Deconstructing Michael Ignatieff's discourse on expanding access to Post-Secondary Education in Canada: Liberal party tradition and rhetoric

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by

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PSE: An Introduction

In no policy area is the interplay between the social goals of efficiency and equity as

evident as in education. A highly skilled workforce has long been seen as important

in promoting economic prosperity, with theorists and policy makers alike

emphasizing the contribution of human capital to economic growth…At the same

time it is very hard to abstract from social goals related to equality of opportunity and

a more inclusive society, and for many an important goal of the education system is to

promote citizenship and active participation in society (Corak, Lipps and Zhao, 2004,

p. 1).

Corak, Lipps and Zhao's (2004) characterization of the importance of an accessible Post-

Secondary Education (PSE) system in Canada, is effectively summed up by de Broucker (2005),

who states that "ensuring widespread access to higher education serves two of Canada's highest

goals—achieving a high standard of living and sustaining social cohesion" (p. v). In effect, these

authors present "access to PSE" as a catch-all pillar of a unified and progressive Canadian

society.

In fact, since the post-World War II era, where, "in cooperation with the provinces

Ottawa took the leadership in establishing and sustaining a national welfare state" (Smiley, 1976,

p.8), "access to university and college has formed the foundation of equality of opportunity [in

Canada]" (Conlon, 2006, p.2). As such, many Canadians have accepted PSE as a vehicle for

societal cohesion and opportunity, and the federal government as chief in providing leadership

on PSE policy (Conlon, 2006). As Canadians ponder the changing federal government role in

PSE governance—as documented by Looker and Lowe (2001); Finnie (2002); Finnie, Laporte

and Lascelles (2004); Conlon (2006); Shanahan and Jones (2007); and Cappon (2008)—it is

worth examining the rhetoric employed by federal politicians and political parties to deliver their message on accessibility to PSE.

On March 28, 2010, Michael Ignatieff, leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, indicated that if he were elected Prime Minister, a Liberal government would "promote a national campaign to improve education and training programs as part of an effort to create a more modern and efficient economy" (Delacourt & Whittington, 2010, ¶9). In fact, this has been an oft espoused message by the former Harvard professor turned federal politician since rumors of his intentions to return to Canada and run for public office first arose in 2005. At policy conferences, during election campaigns, and in leadership contests alike, Ignatieff has consistently iterated his vision for a pan-Canadian strategy to tackle the issues plaguing accessibility to PSE in Canada.

Research Objective

This study is a poststructuralist investigation of the discourse on expanding access to Post-Secondary Education (PSE) in Canada, employed by Michael Ignatieff, leader of the Liberal Party of Canada. Drawing upon the poststructuralist tradition of communicative research, which takes issue with "grand narratives" that pervade contemporary society (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000), this study exposes the tentative, localized and micro-historical nature of Ignatieff's PSE discourse within Canadian political society. Exposing this discourse, as such, is important given Nesbitt-Larking's (2007) contention that "social and political identity [in Canada] is now much more open-ended, fragmented and tentative than before" (p. 89).

Discourse

What it is

Knights and Morgan (1991) conceive of a discourse as "a set of ideas and practices [constructed in a particular social context] which condition our ways of relating to, and acting upon, particular phenomena" (p. 283). Discourse is developed and used to give the appearance of 'truth', and is intrinsically bound in a power relationship (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Leitch & Motion, 2007). Using this (e.g. Knights & Morgan, 1991; Leitch & Motion, 2007) interpretation of Foucauldian discourse, the ideas espoused by Michael Ignatieff on expanding access to PSE are exposed as part of a "historically emerged" and "rhetorically coloured" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000) pillar of entrenched Liberal party rhetoric.

What it does

In fact, this study shows that Ignatieff's discourse on expanding access to PSE is used to inform a much larger Liberal Party discourse of "unity in diversity", which has, today, evolved into a pervading narrative of Canadian culture. Through a textual deconstruction—loosely informed by the writings of Jacques Derrida (1976; 1978)—this "unity discourse" is destabilized and exposed as a rhetorical tool used to project the idea of Liberal hegemony as natural and universal. This study suggests that by employing a discourse on expanding access to PSE, Michael Ignatieff is able to invoke the traditional Liberal narrative of "unity" in order to project himself as the visionary leader of Canada's "natural governing party" (Fotheringham, 2001).

