

Canada on the banks of the Nile

By James Ron

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Only time will tell whether Michael Ignatieff's Liberal party has the charisma and savvy to win the next federal election.

As befits a man with broad international experience, however, Ignatieff's new vision for Canada's foreign policy should intrigue all but the most cynical.

Canada, Ignatieff argues, can become a major hub in the globe-spanning networks of knowledge, diplomacy, culture, and business that shape our world. We have the people, the connections, and the diversity to make this happen. It would be a big help, he argues, if the federal government were keen to help move this process along.

What are global networks, and why should we care?

The networks Ignatieff is talking about are the informal, non-hierarchical flows of people, information, relationships, and goods. They bring with them ideas, power, and the potential for wealth, and often benefit those closest to -- or most embedded in -- their streams.

Networks are to the world what the Nile is to Egypt; they offer resources, stimulation and wealth-creation opportunities to those living nearby, while those living further from its banks struggle in isolation.

Or to use a more local example, networks help differentiate between cities, and between high- and low-value neighbourhoods within any urban space.

In today's North America, networked cities are exciting places to live, learn and work. They have the best schools, shops, and services, as well as the widest variety of bookstores, restaurants, and galleries. They are diverse and densely populated, but also reasonably safe and well serviced.

Poorly networked cities are also easy to identify. They have an isolated, parochial and stagnant feel, offering only limited products and services. The people are less dynamic, less knowledgeable, less engaged in the world around them. They also seem less hopeful about their futures.

Networks catapult cities to greatness -- think New York, London, or Paris, or Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. They have the best universities, the biggest reputations, and the most diverse populations. They attract the best and brightest immigrants, pulling in culture, people, and business like magnets.

If left unchecked, this kind of dynamism can become dysfunctional. In years past, New York was a crime ridden place to live, and even now, many would argue that Toronto is too unwieldy to work.

Networked cities often have mechanisms for self protection, however, including access to the world's best ideas on how to construct liveable space. Networked cities benefit from the best global thinking on green engineering, public transport, and urban planning

In Ignatieff's vision, Canada as a whole can become a more networked nation. More of us will sit on the banks of the River Nile, exchanging information, goods and ideas with other global hubs.

This networking will not be done for us by our diplomats and politicians; only the naïve would think that bureaucrats and parliamentarians can deliver on this promise.

Instead, it will be ordinary men and women who reach out and make things happen, working through a cacophonous civil society of non-governmental organizations, universities, colleges, businesses, and faith-based groups of all kinds.

The government's role in all this is to enable, support, and lead. With the right rules, investments, and encouragement, the government could help unleash the power of Canada's most motivated and internationally engaged citizens.

To an educator teaching some of the country's most exciting graduate students in international public affairs, this vision is a welcome breath of fresh air.

In today's Ottawa, the policy environment seems grey and oppressive. Our current leaders' views are narrow and cynical, and any attempts by bureaucrats or NGOs to create, build or engage are regarded as threats, rather than opportunities.

Our leaders are not well travelled people, and many seem drearily parochial about engaging with the world.

In recent months, moreover, the government has gone on the offensive, cowing non-governmental organizations and bureaucracies into submission, with everyone told to toe the line or risk dismissal.

In this kind of atmosphere, it is hard to encourage our talented and creative students to pursue an Ottawa-based career in international affairs.

If elected, Ignatieff says he will reverse this tide. His promise to create an internationally oriented Canada Youth Service seems particularly exciting, since these volunteers could promote Brand Canada in new ways, while adding value to our economy, culture, and educational system.

I'm no pollster; others are better equipped to predict whether Ignatieff's Liberals can win the public's trust.

I can, however, say that Ignatieff's vision of a vibrant, internationally engaged nation seems far more uplifting than what we currently have on offer.

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