

## How will voters respond to Harper's battle with the arts community?

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### Is Stephen Harper's battle with the arts community likely to help or hurt him with voters?



**Greg Lyle** (*former chief of staff for premiers Gary Filmon and Gordon Campbell*): This battle really makes no sense for Stephen Harper.

Forget about substance for a moment. Forget about Richard Florida and his arguments about the rise of the creative class and what that means for the wealth of nations. Let's just look at the politics.

This is one issue the Conservatives have misread. They think this is about subsidizing the hobbies of the rich. Stephane Dion may be falling for that, but Jack Layton and Gilles Duceppe are not.

In 2005, Warren Kinsella advised Stephen Harper that if he wanted to run this country, he needed to look like he liked it.

Mr. Layton has begun to run with that idea. He accuses Mr. Harper of undercutting our ability as a nation to tell our story. He and other critics point out the irony of sending people to rediscover the Northwest Passage while denying funding to the people who tell the story of the Northwest Passage. What is the point of rediscovering the Franklin's ship if you don't know why that matters to the country?

In Quebec, where francophones are trying to maintain a distinct linguistic and cultural community surrounded by a sea of English, the stakes are arguably higher than in the rest of the country so the issue has had more play. But anyone who remembers the free trade debate knows English Canada can be just as passionate in defence of its own identity, fragile though it may be.

The shame for the Tories is that this fight is over nickels and dimes from a federal budget perspective. By the highest count, the alleged cutbacks have only totaled \$50-million out of hundreds of millions if not billions in overall arts funding. The problem is the Conservatives did not apply their micro politics discipline to this policy area. Some cuts were much easier to defend than others. Plus the whole package could have been more defensible if it had been presented as a package.

The Globe and Mail battleground tracking shows the Tories have been rolled back from their initial advances in Quebec due in no small part to the culture issue. It's time for the Tories to cut their losses, come out with a policy that shuts down these attacks, and use the last three weeks to talk about other issues that work better for them.



**Scott Reid** (*former communications director for Paul Martin*): I need to start by saying that for the purposes of this discussion, I'm suspending my personal bias on an intergalactic scale. Because if unleashed, it would result in an incoherent and profane screech about the way this government denigrates our artists and their work in a manner that makes me...well, want to beat somebody up (ideally, one of those wimpy artistic types I could take with ease). That said...

When you unleash a wedge issue, you take a calculated risk that it will advantage rather than disadvantage your campaign. On the eve of the election call, with the Conservatives and Liberals tied in popular support, this looked to be a percentage play in English Canada. An astute - if cynical - means of animating the Reform Party-small c-Conservative base.

Those gains were long ago banked.

What we're witnessing now is a wedge strategy gone wrong. And it may actually have a noteworthy effect on the election's outcome for two reasons.

First, it is clearly hurting in Quebec, where issues of culture are viewed not as frivolous excess but rather a means to protect the French fact in an English North America. Mr. Harper has shown ample skill in manipulating Quebec symbols to gain political currency. The obvious example was his recognition of Quebecers as a nation. But he's been all *anglais* thumbs on this issue. Apathy and fatigue were the great enemies of a flagging Bloc movement. Mr. Harper has angered and rallied the *pequiste*/artistic base in Quebec and given Gilles Duceppe a new lease on life that the Bloc leader had previously appeared to have difficulty securing. Not smart.

Second, it is dangerously close to morphing from a question of policy to a question of character. Yesterday Harper rose injudiciously to the bait of a reporter's question. With a tone-deafness atypical of his performance to date, he chose to interpret criticisms as an affront to his strategic brilliance. In English only, he unleashed a demagogic rant against all them gala-going, tax-sucking sonsabitches in the fancy-schmancy arts community. Bet it felt very satisfying for a couple seconds. Then reality bit when he was asked to repeat his comments in French. He wisely declined.

In all likelihood, the sole serious obstacle left to Stephen Harper's success in this campaign is Stephen Harper. He's kept Mr. Angry Pants locked

up for most of this campaign. Time to add a chain to that bolt.

Looking forward, Mr. Harper needs to neutralize this vulnerability or risk watching his Quebec strategy fall to pieces. We all know he's been sitting on a symbolic proposal to restrict the federal spending power in Quebec. Time to roll it out sooner rather than later.



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**Gerald Caplan** (former NDP campaign manager): Memo to Doug Finley from The Hawk in the Conservative War Room, somewhere outside Greater Ottawa:

"Hey, sir.

"I think we're on a roll here, and I think we should restrict our campaign to nothing but attacking elitist pseudo-sophisticates who are so la-de-dah about opera and that kind of fancy-dancy high culture that only fabulously rich people can afford (and they're voting for us anyhow).

"The culture wars are working so perfectly because we're able to throw the 'elitist' label around like a baseball. And since our kith and kin south of the 49th parallel trot out the charge every time Obama puts on a tie, it does double duty for us. But I draw your attention to a potential risk with playing the artsy-fartsy card: One of these days the other four parties are going to clue in to how fraudulent it is.

"Is there an **ordinary** family in the entire country that doesn't have a kid playing a guitar, or going to dance class, or playing in a band? The ethnic chappies we've been wooing are deeply into this kind of crud, and one fine day they'll realize that it's their kids who we're penalizing. A small theatre group that wants to take a play about Jews and genocide to Rwanda is now stranded - all for a silly ten grand. This is bad for our ethnic strategy if it gets out.

"So I strongly recommend we do what we always do when we're in a potential pickle - aim even lower. The McCain campaign is demonstrating that there's no lie too preposterous, no insult too vicious, to be effective. We've been doing pretty well, but we're not at that level quite yet. Let's ratchet down the slurs. Let The Big Guy do what he does best: In his monotone voice, with no facial expression whatever, let him really go after the horsey crowd. Say anything that comes to mind. Let Stevaroonie be Stevaroonie.

"Another short time and the game is ours."

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