Liberal Party of Canada and its Discourse

As illustrated by Clarkson (2005), over the last 60 years, the Liberal Party of Canada has been successful in fashioning itself as the "purveyor of pan-Canadian messages" (p. 284), and as the only credible party able to champion national unity. As Bryden (2006) suggests, "the Liberal party has monopolized the national unity dossier in this country for decades" (¶2), effectively using the discourse as a means to legitimize its claim as the natural hegemonic institution in Canadian political life. The unity discourse, employed by Prime Ministers Trudeau, Chretien and Martin, has consistently been the battle cry for Liberal leaders—John Turner included—to frame the party as the unifying Canadian institution in the face of Quebec separatism, U.S. continentalism and regional divisions. It can be argued that this unity message has been fundamental to Liberal dominance in the 20th century. As Clarkson (2005) surmises, "Wilfred Laurier was a little off in his prediction that the twentieth century would belong to Canada. Even if the last century did not belong to Canada, Canada turns out to have belonged to the Liberal Party" (p. 284).

Michael Ignatieff and the Leader's Discourse

A self-proclaimed "lifelong Liberal" (Ignatieff, 2005; 2006)—having campaigned for Lester B. Pearson and Pierre Trudeau—Michael Ignatieff was elected under the Liberal party banner, as the Member of Parliament (MP) for Etobicoke-Lakeshore in January 2006 (Liberal Party, 2010). World renown, as a scholar, journalist and international commentator, Ignatieff would run unsuccessfully for the leadership of the Liberal party in December 2006. He would serve as deputy leader of the party until being appointed party leader in January 2009—he was

ratified as party leader at the Liberal Leadership Convention in May 2009—and has served as Leader of the Official Opposition ever since.

McAllister (2008) suggests that within the Westminster system of Parliamentary democracy, "governments and sometimes even oppositions are often labeled after the leader…rather than the party they lead" (p.2). A read through of Clarkson (2005) and Duffy (2002) will justify any claim that it has largely been Liberal leaders themselves who have been framed as party spokesmen. Therefore, this study assumes that as party leader, Michael Ignatieff's discourse on expanding access to PSE is, in fact, the party's accepted discourse on expanding access to PSE.

Researcher Reflexivity

As expressed by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000), in poststructuralist studies, "the subjectivity of the researcher is particularly prominent" (p.168). This means that while interpreting findings, the researcher will likely be influenced by an inherent bias. With that in mind, it is important to recognize the researcher's reflexivity in studying Michael Ignatieff's discourse on expanding access to PSE.

Similar to Ignatieff, the researcher considers himself a "lifelong Liberal", and acknowledges his role in the construction and reconstitution of any Liberal party discourse. The researcher was first introduced to Liberal politics and party structure in 2002, when he was elected to the New Brunswick Young Liberal Association Executive. Soon after, the researcher was selected as a youth delegate for Paul Martin at the 2003 Liberal Leadership Convention in Toronto where Martin was elected party leader. Introduced to the party's internal structure at a

young age, the researcher was heavily influenced by Liberal rhetoric of a strong and united

Canada, and the party's role as Canada's natural governing institution.

Between 2005 and 2007, the researcher worked on Parliament Hill for two Liberal party

MPs, thus gaining credible insight into the inner workings of the party's structure and

discourse—both in government and opposition. In 2006, the researcher was recruited to Michael

Ignatieff's leadership team as a member of his national youth executive. It was in this capacity

that the researcher became intimately aware of the prominence of Ignatieff's discourse on

expanding access to PSE. A recent university graduate at the time, the researcher became an

advocate of the need for the federal government to take an active role in expanding access to

PSE. This position was heavily influenced by the PSE discourse espoused by Ignatieff.

Soon after Ignatieff's unsuccessful bid for party leader, the researcher left his position on

Parliament Hill and within a year had returned to academic life. Despite the researcher's

continuing loyalty to the Liberal party, this new role in academia provides the researcher with an

opportunity to be removed from the Liberal party's internal structure, and to study party

discourse from a distance. It is in this view that the researcher undertook a study of Ignatieff's

discourse on PSE.

The researcher remains an advocate for a more accessible PSE system in Canada, and has

privileged research that emphasizes PSE's role as an important economic and social force in a

progressive society. It is the researcher's hope that Ignatieff's discourse can be presented as

objectively as possible. Despite this, Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) contend, "Not even

procedure-steered qualitative research can avoid letting value-judgments, interpretations and a

whole host of—often subconscious or non-reflected—choices as regards language, perspective,

metaphors, focus, representation and so on pervade the whole research process" (p.168).

