

Road to Redemption: The Liberal Party of Canada, 2006–2019**Brooke Jeffrey, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021, pp. 336**Richard Bisailon, Concordia University (richard.bisailon@concordia.ca)

Conducting a detailed retrospective of a political party's waxing and waning electoral fortunes is fraught with certain dilemmas. On the one hand, the successful author must have trusted access to those within the party, while at the same time demonstrating a certain degree of analytical objectivity. Brooke Jeffrey has shown throughout a series of writings that she knows the Liberal party of Canada well and has the ability and candour to conduct a fair analysis. In *Road to Redemption: The Liberal Party of Canada, 2006–2019*, Jeffrey seeks to parse the causes of that party's disastrous electoral performance through a series of elections beginning with the 2004 minority government under Paul Martin and running through the Stéphane Dion and Michael Ignatieff years, covering the 2006, 2008 and 2011 elections. She puts forward "five broad areas in which the party was in serious difficulty for some time" (7). These include the Liberal party's apparent "messiah complex" in choosing new leadership. The remaining four areas are closely interconnected and include a need for the party to "modernize its operations and streamline its constitution"; its ability to raise funds under evolving regulatory limitations; a shrinking national base of active and financially committed supporters; and finally an ideological identity crisis that left the party and its platforms increasingly drawn away from liberal values.

To the first area examined—leadership choice and the Liberals' apparent messiah complex—Jeffrey dedicates four of the ten chapters of the book. Notwithstanding the profound differences of character, style and background between Paul Martin, Stéphane Dion and Michael Ignatieff, the author shows that the preoccupation with selecting a winning leader after the three consecutive majority mandates under Jean Chrétien in the 1990s simply did not produce anyone who resonated with either the electorate or even with the party as a whole. Deep internecine divisions held over from the Chrétien and Martin years, combined with constitutional and organizational divisions left unaddressed for decades, meant that none of these leaders enjoyed the wholesale support of the party. The problems became self-perpetuating in that a series of leadership races meant that the other structural issues remained on the back burner.

Even a reasonably well-informed reader will be surprised by the organizational disarray within the Liberal party that Jeffrey documents. What is also quite striking is how this and the other four factors identified as contributing to the party's decline have such deep intertwined roots. More surprising still is the apparent fact that neither the implications of the Liberals' own 1974 Elections Expenses Act, nor their Bill C-24 changing the Canada Elections Act in 2003, were factored into the party's need for organizational change in both fundraising and building its base. These issues constituted a vicious circle wherein increasingly thin finances impeded the creation of the kind of membership list and analytical database that could have improved fundraising in the first place. Jeffrey shows us that by the time of the disastrous 2011 election, the Liberal party of Canada was broke, and broken. Reduced to third-party status, their leader Michael Ignatieff defeated in his own riding, and with a record low number of 34 seats, the Liberal party had already been written off by many analysts.

The 2011 election becomes the point of departure for the Liberals' *Road to Redemption*. Out of government, out of opposition and assured of four years before the next election, the combination of external shock and internal pressure necessary to prompt radical change was present. Jeffrey describes the steps taken toward addressing those five problematic areas. First, delay both the next leadership race and push back the scheduled biennial convention from fall 2011 to early 2012. Then elect an interim leader and delay the leadership convention

until April 2013. Given this breathing room, the National Board of the Liberal party released the discussion paper “A Roadmap to Renewal” laying out the party’s goals that would need to be met before the next election. There was to be more than a change of leaders: there would be changes in leadership; a reorganization of the party’s constitution; closer coordination and harmonization between the national, provincial and local party bodies; the addition of a “supporter” status to create a looser but broader base; investment in a universal database for both organization and fundraising; and an open, competitive leadership race.

That the first and most substantial issue addressed here was the messiah complex is even more significant when Jeffrey turns to the 2013 leadership race. Charismatic leadership requires both a leader and a mission. Justin Trudeau clearly had a vision for party renewal that strongly resonated with the party’s membership. This included a refusal to merge the party with the New Democratic party (NDP), a return to core liberal values, an end to the internecine warfare that had plagued the party, accelerating the technical and structural modernization of the party and taking the high road during the next election. The way forward demanded the broadening of the generational base and the inclusion of otherwise under-represented minorities—indeed majorities, in the case of women in politics. In 2015, the rejuvenated Big Red Machine successfully sold this renewed and ideologically liberal vision wholesale to the Canadian electorate. Jeffrey has argued well that the fundamental challenges she has identified in her exposition had been addressed to the point of 2015’s electoral redemption.

The text would have ended there but for the Liberal party’s fall back into minority in 2019. To her credit, Jeffrey expanded her initial project to address this apparent backsliding of the party’s rebirth as “Canada’s natural ruling party.” She addresses, with candour, the gaffes, scandals and political missteps that increasingly eroded much of the electorate’s trust and their belief in the new Liberal vision. Perhaps my critique here does not speak so much to the factors identified by the author but rather to those *not* addressed in her analysis. A certain hubris and a cumulative series of political scandals have also plagued the Liberal party throughout the past century. Jeffrey accurately details those factors that pushed Trudeau’s Liberals into minority in 2019. With another imminent election, it remains to be seen whether a continued series of real and perceived errors will further jade the electorate in 2021.