

Today's Liberals need an issue, like free trade, to turn fortunes

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They were led by an unpopular leader, had trouble getting their message heard and faced a stiff challenge for second place from a surging NDP. But the 1988 Liberals of John Turner had a decided advantage over the faltering Grits of today. They had an issue.

During the famous free-trade campaign of 1988, Mr. Turner started out by facing an internal revolt from MPs who discussed replacing him with Jean Chrétien, and had a foil in NDP leader Ed Broadbent, who was even more popular than Jack Layton is now.

But as the campaign matured, Mr. Turner turned what seemed a sure disaster into a tolerable result that saved the party furniture. He still lost by a whopping 86 seats, but the Liberals emerged a solid second because Mr. Turner nimbly managed the issue of free trade and wooed back supporters who had begun to scatter.

It's a strategy that the struggling Stéphane Dion may have no choice but to copy – abandon the script that was designed to win the election and replace it with something aimed at keeping the party whole for next time.



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Liberal Party Leader Stéphane Dion greets supporters at a seniors residence during a campaign stop in Toronto Friday. (*The Canadian Press*)

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"If you threw the right scare into people about Stephen Harper, and Dion was the guy leading that charge, then he could probably climb back out

of hole and may get over 80 seats,” said Greg Lyle, a pollster with the firm Innovative Research Group, Inc. “That would be a win right now.”

With election day just over two weeks away, most polls put the Liberals at 24 to 26 per cent, an astounding number, given that the party has hardly ever polled below 30 per cent. If those figures persist through to Oct. 14, the Liberals will find themselves with a substantially reduced caucus – some worst-case predictions suggest it could drop to between 55 and 60 seats.

Although it's not likely, pollsters are conceiving of scenarios under which the NDP comes close to displacing the Liberals in the parliamentary standings. Increasingly, Liberals argue that the way to avoid that fate is for Mr. Dion to find his version of a free-trade issue that resonates with traditional Liberals. The party badly needs to steal support back from the NDP and the Greens, and grab back a chunk of centrist voters that Mr. Harper appears to be attracting.

Robert Asselin, a former adviser to Mr. Dion and now assistant director at the University of Ottawa's school of public and international affairs, said the Tories are vulnerable to the deficit issue, particularly given the current U.S. economic crisis and its potential to spill into Canada. He believes the Harper government would be in substantial trouble had the election been called a month later.

“No question, it will be the economy,” Mr. Asselin said in an interview. “Mr. Harper has mismanaged the surplus and given us little room to breathe.”

For Mr. Dion, the trick in the debates that will take place next week is to exploit Mr. Harper's argument that the economy is fine and needs no intervention. In Mr. Asselin's view, the Harper strategy is faulty because it allows Liberals to characterize him as a leader who would fiddle while Rome burns.

“He's been too loose about the economy, saying everything is okay,” Mr. Asselin said.

Moreover, he added, Mr. Dion can fall back on the fact that the Liberal government under Mr. Chrétien and Paul Martin worked to eliminate a deficit. Mr. Harper, the argument goes, has undone that work.

Indeed, polls taken at the beginning of the campaign show a deficit as a top-of-mind concern for Canadians. The survey by the Strategic Counsel found that 57 per cent of voters were less likely to vote for a party that is willing to entertain the idea of a deficit (something Mr. Dion did, then immediately recoiled from). Although recent forecasts put the government in a narrow surplus position, the government ran a small deficit in the first two months of the fiscal year. Finally, a \$12-billion surplus from the last Liberal year of government has all but been eliminated, mostly through Tory tax cuts.

Mr. Turner, for his part, knows how important the free-trade issue was to Liberal fortunes. Heading into the 1988 contest, he was the head of a party with 39 seats and feeling the hot breath of the NDP as Mr. Broadbent tried to effect the breakthrough that Mr. Layton is aiming at today.

But it never happened because, in free trade, Mr. Turner found an issue of great public importance that re-established the Liberals as the defenders of Canadian nationalism.

“I think it was our focusing on free trade in a much stronger way than Ed Broadbent did that brought us back firmly into second place and set us up for government,” Mr. Turner said this week in an interview.

But would a fight on the deficit do the trick? It's unclear, given the fact that Mr. Harper has spent so much time characterizing the Liberal Leader as a risk during a time of economic uncertainty. The same poll also rated Mr. Harper the best candidate to deal with tough economic times.

David Herle, who co-chaired Paul Martin's 2004 and 2006 campaigns, says an effective method might be to portray Mr. Harper as an insensitive leader who would be wrong for the coming economic turbulence. The party should consider portraying itself as on the side of average Canadians and Mr. Harper as not being tuned into their needs.

“Is that the kind of guy in the chair when your spouse loses their job?” Mr. Herle asked.

The two key questions in employing such a strategy are this: Is there enough economic anxiety out there and is it growing fast enough for the Liberals to capitalize? And can Mr. Dion deliver the message?

Robin Sears, who co-chaired Mr. Broadbent's 1988 campaign, sees significant parallels with today's effort, save for one thing. He doesn't think Mr. Dion can turn it on the way Mr. Turner did.

“If the gods of politics were to drop some plum on Dion in the debate or at some point between now and then, could he exploit it successfully?” he asked. “Based on his performance up to now I'd say it's unlikely.”

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