Methodology

Deconstruction

The method of analysis for this study of Michael Ignatieff's discourse on expanding access to PSE is a textual deconstruction. Deconstruction, as a process of poststructuralist inquiry, finds its roots in the writings of Jacques Derrida (1976; 1978), who used the method to examine, or re-read, philosophical texts. Prassad (2005) explains that "deconstruction can open up new strategies for interrogating administrative and organizational texts" (p. 239) as well. Essentially, as informed by whole idea of the poststructuralist thought, deconstruction allows texts to be subject to rigorous rhetorical analysis, thus calling our unexamined assumptions into question (Prassad, 2005). Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) characterize the method as a "free play" (p.155), while Prassad (2005) cautions that "Deconstruction…does not come with grand promises of permanent empowerment and liberation, but with more tenuous guarantees of constant destabilization and critique, laced with irony" (p.241). It is in this view that Ignatieff's PSE discourse is analyzed and destabilized.

Comprehensive Texts for a Comprehensive Discourse

As indicated in the literature on the importance of a strong and accessible PSE system (e.g., Corak, Lipps & Zhao, 2004; de Broucker, 2005; Junor & Usher, 2005; Mendelson, 2006; Kirby, 2007; Cappon, 2008), any discussion about the direction of PSE policy should reflect a much larger debate about the collective goals that Canadians share. In fact, Cappon (2008) suggests that it is vitally important to recognize the links between PSE and the wider social and economic goals that Canadians hold. As such, three texts—written and spoken by Ignatieff—which include a PSE component as part of a much larger political strategy are examined and deconstructed.

Timeframe of Study

The three texts chosen cover the time period of March 2005 to May 2009. This timeframe is closely aligned with Michael Ignatieff's entrance into Canadian federal politics, as well as his emergence as a potential leader of the Liberal party, and his eventual acclamation as party leader. It is within this timeframe that Ignatieff's discourse on PSE, and Liberal politics, was constructed and reconstructed within the Liberal leadership frame. As such, the timeframe provides a valuable window in which to examine the discourse and its development. Not only were the texts chosen because they include a PSE discourse framed within a larger discourse, or because they fall within the appropriate timeline; the three texts were also chosen because of their ease of accessibility—archived on the internet, the researcher's familiarity with their content, as well as the context in which they were presented. Contextualization is an important consideration of this poststructuralist inquiry, as it is essential in understanding the historical emergence of the discourse within this political atmosphere (Lyotard, 1984).

The Chosen Texts

Michael Ignatieff's address to the 2005 Liberal Biennial Convention, titled "Liberal Values in the 21st Century", is the first text deconstructed. This speech was deemed by many commentators and media personalities (e.g. Akin, 2005) as Ignatieff's return to Canada in pursuit of elected office. The day following the speech, David Akin (2005) said, "Yesterday, some media reports suggested Ignatieff would make a great Liberal leader and a great Prime Minister…His speech was a remarkable political document" (¶1-2).

The second text chosen for deconstruction is Ignatieff's 2006 leadership policy pamphlet, titled "Agenda for nation building: Liberal leadership for the 21st century". This document was Ignatieff's primary policy document in his bid for the leadership of the Liberal party in 2006.

Although structured as a compilation of policy proposals, the text is framed as a friendly

narrative, in which Ignatieff speaks to Liberal party faithful.

The final text chosen for deconstruction is Ignatieff's "Speech Accepting the Leadership

of the Liberal Party of Canada", delivered May 2, 2009, at the Liberal Leadership Convention in

Vancouver. This speech represents the culmination of Ignatieff's three- to four-year bid for the

party leadership. It also offers a view into his discourse as the Leader of the Official Opposition,

a position he accepts, or at least espouses, as valuable to the Canadian political process.

