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Stephen Harper's fraying image

Stephen Harper's fraying image

Richard Cl  roux

HARPER SINKS INTO SUMMER

In case you hadn't noticed, Conservative Leader Stephen Harper has been out on the summer BBQ and ice cream circuit, trying to save his leadership after blowing two golden opportunities to dump the Liberals in the Commons last spring.

Two polling organizations, SES Research last week, and Strategic Counsel on Monday, have him dropping like a rock in water, and SES had him in third place as a leader behind Paul Martin and Jack Layton. The Liberals are thinking fall re-election.

Nothing is going right for Harper. Two old friends, Gerry Nicholls of the National Citizens Coalition and John Williamson of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, slammed him. The *National Post*, the unofficial Conservative party house organ, has turned against him. He cannot keep staff. Four directors of communications in a row have left him. Monday morning his chief of staff Phil Murphy upped and left.

So what went wrong in damage control? Well, they dressed Harper up as a cowboy in a little vest, and sent him out West to flip hamburgers, but he still looked like an overweight economist in a little cowboy vest who has been eating too many hamburgers.

Somebody said he looked like a gay rodeo rider. Not nice. Wait until Vic Toews hears about it. Then Harper headed off for Quebec.

The summer circuit is never kind to politicians in Quebec. Remember Gilles Duceppe in his shower cap at the cheese factory, or Jean Ch  tien wearing an army helmet backwards. It's corn-on-the-cob time in Quebec right now, and no politician looks graceful eating a dripping cob on TV. It's like women eating Popsicles. Just don't go there.

Hot dogs are also out at Quebec BBQs ever since Pierre Trudeau caught Robert Bourassa eating a wiener and called him a "mangeur de hot-dogs" and the putdown label stuck.

They had trouble finding Harper any Conservative candidates not on holiday for him to meet. So they took him out to a Dairy Queen in the Montreal suburb of Dollard. It was charity day, for the Children's Miracle Network. What can go wrong with that, eh?

Problem was nobody would take a cone from him. What can you say about a guy who can't sell an ice cream cone on a hot day?

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A Harper aide, meaning well, slipped \$5 to two young ladies to go get a cone from Harper. They did, but

afterwards they told the cameras the cone was great but they didn't care for the politician.

The next stop was-can you believe it-a hot air balloon festival up in Lac Saint-Jean. What serendipity! Is there anything that goes better together than hot air balloons and politicians? At least the wicker basket didn't land on his head.



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