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## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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### Donolo's challenge: stop the Liberals' ugly slide

By Campbell Clark  
From Thursday's Globe and Mail

*Party insiders are calling for new chief of staff to craft a solid message about what the Grits stand for*

Two months ago, Michael Ignatieff launched an unexplained rush to trigger an election. Last month, he overruled Quebec lieutenant Denis Coderre over a Montreal candidate, prompting him to quit while blaming a cabal of the leader's Toronto aides. On Tuesday, a quick change of staff aimed at righting the ship became a very public mess, as news of chief of staff Ian Davey's departure broke before he was told.

Peter Donolo, Jean Chrétien's former communications director, starts Thursday as Mr. Ignatieff's new chief of staff, under pressure to fix it all. After missteps, and an ugly slide in the polls to sub-Stéphane Dion levels, he must overturn the impression that that the Liberals are spiralling downward.

Inside the party, there are calls for Mr. Donolo to craft a core message about what Mr. Ignatieff and the Liberals stand for, to reconnect with lost women and ethnic voters, and appeal to the middle class.

"Mediocrity would be a big step forward," said pollster Greg Lyle.

But he means that in a good way. The Liberals have strengths, and Mr. Ignatieff's image is still vague enough to be redefined.

Ask Canadians which party they feel closest to, and more still pick the Liberals' "enduring brand," despite Conservative gains, said Mr. Lyle, the managing director of Innovative Research Group. Voters float back toward the Liberals when there's no reason to avoid them.

"Odds are, if the Liberals can stop doing bad things - not even doing anything right - they're going to go up, and the Tories are going to go down," Mr. Lyle said.

The Liberals also have better fundraising and organization than under Mr. Dion, raising as much - \$6-million in the first half of 2009 - as they did in all of 2008, and tripling membership to 120,000. That's still far behind the Conservatives, but a catch-up in crucial resources.

The problems are deep: not just an overall slide from their fall election rush, but a loss in traditional bases of women and ethnic voters. In Quebec, where being the main federalist option can win more seats, they're neck and neck with the Tories again.

Liberal MPs insisted Wednesday they'll rebound, in part with charges the Tories are steering public infrastructure and advertising money to partisan ends.

"We do that, we continue to show the character and the tone of the Prime Minister, and we put serious policy ideas in the window for Canadians," said Ottawa MP David McGuinty. "Our leader has given three foundational speeches: one on foreign affairs, one on clean energy, one on the economy, and he will continue to do so."

Those who know Mr. Donolo say he won't focus on "foundational speeches," but on honing a populist basic message about the leader.

In September, three days before he was, in theory, to defeat Mr. Harper's government, Mr. Ignatieff gave a speech about the rise of China and India - baffling many Liberals who were screaming for him to better explain why he was gunning for an election.

Instead, they expect Mr. Donolo, known in Mr. Chrétien's PMO for keeping his eyes on main-street voters, to define what Liberals' main message is to the middle class - the oft-cited example is Mr. Chrétien's 1993 campaign, with its "jobs, jobs, jobs" refrain.

As a Strategic Counsel pollster three months ago, Mr. Donolo said defining Mr. Ignatieff doesn't require grandiose policy, but sharper stands; he suggested Mr. Ignatieff might have spoken out against the U.S. Republican attacks on Canadian medicare.

A lack of a definition of what Mr. Ignatieff stands for made him vulnerable to Conservative attacks that he's only out for power, Mr. Lyle said. Policy-wonk speeches don't cut it. "Nobody at Tim Horton's is talking about trade with India," he said.

But he argued that Mr. Ignatieff's image is still fuzzy, and can be revived - and one Liberal who knows Mr. Donolo says the new chief of staff knows the problems, and has a few months to do it: "But now he's got to get it right."

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