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Derailing the big red train
 Greg Weston takes a day-to-day look at how a campaign of Conservative policy - though not perfect - trumped Liberal pratfall

By **GREG WESTON**, PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU

It was only four days before Canadians would go to the polls, and a huge crowd of more than 1,000 enthusiastic supporters jammed the hotel ballroom to hear and cheer Stephen Harper's campaign of hope.

In Liberal-red Montreal. On the night of a treacherous ice storm. Conservatives winning seats. In Quebec. We're not making this up.

On the same day in southwestern Ontario, the Liberal campaign of fear and loathing in lost races has successfully turned the once-respected Paul Martin into the laughingstock of Canadian politics.

A raging grandpa. Scaring off his own supporters. Apologizing for Buzz Hargrove. Begging for Green Party votes. We couldn't make this stuff up.

Herein a writer's notebook of the 55 days that finally pushed voters to proclaim: We're mad as hell, and we're not going to take it anymore.

DAY ONE: In the first hour of the first day, Harper's campaign bus hadn't even left Parliament Hill when he promised a Tory government would hold a free vote in the Commons on same-sex marriage.

It was a risky move, but it evidently worked.

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The Conservatives got killed in 2004 in large part because the Liberals successfully painted the newly merged party as having a "hidden agenda" on abortion, same-sex marriage and other social issues.

This time, they were determined not to give the Martin smear machine the same opportunity.

A Conservative strategist says: "He had decided to deal with the issue off the top, rather than be chased around for half the campaign accused of having a hidden agenda, and ultimately be accused of 'finally admitting' what the party would do."

It paid off: Harper got rid of a grenade under his seat on the first day, and the polls didn't budge.

WEEK ONE: For all the months of preparation, and all the hype about the Conservative campaign being "flawless," Harper's first week did not go all that smoothly.

In Quebec City, he neglected to introduce the eight local candidates standing behind him for the photo op. A Montreal columnist dubs them the "potted plants."

Harper promised to appoint a federal prosecutor to get to the bottom of Adscam, and was instantly hit with a barrage of ugly questions about the feds taking over provincial judicial powers.

The next day, the Conservatives let loose their silver bullet -- cutting the GST to 5% over five years -- but got winged in the foot with some faulty math on just how much it would benefit the average family.

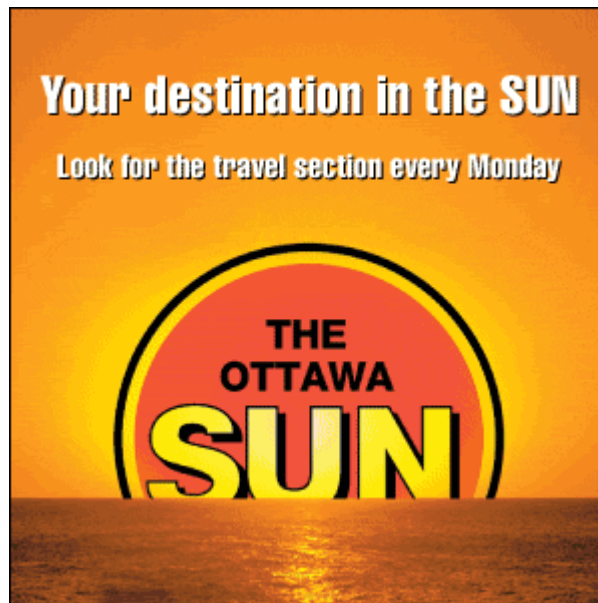
In 2004, so many missteps in a week, however minor, would have put Harper into a tailspin.

But this time, he was surrounded by pros he respected. In the months before the last election, Ian Brodie had taken over as chief of staff, William Stairs as director of communications. Neither had any qualms about being frank with their boss.

But no one brought more experience and a greater sense of calm to the Harper plane than Sen. Marjorie LeBreton, a smart, level-headed and infinitely respected warhorse who has been in the frontlines of Tory elections dating back to John Diefenbaker's 1965 election train.

A strategist says: "She was pivotal in keeping the campaign on an even keel. She spent a lot of the time telling (Harper) and the rest of the people around him to take a deep breath, get over it, and stick to the gameplan."

WEEK TWO: There's an old adage about political candidates: You know you're in trouble when the audience stops applauding. You know you're dead when they start laughing at you.



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Paul Martin's political funeral started the second week of the campaign.

