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Liberal party 'divided in mind'

Ignatieff 's No. 1 priority comes with caveats

John Ivison, National Post

Michael Ignatieff is democratic enough to talk down to anyone but at least when he visited an Ottawa daycare last October, the audience members were only four years old and happy to be patronized, provided he read them Little Bear's Big Sweater.

After the photo op, he told reporters that a national child-care program was a top priority for his Liberal party. "It's a clear commitment," he said. He reiterated the point in February, when he added that deficits would not stand in the way of implementing what he called his "number one social priority."

Yesterday, Mr. Ignatieff was speaking to the Mississauga Board of Trade, outlining his latest list of priorities, which included "the creation of affordable early learning and child-care spaces, in every part of Canada" (my italics).

This seemed something less than a blanket commitment to the \$5-billion national daycare plan that Paul Martin's government negotiated with the provinces, and which Mr. Ignatieff so clearly supported, so I asked the Liberals if they are still committed to that plan.

"We will give the details of what we intend to do in the platform. It doesn't mean we will come back with exactly the same proposal but the issue will be addressed," said a senior Liberal.

The reason for such equivocation is, of course, funding. As Mr. Ignatieff pointed out yesterday in Mississauga, the country is running the biggest deficit in Canadian history and is adding billions to the national debt.

A Liberal government would not follow through with planned corporate tax cuts and would instead concentrate on balancing the budget, he said.

"Stephen Harper doesn't want to talk about any of this His number one economic policy is \$6-billion in additional tax cuts for profitable corporations -- every single year. This is a reckless choice. We can't afford further tax cuts for corporations when we're in a \$56-billion deficit," he said.

Yet, not for the first time, Mr. Ignatieff was being disingenuous when he presented a choice between a deficit-cutting Liberal party and a reckless, spendthrift Conservative government. The \$6-billion saved by freezing corporate tax cuts would not be set against the deficit. Rather, it would be used to fund some of the other Liberal priorities the leader discussed yesterday -- reducing financial support gaps for aboriginal students, investing in skills training, language training for immigrants and what sounds like a scaled-back daycare plan (Mr. Ignatieff was explicit: "None of this requires big new federal programs").

The Liberal strategy under chief of staff Peter Donolo has been to goad the Conservatives into taking "extreme" positions on value issues such as abortion, gun control, gay pride and bilingual judges. The Tories have been only too happy to oblige them -- brazen pandering to the base helps raise funds.

But the consequence has seen the Liberals appearing to move leftward, away from the "sensible, middle of the road" ground Mr. Ignatieff has tried to stake out since becoming leader. John Manley, the former Liberal deputy prime minister and current head of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, said this week that the party needs new blood and relevant policies because the issues the Grits are focused on -- Afghan detainees, Rahim Jaffer -- are "not interesting, not important."

If, as now seems likely, Mr. Ignatieff is also retreating from his "number one social priority," it will only add to the confusion of what the party stands for.

The English economic historian R.H. Tawney once said of the British Labour Party that "it is hesitant in action because it is divided in mind. It does not achieve what it could because it does not know what it wants. It frets out of office and fumbles in it. Being without clear convictions as to its own meaning and purpose, it is deprived of the dynamism, which only conviction can supply."

Much the same could be said of Mr. Ignatieff's Liberals.

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