Review of the Literature

A Progressive and Comprehensive Federal Government Role

As indicated in the literature (e.g., Corak, Lipps & Zhao, 2004; de Broucker, 2005; Junor

& Usher, 2005; Mendelson, 2006; Kirby, 2007; Cappon, 2008), PSE policy is a complex and

encompassing component of a progressive and inclusive Canadian society. Cappon (2008)

mentions such priorities as health, inclusiveness, a rising standard of living, tolerance,

accessibility, and social engagement, as national goals that are inextricably linked to Canada's

PSE system. Literature (e.g. Smiley, 1976; Shanahan & Jones, 2007) also indicates that the

federal government has a chief role to play in directing PSE policy, despite "Section 93 of the

Constitution Act, 1867 [which] specifically gives the provincial legislatures the exclusive power

to make laws in relation to education" (p. 32). In fact, in the late-1950's, the federal government

assumed responsibility for governing employment and income levels through the use of

generalized fiscal and monetary policies (Smiley, 1976). The result of this, as Conlon (2006)

points out, has been a substantial and sustained public investment in Canadian universities and

colleges. "Prior to the mid 1960s access to education in Canada was defined almost exclusively

by gender and income. That changed because the federal government made access to education a

fiscal priority" (Conlon, 2006, p. 2). Also, Shanahan and Jones (2007) explain that "the federal

government has jurisdiction over national defence, Indian affairs, national security (including

crime and prisons), external affairs, economic development, the territories and any other areas of

national interest. All of these areas intersect with post-secondary education" (p. 32).

Michael Ignatieff: A Progressive PSE Discourse

       In all three texts examined, Michael Ignatieff delivers a PSE discourse very much in-line

with these two elements of PSE literature. In the first text, "Liberal Values in the 21st Century",

Ignatieff (2005) states:

> On education, I think we should go further…we need to use federal power to invest in education—especially post-secondary education—and set the standards nationally that we need in order to make education an engine of mobility for our people and an engine of productivity for our economy. Let's not get tangled up in federal-provincial battles over jurisdiction. Let's work together to make Canadians the best educated, most literate, numerate, skilled people in the world (¶58).
> .

    In "Agenda for Nation Building: Liberal leadership for the 21st Century", he

(Ignatieff, 2006) says:

> Education is freedom. It allows Canadians to create opportunity and hope, to make themselves artists of their own lives…The federal government should also work with the provinces to eliminate all remaining barriers—of income and family circumstance—to post-secondary education…Improving education in Canada's regions is the key to economic development outside Canada's major metropolitan areas (pp. 9-10).

    In his 2009 acceptance speech he (Ignatieff) exclaims:

> A strategy for [economic] recovery must be a strategy for learning. Investing in Canadians to create the jobs of tomorrow…We must create a society where learning is a way of life and learning is life-long…Where every student who gets the grades gets to go—to the best higher education in the world…A Canada where every new Canadian has the chance to work hard and achieve their goals, like my father did (¶51-65).

A Growing Accessibility Gap

In each of the three texts, Ignatieff consistently employs a discourse of PSE as a driver of social cohesion and economic opportunity, as well as citing the need for strong federal government involvement in PSE policy. Also, Ignatieff acknowledges the growing accessibility gap currently plaguing the Canadian PSE system. This recognition draws from the literature (e.g. Looker & Lowe, 2001; Finnie, 2002; Corak, Lipps & Zhao, 2004; Finnie, Laporte & Lascelles, 2004; de Broucker, 2005; Junor & Usher, 2005; Conlon, 2006; and Cappon, 2008), which argues that the current role played by the federal government has led to—directly and indirectly—socio-economic barriers to PSE. In fact, Looker (2001); Looker and Lowe (2001); Finnie, Laporte and Lascelles (2004); de Broucker (2005); Junor and Usher (2005); Mendelson (2006); Cappon (2008) and Theissen (2009), all contend that there exist multiple social, cultural and political accessibility issues to PSE, which are not directly financial in nature. It is important to note, however, that none of the literature holds that non-financial barriers exist in isolation of financial barriers. In his discourse, Ignatieff routinely speaks of the plight of those from disadvantaged socio-economic situations. He consistently acknowledges that it is the federal government's responsibility to rectify this inequity.

The Plight of Aboriginals

There is a well-developed body of literature that deals specifically with the plight of Aboriginals, as well as other minority racial groups, in accessing PSE (e.g. Mendelson, 2006; Shanahan & Jones, 2007; Theissen, 2009). Mendelson (2006) states that, "the success of Aboriginal people in our postsecondary education (PSE) system is, or should be, of vital interest to all Canadians" (p. 1). Mendelson (2006) goes on to say, "Our future social well being and

economic prosperity, particularly in Western and Northern Canada, rests at least partly on better

results for Aboriginal Canadians in the postsecondary education system" (p. 1). This is an issue

consistently addressed in Ignatieff's PSE discourse.