On Monday, Harper rolled out the Conservative \$10.9-billion "daycare" program, giving all Canadian families \$1,200 a year for every pre-school child to spend as they see fit.

The next day, the Liberals finally struck back as Martin pledged to double federal daycare program spending by another \$6 billion -- starting in 2010 -- long after the mandate of the next government and probably the one after that. Reporters rolled their eyes en masse.

Next, Martin used an international climate change conference in Montreal to slam the U.S. for not joining the Kyoto accord, even though the U.S. record on greenhouse gases is far better than ours.

Then it was off to Toronto to promise to ban banned handguns, touching off a wave of Internet jokes about what this increasingly desperate PM would ban next: Illegal drugs? Criminals?

WEEK THREE: It is Sunday morning, and Martin's communications director and key strategist, Scott Reid, is on television slamming the Tory daycare plan, saying parents might blow the cash on "beer and popcorn." Ka-boom!

In a downtown Ottawa office tower, Conservative strategists and spinners manning the party's war-room sounded as though they had just won the lottery. In a way they had. The Conservatives jumped on the comment not as a gaffe, but as a clear sign of Liberal arrogance, and of the philosophical divide between the free-choice Conservatives and the paternalistic government-knows-best Grits.

The ensuing explosion tore a gaping hole in the Liberal machinery: It was the last time Reid, one of the Liberals' most effective communicators, was seen on air.

WEEK FOUR: It was supposed to be the calm in the storm, the Christmas week when the campaign would fade to black.

But the peace was shattered by the horrific shooting of a beautiful 15-year-old girl caught in gangland crossfire on a downtown Toronto street while Boxing Day shopping.

A Conservative strategist told me: "It seemed to galvanize a sense in the suburbs that the Liberals had been soft on crime. It also pricked the bubble of Martin's claim that Canada is a perfect place not to be disturbed by change. A little girl gunned down shopping; it doesn't get much worse."

Dec. 28: Every campaign has its turning point, and most analysts agree this one hit it the Wednesday after Christmas when the RCMP confirmed they had launched a criminal investigation into a possible government leak of the income-trust announcement which, if true, may have allowed inside trading on the stock market.

Pollster Nik Nanos said it was the first time he saw the Conservative numbers move almost immediately.

"Suddenly, you had the confluence of this bombshell reconnecting to the whole ethics issue, dropping right in the middle of the holidays when families and friends are gathering and talking. That made the election a competitive race."

WEEK SIX: With the momentum clearly with the Conservatives, Harper's performance in the televised debates was crucial -- not to win, but merely to hold his own.

In all the days of rehearsals, he had heard just about every conceivable question

that might be thrown at him by his opponents. Except for one.

Out of nowhere, Martin suddenly announced in the middle of the debates that a Liberal government would eliminate the power of the federal government ever to use the notwithstanding clause.

It was all a trap for Harper, intended to paint the Conservative leader as wanting to keep the opting-out clause to implement his scary social agenda.

But Harper deftly sidestepped, and Martin was left looking like he would say anything for a vote.

The next morning, the Liberals set down their final, fatal message that would quickly turn into a laugh track aimed right at him -- the attack ad claiming that Harper would put armed troops in the cities.

The Tories shot back with one of their own suggesting Martin is a liar.

The previous six weeks came home to roost: Voters weren't buying the scary-Harper stuff, but they were increasingly coming to see Martin and his party as a bad joke.

WEEK SEVEN: With two weeks to go, pollsters were starting to report voters were locking in and tuning out. A Conservative insider says the spinners were getting cocky, believing they could feed the media anything and get away with it -- in this case, burying about \$23 billion of spending in documents that were incomprehensible. It didn't matter.

WEEK EIGHT: Harper begins the week strolling to the media section of the campaign plane, an area he once considered a leper colony, now chatting to reporters about his working on a hockey book.

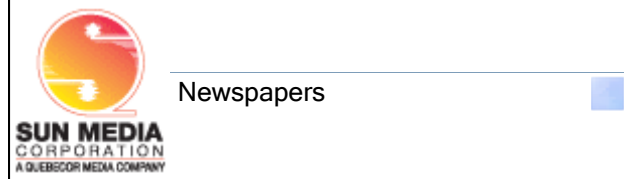
Across Quebec, voters clearly like Harper's invitation to be "playing on the ice, not sitting in the stands," as the Conservative poll numbers have more than tripled in two weeks.

The Conservative polls show it is all over but the counting.

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