
Jonathan Kay on the Tamil Tigers, and Michael Ignatieff's moral rehabilitation of the Liberal Party

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The moral evolution of the Liberal Party of Canada from the days of Jean Chretien to its current manifestation under Michael Ignatieff can be charted in many ways. A decade ago, Liberal ranks were full of America-bashers and noisy cultural nationalists. The party supported anti-Israel resolutions at the United Nations, and adopted the fashionable, amoral posture of "honest broker" in international relations. Jean Chretien himself flippantly defended slush-fund politics in Quebec, and disdained his successor's efforts to investigate the most disgraceful abuses. The party's bosses had one goal - to win votes, principles be damned.

All this has changed - slowly at first under Paul Martin and the unpopular Stéphane Dion, and now decisively under Michael Ignatieff. Like all political parties, the Liberals still often resort to cynical messaging when it suits them (especially in regard to Stephen Harper's fiscal policies). But overall, the Liberals of today are night-and-day compared to their 1990s-era forebears. And nowhere is this more apparent than in regard to the party's relationship with the Canadian Tamil community. One of the great low points for the Liberal Party of Canada came in May 2000, when two Liberal MPs - Mr. Martin (then the Finance Minister) and Maria Minna, then the Minister of International Cooperation - were caught attending a fund-raising event for a group that had been described by intelligence officials as a front group for the Tamil Tigers, an insurgent group that uses hideous terrorist tactics in its long-running campaign to carve out a separate Tamil state in the northern and eastern regions of Sri Lanka. Yet when confronted about this episode in Parliament, the Liberals refused to apologize, and instead accused their critics of organizing a "lynch mob." Even after 9/11, the Liberals refused to list the Tamil Tigers on the government's list of banned terrorist organizations. As a result, Tigers bagmen continued to raise funds among Canada's large Tamil community. The Liberals' primary concern was retaining votes from militant Tamil nationalists who live in contested ridings on the periphery of Toronto. Fast forward nine years, and the difference is striking. Following on the Conservatives' courageous and groundbreaking decision to ban the Tigers in 2006, Michael Ignatieff has signalled a clear break on the issue within his own party. In recent weeks, tens of thousands of Tamil Canadians have demonstrated in Ottawa, protesting the Sri Lankan government's successful military campaign against the Tigers, and the cornering of over 100,000 Tamils in a small area in the country's northeast. While many of the protestors no doubt harbour good-faith humanitarian concern for innocent civilians caught up in the fighting, the appearance of Tamil Tiger flags discredited the protest. On Tuesday, the Liberal party allowed a few leaders from the Tamil community to meet with Mr. Ignatieff after he refused to address the larger Parliament Hill protest. According to a report from a Liberal insider, there were about nine Tamils at the meeting with Mr. Ignatieff, all known as moderates who do not support the Tigers' military and terrorist agenda. Nevertheless, some of the Tamils begged Mr. Ignatieff to come out and address the protest (with one of the visitors apparently breaking down in tears) - or at least accept a petition from the protestors. Not only did Mr. Ignatieff stand his ground and refuse to do either, he also reportedly declared that no other Liberal MP would do so. Can anyone imagine Jean Chretien, Paul Martin or Stéphane Dion - bald-faced exploiters of ethno-politics, all - making a similar declaration? In the Liberal press release concerning the meeting, Mr. Ignatieff echoed the Tamil community's plea for international diplomatic pressure on Sri Lanka, and for a ceasefire (which Sri Lanka's government opposes, now that it has the Tigers on the ropes). But notably, the press release also deplored the use of "human shields" - an allusion to the Tigers' ongoing practice of hiding behind civilians, many of whom are being held by the Tigers (literally) at gunpoint. And it is not just Mr. Ignatieff who is leading the charge for a more principled foreign policy. Even before Mr. Ignatieff took control of this issue, Bob Rae was appearing at Toronto-area Tamil-Canadian discussion forums, telling the community - in blunt terms - that the Tamil Tigers' militancy was part of the problem in Sri Lanka. It was a message that Liberal MPs with strong Tamil constituencies - Jim Karygiannis of Scarborough-Agincourt fame, most notably - would never dare deliver. Between Messrs. Rae and Ignatieff, the Liberal Party of Canada has reinvented itself on this issue - and on other broad questions of foreign policy. How refreshing it is to see a party leadership that puts principle before electoral expedience. It's one big reason, we suspect, why so many Canadians are taking a fresh look at this resurgent party. jkay@nationalpost.com Courtesy: Nationalpost.com