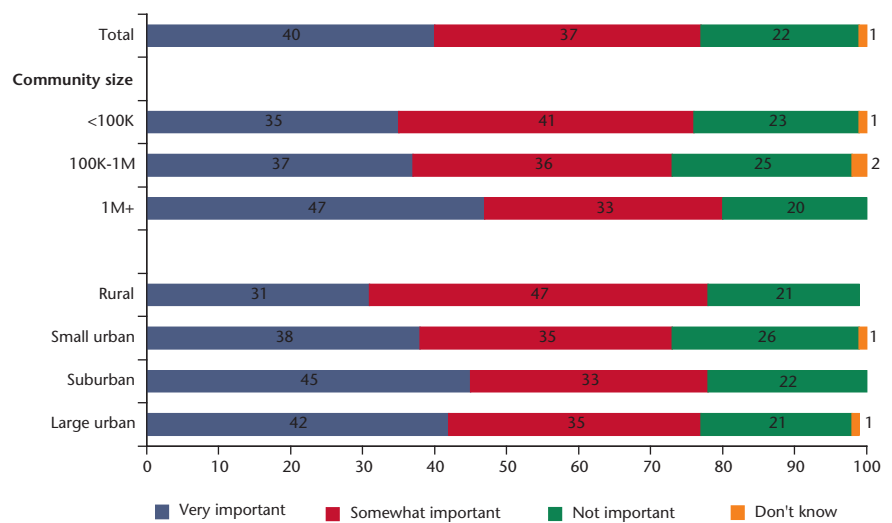
The "Cities Agenda" advanced by the Martin government ought to be resuscitated, without diluting it as that government did, to apply to every hamlet in the country. There are issues unique to our cities that are having an enormous impact on quality of life. Transit, infrastructure, green space, clean air, affordable housing and the kinds of recreational supports that keep kids away from trouble are

FIGURE 3. HOW IMPORTANT IS MULTICULTURALISM TO THE CANADIAN IDENTITY (PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS)?



Source: Consumerology.ca

FIGURE 4. HOW IMPORTANT IS CELEBRATING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES TO YOUR OWN VALUE SYSTEM (PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS)?



Source: Consumerology.ca

all major problems in cities across Canada. Conservatives have far too limited a view of government to ever consider addressing those issues. New Democrats are too tied to unions, especially public-sector unions, to really propose workable ideas in these areas. Therefore, that is space the Liberal Party can move in and occupy.

Despite the economic troubles, urban Canada continues to be highly sensitive to environmental issues, particularly the ones that affect them directly such as waste disposal and smog. The

Conservatives are blind on this issue and are leaving a flank badly exposed.

- There are some issues on which there are clear cleavages between citizens in rural or small town Canada and citizens in urban Canada.
- Canadians who live in cities know the strength of the diversity of the population and they celebrate it. Rural Canadians tend to be suspicious of it.
- City residents are increasingly secular and certainly reject religion as any

basis for public policy. Rural Canada remains more religious and more Christian.

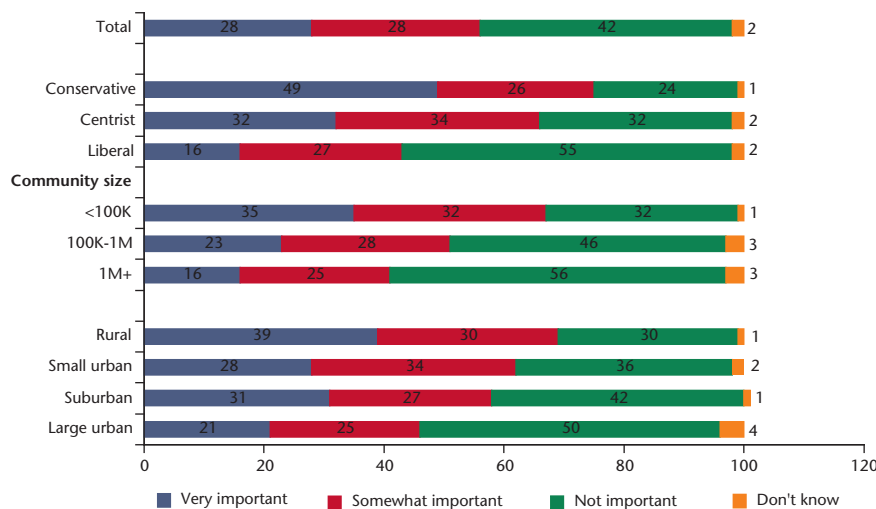
- Urbanites identify with the Liberal tradition of prioritizing foreign policy around creating and keeping peace in the world. Rural Canadians identify more with the Conservative approach of big guns behind the Western alliance (figures 3-6).

