

July 18, 2010

Marjory's Two Frenzied Days "On the Bus" with Michael Ignatieff

Several people have asked me "What was it like to ride the Liberal Express with Federal Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff?"

It was a swinging pendulum. We went from calm-and-orderly to energy-and-bustle and back again to calm numerous times as we went to events in Brockville, Kingston, Napanee, Peterborough, Cobourg, Markham and Ajax - all in two days.

Once settled on the bus, all was calm-and-orderly. The logistics crew took roll calls to ensure that no one was left behind. People settled in.

Who sat across from Mr. Ignatieff was scheduled to allow Members of Parliament, candidates, and media access for a private consult or interview.

Before each stop MPs and candidates briefed Mr. Ignatieff on local issues. I had the opportunity to spend an hour between Cornwall and Brockville discussing the concerns of Leeds-Grenville.

Mr. Ignatieff was keenly interested in the need for jobs in the cities and towns of eastern Ontario, and pleased that residents at the doors express support for our food policies: improving access to locally grown food; better labelling so consumers know its source; a total re-think of farm assistance programs; and more inspections at the boarder to ensure that imported food is safe and Canadian producers are competing on a level playing field with imports.

At the back of the bus the national media sat around their table writing furiously on their laptops, blogging and preparing their stories. WiFi kept us connected to the world outside.

Reporters from local papers who joined the bus for one or two stops also had one-on-one interviews with Mr. Ignatieff. He also did telephone interviews from the bus.

Between towns MPs, candidates and staff read newspapers, were glued to their "Blackberries" or chatted. Travelling the long grey line between towns gave everyone a chance to get to know colleagues better, and exchange news and views about everything from national issues to their personal interests to the needs of their constituents.

Kirsty Duncan, MP for Etobicoke North told me about her support for MS patients trying to get access to a new therapy and how her office helps hundreds of families in crisis every week.

Mauril Belanger, MP for Ottawa Vanier and I shared ideas for bringing the next generation of jobs to eastern Ontario cities and towns like Brockville and Prescott.

Yes, this was the calm discussion between stops.

Then – we'd arrive, and it was all energy-and-bustle.

The media got off the bus first, then the students in red T-shirts to form a colourful backdrop. Then caucus and candidates hustled up the aisle with – "Go Go Go". Mr. Ignatieff emerged and waded into the cheering crowd. There were introductions, group shots, discussions and smiles all round.

At every stop Mr. Ignatieff spoke and took questions from the local media or the crowd. Unscripted and without using notes he addressed both national and local issues.

Local candidates said a few words, then more handshakes and photographs. One could not say “no” when children asked for a picture, and it was a struggle to gracefully extract Mr. Ignatieff from each conversation – and the crowd.

When we returned to the calm of the bus we all waited for the air conditioning to kick in.

The staff photographer and the technical support team got to work downloading pictures and writing blogs to up-load to the Liberal web site. They sat around another table covered with computers, Blackberries, and cameras - and the occasional cold hamburger as they fed themselves and the voracious 24 hour news cycle.

Mr. Ignatieff was allowed little rest as he was immediately briefed for the next event.

In two days on the bus we attended whistle stops, town halls question-and-answer sessions, a briefing and session of hammering nails at a Habitat for Humanity project, a Board of Trade lunch and a celebration for our uniformed public servants – the military, fire and police services.

We started fresh in the mornings and ended the days wrinkled and weary.

But my time on the bus was exhilarating, interesting and educational - an amazing way to learn about our country. I can only imagine the sense of Canada that will be gained by Mr. Ignatieff and the Liberal Team after a summer “On The Bus”.

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Marjory Loveys, Federal Liberal Candidate, Leeds - Grenville

Marjory@MarjoryLoveys.ca

613-865-8971

