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A panic attack?

The Liberals always planned negative ads to tear down Harper. But they may have waited too long.

JOHN GEDDES

It was hard not to see those ads as a desperation ploy. Stephen Harper's face in extreme closeup coming ominously into focus, the narrator recounting a particular version of his views as if through clenched jaws, and the percussive soundtrack reminiscent of the old *NYPD Blue* score just before the action shifted to a crime scene -- all so grim it seemed the message could only have been cooked up in the sweaty heat of a Liberal campaign gone terribly wrong. Yet it would be a mistake to view last week's unleashing of a pack of TV attack ads as evidence of pure panic. Sure, the polls had swung harder in the Conservatives' favour than organizers had anticipated. But it's worth remembering that a senior Liberal told *Macleans's* several weeks before the campaign began that negative ads would be essential -- this was the key tactical lesson the Prime Minister's strategists drew from the 2004 election. "Voters just didn't respond to positive messages," the official said back in the pre-campaign calm, "but they had a hunger for negative ads."

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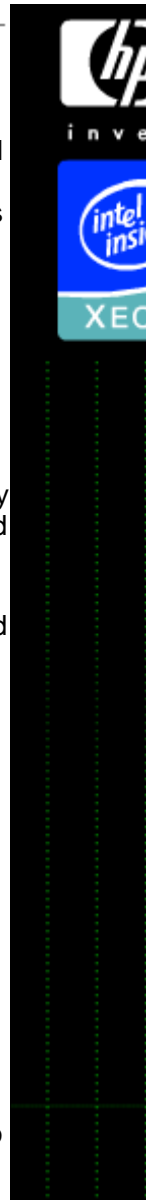


So going negative was always near the heart of the Liberals' plan, and their belief in the public's appetite for hard-hitting TV spots explains a lot about how the campaign unfolded. It's a major reason the Martin machine showed remarkably little interest in more routine campaign-trail slogging. It was different in the Tory camp. Harper's strategists always said that since voters tend to see him as too negative, they couldn't risk reinforcing that impression with bare-knuckle advertising. Instead, through four weeks of December electioneering, Harper stuck doggedly to a policy-a-day strategy. He would begin the typical morning by laying out a plank of the Conservative platform. It wasn't often exciting, but slowly an impression of Harper as a constructive, unthreatening campaigner took hold. Martin didn't seem worried enough to counterpunch much, though. His advisers had all but written off the first half of the unusually long eight-week campaign they had chosen. They made little secret of their intention to really get rolling only in the first week of January, when they would unveil their own policies -- and take aim at Harper.

But 2006 dawned with the Liberals in far worse shape than they had banked on. The December ground war waged by Harper had proven more effective than they expected -- which meant the Liberals' long-planned January air assaults would have to inflict that much more damage. The six-point lead the Liberals enjoyed on Dec. 20, according to the closely watched CPAC tracking poll conducted by SES Research, had turned into a three-point Tory advantage by Jan. 3. What happened? The big unexpected factor was news that the RCMP was investigating the Finance Department over a possible illegal leak of Finance Minister Ralph Goodale's announcement that Ottawa would not be imposing a tax on income trusts. Liberal insiders insist that it was this "externality" that hammered them -- not Harper's performance. The story derailed their plan to take the initiative as the campaign entered its post-holiday phase. Conservatives contend that while the RCMP revelation gave them a boost, it was Harper's methodical march through the weeks before that put him in a position to fully exploit it.

The election now rides on which interpretation of the Tory surge turns out to be true. If Harper's new stature rests on the solid foundation he poured in the campaign's first half, the Liberal ads will have trouble cutting him back down to size. But if the Conservative spike reflects mainly a reaction to fleeting news -- not only the income trusts investigation, but also the Options Canada story in Quebec, and serial Liberal campaign slip-ups -- then perhaps it could evaporate. As of late last week, with about 10 days to go before the Jan. 23 vote, Liberal strategists were still hoping their barrage of negative ads would lop about four points off a Conservative polling edge that then stood at nine percentage points. "We need to get the spread in the polls down to three, four, five points -- then it's a knife fight in the last few days," said one. "We need to get close enough for hand-to-hand combat."

The strategist didn't even bother pretending that selling Liberal policies might play a big part in the stretch-run recovery Martin was struggling to set in motion. When he released the complete Liberal platform in Toronto last week, little attempt was made to interest reporters travelling with him in a formal briefing on the document. The Liberals seemed perfectly content to keep attention focused on the negative ads they had launched two days earlier. They viewed the possibility of attention to their ideas as an undesirable distraction from the core aim of tearing down Harper. "Sometimes, you have the luxury of delivering more than one message at a



time," explained one Martin adviser. "This time, no. It all has to be one stream."