In "Liberal Values in the 21st Century" Ignatieff (2005) states:

Can we really say the prosperity of the last thirty years has been equally shared? We know it hasn't. We know there are more than a million children living in poverty in Canada. We know that these children come from the families of recent immigrants, minorities and aboriginal peoples. A Liberal doesn't turn away from these facts. Liberals face them and do something about them (¶57).

In "Agenda for Nation Building: Liberal leadership for the 21st century" he

(Ignatieff, 2006) iterates:

The federal government should also work with the provinces to eliminate all remaining barriers—of income and family circumstance to post-secondary education, especially for Aboriginal Canadians (p. 9).

In the 2009 speech, Ignatieff indicates:

A strategy for recovery must be a strategy for learning. That means every Aboriginal child gets a world-class, not a second-class education (¶51&61).

Symmetry: Literature and Discourse

The three texts establish that Ignatieff's discourse on expanding access to PSE is

consistent with the discourse that calls for a more progressive PSE system in Canada. As such, it

is important to deconstruct this discourse within the context in which it is employed by Ignatieff.

The study, therefore, shifts focus to analyze the larger discourse at play within these rhetorical

texts.

Tools for Analysis

Lye (1996) describes reading texts in the deconstructive mode as "not a matter of decoding the message", but as "a matter of entering into the thoughtful play of contradiction, multiple references, and the ceaseless questioning of conclusions and responses" (¶27). Deconstruction is a loose methodology that adheres to no strict structure, and is therefore, applicable in a variety of formats. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) even suggest that the slogan "anything goes" (p.184) is well in harmony with the poststructuralist endeavor of deconstruction. As such, the methodological tool used in the deconstruction of the chosen texts is a six-step process, loosely informed by seven-step process of Ngwenyama (2001).

In this instance, the researcher's deconstruction was a free play structured around the following six signposts: 1) Identifying dichotomies and dualities; 2) Reinterpretating the dichotomies; 3) Taking away the dichotomist authority; 4) Denying the plot; 5) Unveiling the other side of the story; and 6) Stating what is between the lines. The initial intention of the research was to examine contradictions in discourse between the three texts, however, no such contradictions appeared and that route was quickly abandoned. As such, the deconstruction process was a destabilization of all three texts, taken as one narrative. This was possible as Ignatieff essentially tells the same story in all three cases.

After a close reading of the three texts, the six signposts were settled upon. Although, throughout the deconstruction process it was difficult for the researcher to strictly adhere to one sequenced method. Jacques Derrida (1984) himself, lends justification to this chaotic process as he says that the deconstructive process would be a danger to the poststructuralist stance if it were to become an available set of rule-governed procedures.

The Deconstruction Process and Analysis

Step One

The first step in the deconstruction process was to identify the dichotomies educed within the texts (Ngwenyama, 2001). In the case of these three texts, four "themes" consistently emerged as dichotomies: protecting and enhancing national unity; preserving and defending national sovereignty; advancing the cause of social justice; and strengthening [and recovering] the economy. Examples of the discursive elicitation of the themes found in each text are as follows:

> As I see it, the Liberal party has three essential purposes: To protect and enhance our national unity, to preserve and defend our national sovereignty, to advance the cause of social justice (Ignatieff, 2005, ¶8).

> A nation-building agenda must have four basic priorities: Strengthening a sustainable economy; Strengthening the spine of our citizenship; Strengthening our unity as a people; and Strengthening our place in the world (Ignatieff, 2006, p. 5).

> The Canadian way means social solidarity and the inclusion of all…The Canadian way is a way for the whole world…The Canadian way is not the easy way…Let us get back to the Canadian way (Ignatieff, 2009, ¶47,83,87&117)

It is important to note, that the researcher found instances in which the PSE discourse was used to inform each of these four themes.

Step Two

The second step in the deconstruction process was reinterpretation. Using the same story particulars (Ngwenyama, 2001) in the texts, the researcher reconstituted the themes, which at first seemed to be given equal footing, into a particular hierarchy. In fact, upon a second close reading of the texts, the "unity" theme emerged as the dominant and overarching narrative of Ignatieff's rhetoric. As such, a reinterpretation of the three texts sees the other three themes used to inform

the larger "unity" discourse, as well as the "unity" discourse informing the other three themes.

Examples of this hierarchical dichotomy are seen as follows:

> Liberals also understand the relationship between unity and justice…Our unity matters not just to Canadians, but to the world…We must remain a light unto the nations…Liberals understand that you can't have a united county unless you have a just society, and a just society is an equal one (Ignatieff, 2005, ¶28,30,32&51).