For policy to create new Liberal support and build new coalitions, the Liberal approach will have to be bold. Incremental small measures will not overcome historic voting patterns or re-engage nonvoters. In the absence of a meta narrative that lifts people's hopes that the big picture could be better, some potential Liberal voters will be drawn to the Conservative offering of less costly government while others will look left for more radical opposition to the status quo. Potential Liberal voters need to believe the party will make a meaningful difference.

Finding themselves in a highly precarious and historically daunting situation, it is possible that nothing the Liberals do will get them "back to where they once belonged." But if they are to have a sliver of a chance, it will be because they did almost everything perfectly over the next few years. That must include a much more clear-eyed and strategic approach to politics than the party has taken since 1984. Sound execution of campaign mechanics alone will not be enough, as the 2011 election proved decisively. Peter Drucker said, "management is doing things right. Leadership is doing the right things." To start the road back to government, the Liberal Party needs leadership not management. The Liberal Party needs to create a need for itself again. It needs to capture the spirit of 1958-63 and reinvent itself for a new Canada and a new reality.

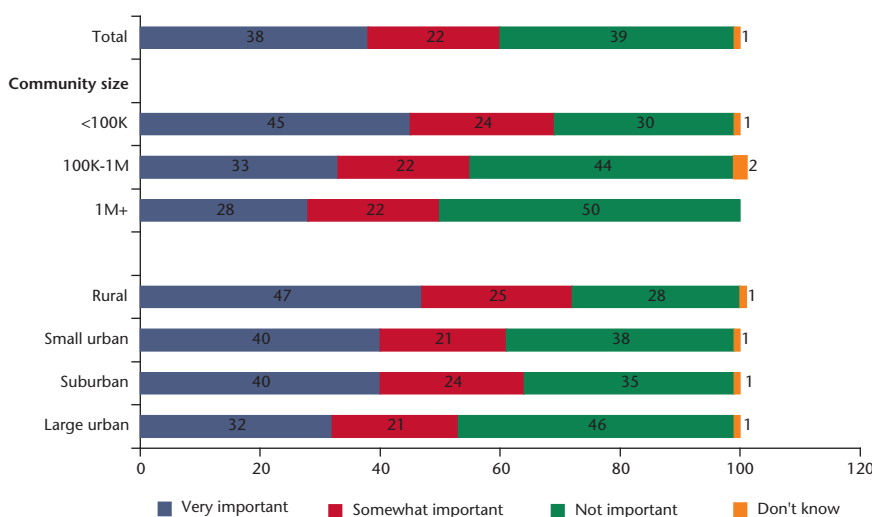
Contributing Writer David Herle, former pollster and chief campaign strategist for the Liberals under Paul Martin, is a Principal of the Gandalf Group in Toronto.

FIGURE 5. HOW IMPORTANT IS CHRISTIANITY TO THE CANADIAN IDENTITY?



Source: Consumerology.ca

FIGURE 6. HOW IMPORTANT IS RELIGIOUS BELIEF TO YOUR OWN VALUE SYSTEM?



Source: Consumerology.ca