

West Word Column

My Iggy Election Diary

December 1/05: I get an email from Nancy, my Canadian friend in Warsaw who's been teaching there since 1986 but keeps close tabs on Canuckistan. The Subject heading is "Ignatieff." I read it right away. "I hope you will get a chance to fight the good fight against this perfectly disgusting political move to put Ignatieff in that riding...If they elect him, they are simply dupes. He is an arrogant snob in my opinion and the fact that he supported the Iraq war should be made a big issue." And she thought I should take him on, being a Canadian writer of Ukrainian ancestry "who can cite his lack of interest or knowledge of people from that part of the world."

Michael Ignatieff, Russian-aristocrat by ancestry, Canadian by passport, cosmopolitan (BBC, Harvard) by world citizenship, has returned after almost 3 decades abroad to run for political office in the federal riding of Etobicoke-Lakeshore. Two (Ukrainian-Canadian) hopefuls have been finessed by Liberal party officials in their attempt to register their own nomination papers, Ignatieff has been duly "acclaimed" the Liberal candidate, and shouts of "shame!" and "Yankee!" and placards reading "Bush-Ignatieff-Partners in crime!" and "Prince Ignatieff – Fake Canadian!" greet him when he makes his acceptance speech.

I have lunch with a Ukrainian-Canadian friend in Edmonton well-connected with the Ukrainian-Canadians of Toronto. "This bunch in Etobicoke," she says, "are real hard right-wingers."

So, here's the dilemma for a left-of-centre Ukrainian-Canadian such as myself: who's more illiberal, a group of Ukrainian nationalist fanatics, or a scion of the Russian aristocracy who's cosy with American power?

There's already a remarkable number of newspaper column inches reporting Ukrainian-Canadian grievances against Ignatieff's representation of Ukraine and Ukrainian "nationalism" in his 1993 book, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism*. The same quote is repeated: "I have reasons to take Ukraine very seriously indeed. But to be honest I'm having trouble. Ukrainian independence conjures up images of embroidered peasant shirts, the nasal whine of ethnic instruments, phoney Cossacks in cloaks and boots, nasty anti-Semites." Through the whole campaign, Ignatieff will counter: "I have a deep, personal affinity with the suffering of the Ukrainian people and a deep respect for the Ukrainian-Canadian community," and, besides, his great-grandparents are buried in Ukrainian soil.

That's very touching. But also evasive: they're buried there because they *owned* the place. The Ignatieffs were landlords in Ukraine, owners of an estate complete

with Ukrainian serfs and peasants. More honestly, he has written: “Somewhere inside, I’m also what Ukrainians would call a Great Russian, and there is just a trace of old Russian disdain for these ‘Little Russians’ [Ukrainians].”

December 1/05: NDP leader Jack Layton thinks Paul Martin has “some explaining to do” about his “star” candidate’s position on the American war in Iraq. But this remains an oddly muted complaint. Rick Salutin in the *Globe* will have the best line of the whole campaign – Ignatieff is a public intellectual who “speaks power to truth” – but letters to editors express a swooning admiration: Mr Ignatieff is “eminently qualified” (his views on Ukraine deemed “irrelevant”) to be a Liberal candidate, dedicated as his career has been to “profound insights unparalleled in public life in Canada and the world.” Whew.

December 2/05: Ignatieff is interviewed by Mary Lou Findlay on CBC radio’s *As It Happens*. “I welcome the scrutiny, all hard questions are legitimate,” he declares gamely. “I’ve always had the deepest understanding for the *horror* of the Ukrainian historical experience and I teach it this way in my human rights classes.” I’m impressed by his unflappability about what he calls the “Ukrainian blow-up,” and his evident sincerity, but only for a second. “My family is of immigrant origin so I associate profoundly with all the immigrant groups.”

I think it’s that *profoundly* that does it for me. Who’s he trying to kid?

Wild strawberries were served in a silver cup at breakfast, I remember, followed by hot rolls with apricot jam. The dining room looked over the lake, and when the window was open you could feel the mountain air sweeping across the water, across the white linen tablecloth and then across your face.

That’s Michael in *Blood and Belonging*, remembering the enchanted childhood in Yugoslavia in late 1950s where his father George Ignatieff, was Canadian ambassador to the Communist court of Marshall Tito. Even Soviet officials called George Ignatieff *Graf*. “Graf” means “Count” in Russian. *My family is of immigrant origin.*

“I do not believe in roots,” wrote Iggy in his family memoir, *The Russian Album*. On the other hand, he says now on CBC that “We’re all Canadians...and behind that is a vision of Canadians as citizens.” What’s he trying to say: that immigrants have no roots, only citizenship?

December 2/05: The *Montreal Gazette*’s Josee Legault speaks up for the Quebecois, equally misunderstood by the cosmopolitan Ignatieff, in, for example, the television series that accompanied *Blood and Belonging*: “The final image of the section on Quebec closed in on the faces of worried anglophones, aboriginals and children of visible minorities with Ignatieff’s voice asking ominously: ‘If a state only protects its majority, will its minorities be safe?’ This is a gross misrepresentation of Quebec society.”