> A national project worthy of our best efforts must be comprehensive. It should address all Canadians, our entrepreneurs and business leaders, our Aboriginal peoples, our new immigrants, our farmers and fishermen, and our urban and rural poor. It should offer our federal government a co-ordinating goal and purpose. Above all else, our Liberal vision should bring us together as a people (Ignatieff, 2005, p. 5).

> We are here to rededicate ourselves to the central task of our party: to offer our people the uniting vision that will inspire us all to better days…When they do [ask us to form their next government], all our efforts will be focused on one task: To unite our people again…I came back to Canada convinced that our national unity is worth every effort (Ignatieff, 2009, ¶18,39&79).

Step Three

The third deconstruction was taking away the authority of the "unity" discourse within the three texts. This step served to problematize the usage of the other three themes. Problematization, a Foucauldian term, involved highlighting paradoxes and difficulties with the usage of the themes (Leitch & Motion, 2007). The researcher rhetorically asked himself, "If sovereignty, economic strength, and social justice aren't used to propagate the unity discourse, what are they used for?" In fact, the researcher found that none of the sub-themes served any structural purpose within the texts other than to perpetuate the idea that the Liberal—and Ignatieff's—purpose is to maintain and strengthen national unity.

Step Four

Step four involved identifying the plot and purpose of the discourse that is espoused within the three texts, so as to expose its tentativeness as a micro-historical development. In this

instance, the researcher discovered that Ignatieff's plot centered upon the idea that the Liberal party has been, and always will be the unifying institution in Canadian society. An example of this narrative, which is delivered throughout each text, is most explicitly expressed in "Liberal Values for the 21st Century":

> Our party represents the nation, ocean to ocean. We are more than a machine for winning elections. We are the governing party of our people. We are the coalition— between regions, languages, peoples—that holds our nation together. Our core commitment is to stand by the common standards and national programs that make us one nation (Ignatieff, 2005, ¶10-11).

Uncovering the Plot. By extracting the above excerpt, and identifying it as a consistent plot throughout the texts, the researcher was able to link Ignatieff's contemporary discourse with the "unity" discourse that was born of Liberal party culture in the 1960's. Clarkson (2005), in fact, identifies this same cultural (contextual) condition, in *The Big Red Machine*. In speaking of the Trudeau era of Liberal leadership, Clarkson (2005) states:

Instead of brokering inter-regional conflicts, the parties developed a "pan-Canadian" mission, by which they performed an integrating function from coast to coast through policies aimed at constructing a national identity (multiculturalism, bilingualism, and the adoption of the maple-leaf flag) and societal cohesion (medicare, pensions, and other social security measures) (p. 14).

Essentially, the plot employed by Ignatieff is shown to have been established in the Trudeau doctrine of Keynesian politics—which finds its deeper roots in the 1945 to 1968 time period (Gagnon, 2000). .

Gagnon (2000) states, "Trudeau is arguably the most important figure in the history of Canadian federalism" (p. 16). In pursuit of his 1968 election platform for a "just society", as well as the multiculturalism project of the 1960's and 1970's (Gagnon, 2000), Trudeau inspired the

"unity through diversity" discourse that still informs Liberal party culture today. This discourse, in fact, has come to pervade all of Canadian culture as if it were a natural, objective and eternal truth. Because of this, the researcher believes that Ignatieff tries to utilize it to his advantage.

Step Five

Upon exposing the plot employed by Ignatieff, the researcher undertook step five of the textual deconstruction. This involved a literal "free play" in re-crafting the plot to highlight silent components not addressed in the discourse. As Ngwenyama (2001) says, "Stories have plots, scripts, scenarios, recipes and morals. Turn these around" (p. 8). In a sense, the researcher was able to demonstrate the hesitancy of the Liberal ideal of the party being the unifying and hegemonic institution of Canadian society. The reconstitution—altered story—composed by the researcher is as follows:

> Our party represents the nation, in the areas we need to gain enough seats to call ourselves a national party. We are a machine for winning elections. As such, we have been the governing party of our people. We build strategic coalitions—within regions, languages, peoples—that allow us to be the governing party.