Martin's ability to carry a negative message should not be underestimated. His fierce tone in an almost frantic last push in the final few days of the 2004 campaign contributed mightily to the Liberal come-from-behind victory. This time, he shifted into rhetorical overdrive with nearly two weeks to go. In a lunch speech on the day he released his platform to the Canadian Club in Toronto -- not usually the occasion or the forum for a stemwinder -- Martin let loose. He was at his most intense in denouncing Harper's plan to cancel the Liberal government's daycare deals with the provinces. "He said that he would pull the plug on all that, that he would renege, that he would terminate our agreements," Martin said, "and deny Canadians the first new social program in a generation."

Pull the plug, renege, terminate, deny. Get used to those active verbs and more like them as the campaign heats up in the home stretch. Harper's short list of priorities does not contain good targets: pass a government ethics bill, cut the GST by a point, crack down on crime, give parents \$1,200 a year for every kid under 6, and try to negotiate a health care wait times guarantee with the provinces. But the Conservative leader looks considerably more vulnerable on several issues where he or other Tories have signalled they might reverse Liberal moves: pulling out of those daycare agreements, rethinking Canada's commitment to the Kyoto climate change treaty, reconsidering the U.S. plea for Canadian participation in George W. Bush's missile shield plan, refusing to go ahead with the recent \$5-billion-plus deal Martin struck to help Aboriginal communities.

These aren't the issues on which Harper wants to fight in the final days of the race. While he has answered direct questions on some of them -- telling Radio-Canada, for instance, that he would allow a free vote in the House on the controversial missile shield plan -- he clearly wants to keep the focus on his carefully crafted to-do list. The missile shield issue, along with the Kyoto treaty, offer the Liberals openings to claim that Harper would bring Ottawa more closely into orbit around Washington. The payoff line in one of those attack ads: "A Harper victory will put a smile on George W. Bush's face."

And at one of the biggest Martin rallies of the campaign, a raucous gathering of about 750 Liberals at a suburban Toronto hotel last week, the PM generated outraged roars from the partisan crowd with lines that tapped into anti-Bush sentiment as much as anti-Harper feelings. "He's described U.S. conservatives as a light and an inspiration," Martin said of his opponent, to howls from the crowd. "The farthest of the U.S. far right -- that's what Stephen Harper means when he says it's time for a change in Canada. Well, let me tell you, Stephen Harper -- the United States is our neighbour, it is not our nation."

That's combustible material. The question is whether Martin can light a fire in a contest that Harper has dominated largely by keeping cool. He has built support by steadily refurbishing his own image as an unthreatening choice - - gradually erasing what once looked like an untouchable Martin edge when it came to voters' opinion of which leader would make the best PM. According to the *Maclean's* Canada 20/20 Internet panel, Martin was viewed as the most competent leader by 36 per cent at the start of the race, compared to just 22 per cent for Harper. But by last week, Martin and Harper were tied at 30 per cent each in that competency rating. "It wasn't a sudden change," said Greg Lyle, managing director of Innovative Research

Group, the firm conducting the weekly Internet survey during the campaign. Harper steadily gained on Martin through the campaign in that crucial most-competent measure, Lyle says, creating a comfort level that allowed many voters to switch to the Tories as their ballot choice at about the campaign's mid-point.

Martin needs many of those switchers to come back to him. But in the early days after the launch of the negative ads on Jan. 10, there was no clear indication that they were doing the job. On Jan. 11, the SES poll showed the Conservatives at 38 per cent support nationally, the Liberals at 29 per cent, the NDP at 16 per cent, and the Bloc Québécois at 12 per cent. On Jan. 12, the Tories had climbed to 40 per cent, the Liberals had kept pace by notching up to 31 per cent, but the NDP and Bloc were both down two percentage points. SES president Nik Nanos said the NDP drop might represent support shifting to the Liberals, as left-of-centre voters spooked by the anti-Harper ads began to think strategically about stopping the Conservatives. "I do think that in the hard-hitting endgame, the real challenge will be for the NDP," said Toronto-area Liberal MP John Godfrey, "because people will polarize around two different visions of the country."

Of course, pulling support from the NDP in the closing days and hours was a crucial component of Martin's 2004 minority victory. But Nanos pointed out that the NDP was standing at about 20 per cent in the polls when its support started to bleed away to the Liberals last time. Now, with the NDP at just 14 per cent in the SES poll, Jack Layton must surely be close to holding only his bedrock, diehard base. "There's not enough there for the Liberals," Nanos said. "They need to carve into Conservative support, too."

Martin advisers agree, looking for their attack ads to slice enough away from Harper to narrow the gap between Liberals and Tories from about nine percentage points to no more than five points by the middle of this week. After that, it's up to Martin to somehow make lightning strike in the dying days of his second campaign in a row.

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