

March 10, 2009

## Ottawa*Watch* 213: Courting evangelicals

By Lloyd Mackey

*John McKay's role as a Liberal "ambassador" to the evangelical community (and vice versa) did not last much beyond Michael Ignatieff's leadership. Justin Trudeau tended to be more pugilistic in his occasional interfaces with evangelicals. For example, while he appreciated the role that Alpha ministry played during the time of his brother, Michelle's drowning death in a BC lake, he tended to see faith as something that was to be vigorously debated on an intellectual level, rather than helping to shape issues of the heart.*

*That said, both McKay and former senator David Smith (who passed away last year) remained diligent in quietly sharing a range of evangelical values with their fellow Liberals.*

*McKay got himself in a little trouble early on in Trudeau's leadership, in 2014, by being secretly recorded referring to Trudeau's pro-abortion stance as a "bozo eruption". Trudeau had directed that pro-life candidates not be permitted to run for the Liberals on a federal level.*

*While McKay later diplomatically skated around the issue, it is noteworthy that he has not been awarded any cabinet position under the present prime minister.*

Press gallery colleague Brian Lilley, who provides Parliament Hill news and analysis to the influential CFRB group of radio stations across Canada, has a most interesting blog, this week. In it, he reveals that Toronto-area Liberal MP John McKay has been designated by his leader, Michael Ignatieff, to help the party reach out to evangelical Christians.

Here is the link to the blog in question: <http://www.cfrb.com/node/889337>. I would suggest that Ottawa*Watch* readers take a close look at it, but in any case, will summarize some aspects for purposes of historical context.

Lilley suggests that McKay, first elected in 1997, is the right person for the evangelical-recruiting job.

McKay is a member and past moderator of Spring Garden Church, a strong inner-suburb Baptist congregation with vigorous evangelical leanings. Further, he was a co-founder of the Canadian division of the Christian Legal Fellowship, a North-America-wide organization of Christian lawyers.

And, even further, his voting record on same-sex marriage (against) and his pro-life stance will help him, as Lilley puts it, “in speaking to a community he knows well but that the Liberals have avoided like a plague.”

I read Lilley’s blog with interest and generally agree that his thrust is accurate. Ignatieff has indeed, recognized the need for the Liberals to “recapture” evangelicals, if it is to have any future crack at power in Canada.

Having said that, I would like to provide some context to the discussion, both with respect to McKay’s own approach to the faith/political interface, and to some of the other players involved in the mix.

\* \* \*

McKay has been both articulate in the advancement of moderate social and fiscal conservative concepts, and outreaching toward the moderate sectors on the conservative side of the fence.

When he was first elected, and the Reform party was the official opposition, it often seemed that when it came to articulating Reform-style conservatism, McKay was without a peer on either side of the house. And there seemed to be fair evidence that Preston Manning and other Reformers relied on McKay to communicate their particular perspective inside the Liberal caucus.

Moreover, since being on the opposition benches, McKay has successfully brought forward a couple of private member’s bills that specifically addressed the freeing up of the development and relief process. Those bills were an outcome, in part at least, of his involvement, before entering politics, in evangelically-oriented Christian development projects.

And, in order to see that his legislation made it through the Senate, once they passed the House of Commons, he worked with Conservative Senator Hugh Segal. (Segal’s introductory words in his 2006 autobiography should not be forgotten, in recognizing the significance of that McKay-Segal linkage. In *The Long Road Back: The Conservative Journey, 1993-2006* [Harper-Collins, 2006], Segal supplies a poignant commentary on the effect of his youthful orthodox Jewish background, on his discovery of both community and conservatism.)

\* \* \*

Besides Segal, the “other player” I would like to mention is Liberal Senator David Smith. Readers of *Ottawa Watch* will recall my periodic references to Smith and his close family ties to the Canadian evangelical community.

Smith, in his younger years, was a Trudeau cabinet minister and apparently helped persuade his boss to include a reference to God in the preamble to the constitution. Later, during Jean Chretien's tenure, he played a key role in building Liberal strength, federally, particularly in Ontario. Keep in mind that, during those years, the Liberals were electing over 100 MPs from Ontario. That figure has dropped to just over one-third of that total, during the Conservative resurgence.

Smith, a Baptist, himself, has retained close contact with the Pentecostal community from which he was sprung. (Both his late father, C.B. Smith and his brothers, Robert and George, were/are outstanding Pentecostal leaders.)

That religio-political astuteness stood him in good stead in helping evangelicals to feel comfortable with the liberal political culture, particularly in Ontario. The lack of success of the Liberals in the west likely had something to do with the fact that the party could not penetrate the evangelical culture west of the Ontario-Manitoba border.

\* \* \*

McKay, it would appear, if Brian Lilley has things well-pegged, could be Smith's *de facto* successor in the effort to attract evangelical votes to the Liberals, particularly in Ontario.

But his success in that area is not a "done deal". Rather, there are some other interesting options, one of which is being test-driven at the moment. It involves the concept of political realignment and involves the way in which the Liberals are relating to the Conservatives, in getting the budget passed.

That means McKay's success could come in a different area and could involve "redefining victory", to adapt and paraphrase some of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's recent comments about Canada, Afghanistan and the Taliban.

\* \* \*