This is fundamentally the thesis of *The Big Red Machine* (Clarkson, 2005). The Liberal party has consistently been able to build inter- and intra-regional coalitions to sufficiently garner the support of a majority of Canadians. "For it [Liberal party] remains the only machine able to deliver electoral success in a Canadian polity still deeply fractured on regional and ideological lines" (Clarkson, 2005, p. 284). As such, it can be argued that the Liberal party has been the hegemon of Canadian politics, simply because of its ability to win elections.

Step Six

Gramsci argues that hegemony is the expression of a power bloc rather than a unified ruling class. By this term he meant a set of associations and alliances of ruling

interests that is ascendant in culture and therefore recognizes divisions of interest

within the power bloc and that ascendancy requires constant negotiation and

bargaining both within the leading power bloc and within subordinate groups and

classes (Rojek, 2007, p. 41).

By exposing the "other side of the story" with a "free play", the researcher has unveiled

the supposed 'grand narrative' of Liberal hegemony, that being; the Liberal party is the natural

governing party because of their ability to unify a diverse Canadian polity. This 'grand

narrative', as it turns out, can be deconstructed to reveal a micro-historical and emergent story,

cast and recast by Liberal leaders to perpetuate the idea of political power both within the Liberal

party, and among Canadians. As tendered by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000), "Deconstruction

thus means that an almost invisible crack in the façade of a work will prove to be a symptom of a

flaw in the entire edifice" (p. 154). The edifice of "Liberal hegemony" is not a natural truth, but

rather a fragile and tentative saga of a Liberal politics built upon electoral success.

Back to PSE

Despite its use as a piece of a larger discourse of unity and Liberal hegemony, Michael

Ignatieff's discourse on expanding access to PSE does exhibit the progressive and inclusive

characteristics that are highlighted within the literature. As such, the researcher finds Ignatieff's

discourse of making the system more accessible, genuine. It was never the intention of the

researcher to uncover a sinister motive in Ignatieff's discourse, but rather to destabilize his

narrative to unveil the larger issues at play. In fact, Ignatieff has a history of using education as a

discourse through which to champion the national unity cause; a history that precedes his

entrance into political life. In his 2000 book, *The Rights Revolution*, Ignatieff warns that without

a commonly taught history, Canada's different "nations" may drift further apart, and that a

continuous dialogue between them is required for the nation-state to remain peacefully intact.

Ignatieff is adept, as have been earlier Liberal leaders, at using the unity discourse to—as

Gramsci would say—negotiate and bargain between a plurality of interests within Canadian

society. This negotiation is as much about highlighting areas of strength within the discourse, as

it is about ignoring areas of weakness. Ignatieff's PSE discourse provides a clear example of this

phenomenon. He, in his texts, ignores the role played by the Liberal governments of the mid-

1990's in drastically cutting funding use by the provinces to fund PSE.

As Shanahan and Jones (2007) mention, "As part of a broader strategy to reduce the

federal deficit, the new government's 1995 budget drastically reduced financial transfers to the

provinces for health, education and welfare" (p. 33). Conlon (2006) argues that "federal funding

cuts undermine the ability of the federal government to develop a sustainable, long term strategy

to promote access for low-income Canadians" (p. 2). Neither of these two elements are discussed

when Ignatieff speaks about PSE. However, through deconstruction, we discover that

highlighting such downfalls of Liberal policy would be detrimental to the PSE discourse's ability

to inform the unity discourse, and subsequently the discourse of Liberal hegemony.

Concluding Discussion

Gagnon (2000) states the Canadian Federation was built upon the conflicting imperatives

of unity and diversity. This conflict is well aligned with a poststructuralist paradigm, which

emphasizes "ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction and fragmentation" (Alvesson & Skoldberg,

2000, p. 191). Despite the Liberal party's ability—over the past 60 years—to fashion itself as the

provider of unity in Canada, a deconstruction of that discourse reveals the problem in blindly

adhering to such a totalitarian train of thought. Clarkson (2005) even highlights that there has been an internal fracture within the Liberal party membership itself for decades.

Although only a first step in the process, this study provides a strong case for the need to deeply examine political discourse, in order to uncover the tentativeness of its applicability in contemporary society. In fact, the current incarnation of the Liberal party would be well-guided by an examination of its current rhetoric (discourse). Bryden (2006) and Clarkson (2006) argue that since 2006—when Stephen Harper came to power—the Liberal party has lost its once firm grasp on the "unity mantle". As such, it may be time for the party, under Ignatieff's leadership, to reconsider this traditional narrative, and craft for itself a new message for Canadians; a new discourse which can help the party win successive elections.

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