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### Tory talent show

Stephen Harper could be upstaged by his party's fresh faces

JOHN GEDDES

If the organizers get their way, the last thing the Conservative party's policy convention in Montreal this week will be about is policy. What they hope to orchestrate is a coming-out bash for young Tory politicians who look good on TV. So watch for Alberta MP Rona Ambrose, 36, to get plenty of exposure as one of the event's on-stage main hosts. And when it comes to presenting the key case that the sponsorship affair proves the Liberals' best-before date has expired, the designated speaker will be B.C.'s James Moore, who is touted, at just 28, as one of the party's brainiest MPs. Tories hope a show of bench strength will put a scare into Liberals. But there's another way to consider who should be uneasy about the convention's introduce-the-team theme. Maybe Stephen Harper should be worried about being upstaged at his own talent show.

There was no shortage of buzz among Tories about Ambrose's flair and Moore's smarts, along with advance hype for a half-dozen other MPs slated to get their moment in the convention spotlight. But Harper's keynote speech, set for Friday evening, wasn't getting the same big buildup. No doubt that was partly his handlers attempting to limit expectations. Another factor, though, is the resignation among even some of Harper's solid supporters that he is not evolving into the sort of politician who can connect with voters on a gut level. "His image remains a challenge," admitted one senior Conservative strategist. "There's no question he's seen as having the gravitas, but there's a lingering question of approachability. He can work on that, but he will never be made into Heck-of-a-guy Harper."

Lucky for him there's not much chance of Heck-of-a-guy Martin, or Layton or even Duceppe, emerging either. Still, for Harper to be a viable prime-minister-in-waiting, he must offer something beyond the intelligence and aloofness that persistently define him in the public and media imaginations. "Voters know he's cool and he's smart, but they don't know what makes him tick," says Nik Nanos, president of the polling firm SES Research. This doesn't mean Harper needs to bare his soul, which would almost certainly be seen as phony from a politician so firmly positioned as a thinker rather than an emoter. But he must at least present himself as a conviction

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politician -- the electoral meal ticket of right-wingers from Ronald Reagan to Mike Harris. And it is on this score that some critics see Harper as lacking.

Take missile defence. Paul Martin's fuzzy explanation of his decision not to sign on to the controversial U.S. military program, after prolonged agonizing over what to do, underscored the Prime Minister's growing problem with being seen as dithering and fudging. Harper could have presented himself as the clear-sighted alternative. But instead of having staked out a precise, pro-missile shield position, he was left explaining the hedged Conservative stance -- open to considering the details of a U.S. proposal, but not necessarily committed to signing on. Not much of a sound bite there. Some Tories defend Harper for having avoided a trap. "The Liberals wanted the Conservative party to jump out in front of the debate and say we were in favour of missile defence so they could stigmatize us as being for some new American weapons system," Moore says. "We didn't play that game."

But other frustrated right-wingers see it as another sign that Harper plays too cautiously. "It was a huge missed opportunity," says Adam Daifallah, a 26-year-old Sauvé scholar at McGill University, who is co-writing a book with the working title *Rescuing Canada's Right*, scheduled for publication early next year. "What's strategically wrong with Harper is his lack of clarity and his reluctance to get out in front on issues." Veteran insiders tend to view impatient outsiders like Daifallah as missing the tactical game. One Harper adviser said the underlying reason for avoiding a bold stand on missile defence was the danger of alienating Liberal voters, especially in Ontario, who might find Conservative tax-cutting policies attractive, but are wary of cozying up to the Americans. "Some of Stephen's strongest supporters wish he had come out strongly for missile defence," the adviser said. "But the reality is that the next election will be won by us attracting Liberal switchers."

Going after those potential defectors means not allowing the party to be defined by hot-button topics. And missile defence is hardly the hottest. What really worries Tory election planners is the passel of issues, especially same-sex marriage and abortion, that social conservatives care about most. In an embarrassing flip-flop, Harper's convention organizers had to abandon a plan that might have prevented those incendiary subjects



from being debated at all. Party insiders were supporting a resolution that, if it passed at the convention, would have guaranteed Conservative MPs free votes on "issues of moral conscience." The trick was that passing that resolution would have cancelled all further discussion of those issues in Montreal. Social conservatives who desperately want to try to pass policies on abortion and marriage cried foul -- and the party withdrew the bid to stifle debate.

That reversal left open the possibility that Harper might have to contend with a convention dominated by subjects he's striving to play down. The bitter experience of last spring's election left little doubt about the need for Conservatives to avoid being tagged as the party that would dismantle medicare or reignite the abortion debate. "In the closing days of the campaign, the Liberals were able to shift the debate to social issues, and characterize the Conservatives as having a hidden agenda," Nanos says. "Harper should be looking at issues that reinforce the Conservative brand he is trying to define -- fiscal issues, taxes, integrity in government, and time for a change."

In fact, those are pretty much the same issues Harper's team hopes to highlight in Montreal. While they were struggling to limit the potential for social conservatives to hijack the convention, the party insiders sounded more receptive to demands from others, notably the National Citizens Coalition, for clearer policies on tax cuts and smaller government. But policy proclivities such as those will hardly come as a surprise for the national right-of-centre party. The question is how successful the strategy of introducing new faces turns out to be. It doesn't hurt that veteran MP Randy White, a grizzled embodiment of Western populist social-conservatism, announced before the convention that he won't be running again come the next election.

Now, the challenge is to replace the likes of White with more nationally marketable product. "People aren't really familiar with the fact that we have this group of young people in our party," Ambrose said. "It's hard to get through a realistic portrait of what we represent." She's among the many Tories who miss no chance to mention that the party has the youngest leader and caucus in the House, with 21 MPs under 40. There are dogmatic right-wingers among the young MPs. But there are also those, like Peter MacKay and Belinda Stronach -- whose romantic involvement makes them the party's most-watched power couple -- who represent the pragmatic, centrist core of the old Progressive Conservatives. "Keeping the progressive element of this party is going to be very, very important," MacKay says.

Selling the Conservatives as young, attractive and moderate is only half the game. The other half is portraying the Liberals as old, worn-out and corrupt. With Justice John Gomery's commission into the sponsorship affair also in town, Montreal might be as good a place as any to make that case. For all the emphasis on new faces, and some on policy, Tory hopes are riding largely on Gomery's report, due out near the end of this year. While it's impossible to predict when a minority government might fall, a spring 2006 election is a reasonable guess. "We'd like to see sponsorship and cleaning up government be the ballot question," says veteran MP Monte Solberg.

So one optimistic prospect for Conservatives heading into this week's convention is an election next year in a climate of renewed weariness with the Liberals. What would make it a dream scenario? If by then the public --

even voters who'll never warm to Harper -- had learned to recognize those new, unthreatening Tory faces waiting in the wings.

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