

Team Tory ads pitch immigrants, young families

Commercials highlight party platform for election expected in next six months

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WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 24, 2005
UPDATED AT 8:17 AM EDT

OTTAWA -- The Conservative Party is launching television commercials in Ontario that portray leader Stephen Harper in a relaxed atmosphere making policy pitches to young families, immigrants and overburdened taxpayers.

The ads include other members of the Conservative caucus in a bid to highlight the team that Mr. Harper hopes to lead into government after the next election, which is expected in the next six months.

The ads, which are starting to run just as the governing Liberals hold their summer caucus retreat, are part of the second phase of the Conservatives' summer strategy.

The first part was heavily focused on Mr. Harper, who attempted to shed his stern image with a series of burger-flipping appearances at barbecues and festivals all over Canada. The second phase attempts to highlight the Conservative platform and the people who would enact it.

"It's really to show the message, the team that Harper has going into the election," Conservative MP John Reynolds said. "We're really proud of the team we've got. We've got a team of people who are young, much younger than the Liberal side."

The four new ads are running in Ontario, where the Conservatives need to make inroads to form the next government. Mr. Reynolds said the advertising campaign will eventually be shown in other parts of the country.

In the ads, Mr. Harper and his MPs deal with four themes -- health care, tax cuts, child care and allowing more immigrants into the work force -- as if they're engaged in informal conversations. There is an attempt at humour, although some of the performances are wooden.

On health care, the Conservatives promise to reduce waiting times for all Canadians, not just rich ones.

"That's the plan, and it's time Canadians knew it," Mr. Harper said.

He also promised to help immigrants get work for which they were trained in their native countries.

"It's time we stood up for hard-working immigrants," Mr. Harper said to the approval of immigrant Tory MPs.

On the economy, Mr. Harper said: "We've got to reduce waste and mismanagement and trim bureaucracy. . . . We'll keep taxes down, and make this the kind of country the world wants to invest in." The other MPs in the ads are Peter MacKay, Bev Oda, Rona Ambrose, Jim Prentice, Rahim Jaffer and Diane Finley.

"A drowning man will say anything," Ms. Ambrose said of the Liberal government's promises to fix health care.

The ads were shot last spring and contain no new policy announcements. Mr. Reynolds refused to reveal the cost.

He said the ads reinforce a key Conservative message to Canadians.

"You can spend your money more wisely than the government in some areas, and we also want to be fair to all Canadians and not just pick out sectors," he said.

The Conservative Party has been under attack recently for lacking new policies, and for Mr. Harper's inability to retain key members of his staff.

Mr. Harper's popularity appears to be plummeting, according to a recent poll by SES Research. It found the proportion of Canadians who rated him as the best potential prime minister of all the federal political leaders had dropped to 14 per cent from 27 per cent three months ago.

On the other hand, the Conservatives are beating the Liberals in fundraising, and Mr. Reynolds said that will make a bigger difference in the next election than the current polls.

"If an election were called tomorrow, what happens traditionally is that the government falls five points and the opposition goes up three or four," he said. "We'd be tied, so that's fine."