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Politics

August 31, 2005

Stephen Harper: riding to the rescue

After that incident with the vest, the Conservative leader's handlers strive to revive his image

JOHN GEDDES

How big a media buy would it take to make voters forget seeing a politician wearing a too-snug leather cowboy vest? This was the unspoken question that hung in the air as the Conservatives launched a series of four new TV commercials aimed at shoring up Stephen Harper's image before the House resumes sitting on Sept. 27. The ads, which began running last week mainly in vote-rich Ontario, aim to rebrand the Backward Hat Kid as the strong yet sensitive leader of a youthful, multicultural Tory posse that's out to gun down the Liberals in an election expected early next year. It's a perilous undertaking to try to glean useful information about a party's strategy from a single ad campaign, but in this case the signals seem clear -- and in some respects surprising.

The timing of the ad offensive is critical. Harper has endured a summer of miserable press reviews, symbolized by the widespread mocking of his appearance in ill-fitting western wear at the Calgary Stampede. So annoyed are his handlers at pundits who say Harper wasted the summer flipping burgers that his office recently issued a petulant-sounding news release ("Apparently, some commentators have taken the summer off . . ."), itemizing his more substantial speeches and meetings. Just who is tending to Harper's battered image, though, is unclear: he has lost a string of media aides in recent months. Then in mid-August, his chief of staff, Phil Murphy, exited suddenly. Power appears to have shifted to Doug Finley, one of Harper's two deputy chiefs, who is also the party's director of political operations. By straddling the leader's office and the party machine, some Tories say Finley might be well positioned to coordinate a rapid pre-election rebuilding phase.

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The ads show the direction Harper wants to go. The first thing that jumps out is what they are *not* about -- government ethics and the sponsorship scandal. Instead, they focus on shortening waiting times for health care, cutting taxes, giving parents more child-care choice, and helping immigrants enter the workforce. That's a radical departure from only a few months ago, when Harper was angrily vowing to try to force an election over revelations of Liberal wrongdoing that surfaced at Justice John Gomery's inquiry into the federal sponsorship program. The decision not to make trustworthiness a main theme in the ads suggests the Conservatives have accepted, at least for now, opinion poll evidence that Canadians no longer rank the sponsorship affair as a top-of-mind issue.

That could change in the fall. Public outrage might rise again when Gomery issues his report, slated for early November, on what happened to the sponsorship millions; his recommendations for policy changes are to follow in December. Prime Minister Paul Martin has promised to call an election within 30 days of that final report, which means Canadians might be called to the polls in February. But rather than assuming an election triggered by a probe into scandal will be about that scandal, the Tories are hedging their bets with the new ads, trying to build up their credibility on other policy files.

The ads are all in the same style. Hand-held cameras unsteadily follow the give-and-take as Harper talks policy with some of his most telegenic MPs. The setting is a storefront constituency office, and the atmosphere is one of faux informality, obviously scripted. While politicians are performers of a sort, these ads remind us that's not the same as being actors. Playing themselves, Harper and his supporting cast display talents that rise to about the level achieved in those home equity loan ads that run so often on Newsworld. To be fair, they are not working with deathless lines. "Hey, Jim," Harper calls out to MP Jim Prentice in one exchange, "how long have the Liberals been in power?" "Twelve years," Prentice responds glumly. It's not clear if Harper is just testing him, or if the idea is that he uses Prentice as a walking repository of mundane facts and figures. At another point, Deputy Leader Peter MacKay seems on the verge of cracking up, *Seinfeld*-style, as he bemoans Liberal health policy.

If the dialogue is weak, the scenes might still get across a few key messages. Harper is presented throughout as a team player, not the isolated figure he's often portrayed as. The reason for trying to emphasize



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the MPs around him is obvious: a recent poll by SES Research Associates found the proportion of Canadians who ranked him as the best potential prime minister of the federal party leaders had plunged to 14 per cent from 27 per cent three months ago.

Harper's summer appearances at fun-in-the-sun events were meant to present him as more approachable. But SES President Nik Nanos says that tactic risked eroding his reputation for seriousness, which, if packaged properly, might be a key asset. "He is recognized as thoughtful, articulate and bilingual, and yet people see him handing out ice cream cones and flipping hamburgers," Nanos says. "They shouldn't dress him up and make him be something that he's not."

The ads place Harper in a context that should fit better with perceptions and expectations of him: policy guy hashing over policies. But are these the right ones to be highlighting? Nanos argues that the Tories should play to their strengths. "You have to stick with what works," he says. "For any Conservative leader, it has to be about fiscal issues and taxes and the economy." Only one of the ads, a pitch for lower taxes, hits a Tory sweet spot. The others -- on health, child care and immigration -- are all about issues on which the Conservatives might face more voter suspicion. "Those issues that are outside of your franchise are issues to neutralize," Nanos says. "They are not issues that are going to firm up your core vote and swing voters to you."

Apparently, Harper doesn't see it that way. The ads take on the Liberals on their traditional social-policy turf. He's shown discussing child care with two young female MPs, Rona Ambrose and Helena Guergis. They promise more parental choice than the Liberal daycare policy. In the health ad, Harper slams the Liberal track record on wait times, and mentions that the public system is "the only one that my family has ever used." In case you missed it, that's an allusion to the fact that Paul Martin's physician offers, along with publicly covered care, privately insured services.

The ads are vague on the specifics of the coming Tory platform. Their success depends on whether the Ontario target audience buys the overall picture of a Harper who surrounds himself with a hip-looking group of MPs. Jonathan Rose, a Queen's University teacher and researcher on political advertising, expects voters to be on guard. "The use of female MPs and young MPs in the ads is such an obvious attempt to reframe the party as one that would appeal to younger people," Rose says. On the other hand, with the cowboy vote irretrievably lost, Harper needs to reach out for new support somewhere.

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