

# The real pretenders to the Liberal throne

Our experts on her Majesty's Loyal Opposition break down the leading candidates for December's leadership election



OPINION  
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Commentary

## Elizabeth McMillan

Michael Ignatieff is a paradox. He's a respected academic who's public about his convictions. He's a Canadian who's knowledgeable and outspoken about international events in other countries. He's intelligent without being alienating. But the question remains: can he be a prime minister?

With an impressive CV, Ignatieff eclipses his fellow candidates. But despite his commendable international scope, most voters are still focused on local issues—taxes, health care, education. Regardless of his skill at reinvention, he can't pass himself off as an average Canadian. He walks a thin line between assurance and arrogance, ambition and entitlement.

Yet Ignatieff represents Canada as Canadians want to see themselves. He's intelligent, ambitious, articulate and informed. The son of immigrants, he became one of the country's elite. He's committed to social justice. He chooses unconventional paths and comes out on top. He knows what's going on in the world. He's earned the respect of Americans but retained his liberal beliefs.

In an era that delights in the perceived

stupidity of George W. Bush, Michael Ignatieff is an elegant alternative. He's confident; he makes people listen when he speaks. He's the contemporary Renaissance man: fiercely driven, recognizably brilliant and successful across disciplines. He offers hope for a smarter, more relevant government.

## Ross Prusakowski

If there's been one constant lately regarding the Liberal leadership race, it's that a sizeable wing of the party is hoping to elect someone who's able to assume the mantle of Pierre Trudeau and can generate enthusiasm within the country for the party. When the race for the leadership opened in the spring, it seemed to many party members that Michael Ignatieff was the one and only candidate in the field able to shoulder this responsibility.

However, ten months and countless gaffs later, it's become clear that not only is Ignatieff *not* the best candidate to lead the party, he isn't even the best former academic in the race. These two titles now belong to the energetic and supremely intelligent Stéphane Dion, who is decidedly composed of the best prime-ministerial material of all the candidates. Not only does Dion possess experience with difficult files like national unity and the environment from his time as a minister in two governments, but he also has a clear vision of how an efficient and environmentally friendly economy must function for Canada to make progress.

While each of the other three front-runners can be tarred with either regular policy flip-flops (Ignatieff), horrendous economic management (Bob Rae) or almost no ability to communicate in French (Gerard Kennedy), Dion is clear on where he stands. He's demonstrated leadership on crucial issues and can clearly express himself in both of our nation's official languages. Sure, his accent might make his English hard to understand, but at least when Dion speaks the country knows he's expressing a vision and ideas, not platitudes and buzz words like the last Liberal PM.

## Matt Frehner

While my colleagues may cite Dion's impeccable record and his progressive mind, or Ignatieff's intellectualism and heart-shatteringly chiseled jaw, Joe Volpe is the only Liberal candidate who's caught my sustained attention. His masterful reworking of such stagnant Liberal values as "truth" and "integrity," along with his paradoxical claim to be both a new face within the party and an old stalwart, bursts through the normal barriers of logical consistency and good taste.

Volpe is the perfect Liberal for a postmodern, 21st-century Canada. Indeed, the only way the Liberals stand a chance against the Tories in the new, cutthroat political arena is to vote in someone of malleable morality and stick-to-itiveness. We Canadians don't want flip-flopping intellectuals or unintelligible Frenchies. We need

a leader who can stick by their guns no matter the political climate—or the facts. We need someone who can say, with a straight face, "Of course those twelve-year-olds chose to support me—that's just how wide my base reaches. Gotta a problem with that? Is it because I'm Italian?" Not even Death himself gets in the way of Volpe's supporters. *That's* what I call commitment.

## Paul Owen

The dark horse of this year's Liberal leadership race has to be Ken Dryden. Sure his policies are pedestrian and unimaginative, and he may be an uncharismatic speaker, but Dryden has five things that none of the other candidates have going for them: Stanley Cup rings. Dryden led the Montréal Canadiens to hockey's Holy Grail before even having played a full season in the NHL. He won the 1971 Conn Smythe trophy as playoff MVP and was Rookie of the Year the next season. Dryden also backed Canada to the greatest hockey victory ever in the 1972 Summit Series—now that's international relations.

His hockey pedigree means that Dryden can unite the country like no other Liberal candidate. Québécois love him, despite his horrific French, for his successes with Les Habs. Torontonians adore the man for his tenure as president of the Maple Leafs between 1997–2004, a period which saw them come closer to winning the Cup than any other stretch since 1967. And, of

course, Westerners give Dryden his due for beating the Soviets in '72.

If leading the country isn't any more difficult than leading a successful hockey team, then Dryden is clearly the go-to guy. I highly doubt Stéphane Dion or Michael Ignatieff could have ever stopped Phil Esposito when he streaked down the wing. How then are they supposed to stop the US from treating us like the 51st state? For Kenny it would just be a matter of throwing on his pads and leaning on his stick by the border, waiting in that cocky signature pose that served him so well in the crease.

## Patrick Ross

I'm sure that all four candidates would make decent enough leaders, and are probably pretty nice guys to boot. But one look at the candidates who *didn't* run tells an entirely different story. Shiela Copps. Anne McLellan. Lloyd Axworthy. Brian Tobin. Even interim leader Bill Graham, as well as anyone named Trudeau, refused the call.

Questions could be raised about the ability of any of the current candidates to unite the party and defeat Stephen Harper's Conservatives in the next election. When one gives further consideration to the fact that the Liberal party has a history of winning under leaders more popular than the party itself, one has to wonder if they have a prayer under a leader who could be viewed as scary (Ignatieff), incompetent (Rae), anonymous (Kennedy) or anonymously French-Canadian (Dion).

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