

CANADA'S PRINCE MACHIAVELLI?

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By William Christian, [HistoryWire](#), 20 October 2009

✘ The following article is transcribed from HistoryWire Online, which is one of the sections of Institut Historica Dominion. The website states, *"The goal of HistoryWire, is to engage Canadians in a dialogue with their past: revealing precedents, celebrating accomplishments, debating issues, learning from our mistakes. It is our collective memory wired to the present through articles, blogs, and video. HistoryWire invites your perspectives, your stories, and your opinions on issues such as the relevance of history in understanding current events, the importance of the teaching of history in our schools, and the regional, ethnic, language and gender issues that comprise the Canadian experience. At the heart of Historica's mandate, informing all its programs and now we hope of this online initiative, is the belief that history matters and that indeed it is critical to citizenship and the health of our democracy."*

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When I was teaching political science, one of the standard works my students read was Machiavelli's classic, *The Prince*. Every political science student has to study *The Prince*, but exactly how useful is it in Canadian politics in the twenty-first century?

When you defeat your enemies, slaughter their wives and children, their heirs no longer present a lingering threat to your regime, Machiavelli taught. Now really. Can you see Michael Ignatieff emerging from 24 Sussex Drive after a general election, blood dripping from his stiletto, grinning maniacally, the key to Laureen's Harley in his hand? OK, I grant that you can imagine him grinning maniacally. Something like a maniacal grin appears on his face all the time, but the Harper kids are really cute and there is no way that anyone would get the key to Laureen's Harley. No way.

Another useless piece of advice that Machiavelli offered was that you should show your strength as

a leader. If a trusted lieutenant betrays you, make sure that the world wakes up the next day to find him hanging by his heels in the market place. Wise words indeed, and how many of us haven't wished there were days when we could have been Tony Soprano? Alas, for Ignatieff, there was no way that Montreal commuters were going to awake to the edifying spectacle of Denis Coderre hanging by his heels, swaying upside down in the gentle autumn breeze in Place d'Armes as they rushed by on their morning commute. Machiavelli never envisioned the indignity of having the leader listen to a deposed lieutenant on a talk show without even having the option of poisoning his drink as any decent Borgia would have done under similar circumstances.

When Machiavelli was not giving specific advice that was useless, he was giving general advice that was equally useless. There are three kinds of leaders, he wrote. There are leaders who could take good advice if they heard it, others who don't need good advice because they are wise and know what is good for their country, and a few who could take good advice if only they could find someone who could give it to them. The latter is usually impossible because the leader is normally surrounded by sycophants, fools, and people who want his job.

Harper and Layton fall into the first or second categories. They don't seem to listen to anyone. Layton can't listen because he's talking all the time. Harper doesn't listen because he doesn't trust anyone. He may be a Very Wise Man, Machiavelli's ideal prince, or he may just fall into Machiavelli's third category of a leader who won't listen anyway. Ignatieff listens a lot, though whether he is listening to the right people is anyone's guess. One day he listens to Denis Coderre and says he won't appoint Martin Cauchon to a seat in Montreal. The next day he listens to other people and does. Then he says he won't have a Quebec lieutenant, and the next day he listens to people who tell him that the Liberal constitution requires that he have one, so he appoints Marc Garneau. That is a lot of listening, but is he listening to the right people? Machiavelli can't tell us who the right people are.

Be a lion sometimes, sometimes be a fox, Machiavelli advised. Sometimes be cunning, sometimes be strong, he meant. Ignatieff was a pretty clever academic. One of the finest lectures on any topic I ever heard was a lecture by Ignatieff's mentor, Sir Isaiah Berlin, on Machiavelli. I'm sure that Ignatieff understands Machiavelli as well as anyone, at least in an intellectual way.

Harper, however, understands him viscerally. Harper's good at sneaky. He is also pretty good at nasty, and he seems to be getting better at both. If the Liberals aren't going to continue to plummet in the polls, Ignatieff is going to have to learn very quickly how to knife (figuratively) people like Dennis Coderre in the back before he gets shafted himself.

Then he is going to have to start worrying about how tough Harper has become. I don't think he has to get a food taster before he eats in the Parliamentary Restaurant.

Yet...