December 16/05: According to *Time Canada*, who call him “the national unifier” - the *New Statesman* characterizes him as “the glamour-puss human rights academic” - every election campaign needs a “Big Idea, an uplifting issue,” and it has arrived in the form of Ignatieff’s plea for a Canada beyond its “parochial ethnic and regional politics.” It was this Big Idea that had caught the attention of federal Liberals in the first place – clearly, all of them stuck in the Culture Wars of the 1980s, so yesterday - when he had called for a “bold definition of national unity and Canadian sovereignty that was relevant to the modern world,” in a speech to the Liberal Party convention.

December 19/05: Earth to Iggy: phone Montréal! The *Globe&Mail* is reporting that many young Montréalais of Haitian, Arabic, Moroccan, Vietnamese descent define themselves as Quebecois, support Quebec’s sovereignty (whatever that might come to mean) and accept that Quebec is their country. Well, well; so much for all those predictions (I believed them myself) that a new multicultural generation of trilingual Quebecers would be lost to the sovereigntist cause, preferring the sexy embrace of globalism... But Ignatieff doesn’t “believe in” roots.

January 2/06: Christmas Break is over and I have subscribed, via Iggy’s website, to “Morning Coffee Break with Michael Ignatieff,” a few catchy lines each morning waiting cheerfully in my mailbox, some of it, like this morning’s, cribbed from earlier pronouncements. To the Saskatchewan Liberal Party in November, 2005: “The creation of this political community – Canada – is a precious achievement.”

January 3/06: “The test of serious moral commitment to the family is a willingness to spend public money.” That’s from his 2000 book, *The Rights Revolution*.

January 8/06: “Lumber and beef are not side-shows to us: failure to solve these problems makes their best friends wonder whether Americans can be trusted.” This, from his Beatty Lecture at McGill University in October, 2005. *Interesting, that “us”:* Did Ignatieff already have premonitions that he would be running soon for public office in Canada and would have to re-identify with Canadians?

And the clippings piled up... Then I hauled out two paperbacks that reside side-by-side on my bookshelf: Ignatieff’s *The Rights Revolution*, in which he baldly claims that the military interventions of the 1990s – Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo – were all justified in the name of human rights, on the grounds of the international community’s “emerging obligation to protect strangers outside our own borders.” Controversially, Ignatieff has since included the American invasion and occupation of Iraq as one of these “obligations.”

The other book is Noam Chomsky’s *The New Military Humanism* (1999), where he argues “the right of humanitarian intervention, if it exists, is premised on the

good faith of those intervening.” I note that “if” and read on: “and that assumption is based not on their rhetoric but on their record.” Why has that man with the “sexiest brain” in Canada, Michael Ignatieff, that celebrity of intellectual angst, failed to factor into his ruminations about American military strategy in Iraq precisely that record of the “good faith” of the military-industrial complex? And on its record, not its rhetoric?

I decide to go back to the “Ukraine” chapter in *Blood and Belonging*, a book I had reviewed in 1994, in a tone much more measured than my real feelings. This guy has been up my Ukrainian-Canadian nose for so long that I expect to read him with unmitigated scorn. “All around me,” he begins, “the first impressions of Ukrainian independence are of decline and decay, broken panes of glass, smeared windows, cigarettes all over the floor.[..] What, I ask myself, am I doing in this godforsaken place?” *Hey, Iggy, this isn't about an independent Ukraine, this is about a country crawling out of its Soviet cellar.* “I’ve come here to find out what real difference it makes to have a nation of your own.” *Okay, a fair question, if a little premature: how long did it take Canadians to feel we “had” a nation?* “Since Ukrainian independence these saints [at a Kyivan monastery] are on what for Russians is foreign soil.” *Get used to it.*

“I cannot shake off the sensation that these people are the survivors of a great catastrophe.” *He noticed!*

Gradually, as he moves among Ukrainians, he becomes more rueful. He refers to the “via dolorosa” through the Soviet period, to the famines, the violent collectivization of the land and villages, the liquidation of most of the intelligentsia in the gulag. He visits his great-grandparents’ graves in the Ukrainian village south of Kyiv and, as he sits in the crypt holding a candle, “some element of respect for the national project began to creep into my feelings, when I understood why land and graves matter and why the nations matter which protect both.”

There is also that contentious recollection of his impressions of 1960, of the “Ukrainian nationalists demonstrating in the snow” at Bolshoi ballet performances in Toronto: “Hadn’t they looked at a map? How did they think Ukraine could ever be free?” Well, Ignatieff *has* been misread by Ukrainian-Canadians who have cited this as proof of his “virulent Ukrainophobia.” The sentence immediately following is this: “Yet the tendentious fanatics who refused to look at maps, who refused to accept that Soviet power would last an eternity, got it right, and the rest of us were wrong.”

Now that Michael Ignatieff is a sitting MP in the Parliament of Canada, representing a Canadian “us,” I am waiting for the rest of his *mea culpas*, starting with Empire Lite.