

August 5, 2009

Ottawa *Watch* 234: In the eye of an Oppel

By Lloyd Mackey

Wally Oppel never picked up whatever bait Michael Ignatieff had offered him. And soon enough, Ignatieff was out of Canadian politics and back to high level academic pursuits.

That said, despite the 2022 penchant for partisan positions to harden, there will continue to be examples of people moving to and fro on the political spectrum with the seemingly obvious intention of trying to build collaboration rather than an adversarial milieu.

Reports of a recent meeting between former British Columbia attorney-general Wally Oppel and federal Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, have provided clear indications that the two men discussed the possibility of Oppel's running for the Liberals in the next federal election.

The reports caught my interest for a couple of reasons, both less to do with my usual faith-based punditry and more related to my interest in what my home province of British Columbia can teach the rest of Canada about collaborative politics.

Oppel was narrowly defeated in this past spring's provincial election, in a riding which was new to him, by an independent candidate with strong conservative roots.

He spent nine years as attorney-general in the BC Liberal government of Gordon Campbell. His willingness to bring about the prosecution of the key players in the long-running practice of polygamy in the fundamentalist Mormon community of Bountiful, brought him a fair amount of ink.

Located in the southeastern corner of the province, Bountiful is an outpost home to Warren Jeffs' polygamist bishopric in several states in the American southwest. Jeffs was recently jailed for actions related to his leadership.

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On the surface, it is logical that Ignatieff go after Oppel as a possible federal Liberal candidate. But scratch the soil for a moment and the prospect seems more like a mixed bag.

Yes, he was attorney-general in a government that takes the name "Liberal".

The BC Liberal Party, however, from the moment that Campbell assumed its leadership in the early 90s, was much more conservative than liberal. And, as this writer has occasionally suggested, Campbell's approach follows in a centre-right collaborative

governance tradition which prevailed most of the time for close to 70 years. His best known predecessors were Byron (Boss) Johnson, W. A. C. Bennett and Bill Bennett.

All of which meant that it would have been more logical for Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper to have a quiet and persuasive talk with Oppel.

For all we know, that might have happened, too. If so, it has not been reported.

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That, then, is the first shoe to drop, today.

The second is that the revelation that this little Oppel-Ignatieff talk took place recalls to mind that there is another British Columbian who is not only a former attorney-general in that province, but also the premier who preceded Campbell into office. His name is Ujjal Dosanjh. He was the last NDP premier before the defeat of that party in 2001. And, before that, he was the NDP attorney-general under whose watch then premier Glen Clark was implicated in – and later cleared of – allegations of some state cozying with gambling interests.

The rest is history, of course. Dosanjh converted to federal Liberalism and became health minister in Paul Martin's government. Most of his shadow cabinet and committee responsibilities, in opposition, however, have been in the areas of law and justice.

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For whatever reason, Ignatieff, in permitting a conversation with Oppel to become public, is continuing his penchant for embracing certain aspects of conservatism and possibly loosening some of his party's links with the liberal-left.

While it is too soon to try to determine whether this means much in the context of federal political realignment, it doesn't hurt for the information to become fodder for chit-chat at political coffee-klatches.

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There was also word, this week that after over half a century of being the New Democratic Party, Canada's clearly left-wing presence, is considering dropping the "New" from its title.

If the Dippers, as they are sometimes affectionately known, take on the simply nomenclature of the Democratic Party of Canada, some interesting questions might be raised.

Two such queries could well be: “What will happen to Dosanjh and to the other ex-NDP premier, Ontario’s Bob Rae, now also a Liberal MP? Will they feel comfortable enough with the change to go back to their party of origin?”

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