



A healthy lifestyle can help your child succeed
Learn how at MyPyramid.gov

SCHOOL SUPPLIES

USDA

Ad Council

MyPyramid.gov
STEPS TO A HEALTHIER YOU

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

January 14, 2010

Rapid aid rollout shows PM has learned from the past

By Campbell Clark
From Friday's Globe and Mail

Harper learns from past mistakes, moves with unusual haste to ensure rollout of aid to earthquake victims

Stephen Harper was flying back to Ottawa from Quebec City in a government Challenger on Tuesday afternoon when the earthquake reduced Port-au-Prince to rubble. Within minutes, his staff's Blackberries started buzzing, and as the plane touched down 30 minutes later, everyone had their marching orders: Get the disaster-relief teams ready to roll.

"He started giving orders about what was going to happen," one official said. "And he was still in the aircraft taxiing."

This was a very different Stephen Harper from the rookie prime minister who was criticized for the jumbled effort to evacuate Canadian citizens from war-torn Lebanon in 2006.

After four years in power, here was a PM who has matured in his role and learned from that experience. Where past governments confronting overseas disasters like the scramble to evacuate Lebanon have lost days debating options and fretting over obstacles, Mr. Harper was confident in driving ahead.

It was a moment that played to the Prime Minister's strengths: decisiveness and control.

Nothing a government does, even responding to a natural disaster, is ever divorced entirely from politics, and proving effective and statesmanlike at a time of international crisis is a test that can either elevate or hobble a prime minister. With experience, Mr. Harper has learned that the public message is part of the response.

"Harper is very good at learning lessons from the past," said a Conservative source. "His government got everyone out of Lebanon safely and quickly, but failed at the political marketing. He won't let his government make that mistake this time."

Things have moved with unusual haste.

Two hours after the Prime Minister disembarked from his plane on Tuesday night, Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon was briefing reporters on the still-murky news out of crippled Haiti. On Wednesday, a massive Canadian relief mission took to air and sea.

On Wednesday, Canadian soldiers unloaded supplies, equipment and a helicopters from the belly of four cargo planes in Port-au-Prince, while two ships, the frigate HMCS Halifax and the destroyer HMCS Athabaskan, set sail from Halifax packed with water-purification equipment, concrete saws, tents, medical supplies and a Sea King helicopter. The government said it would match donations from Canadians to a maximum of \$50-million.

"This is a moment where people don't think about themselves as Conservatives or Liberals; they think about themselves as Canadians and they want their Prime Minister to do the right thing. And if he does, they'll all celebrate that," said pollster Greg Lyle. "These moments can really be critical to establishing yourself as a leader."

Instead of spending days waffling over whether to lease huge Russian Antonov planes to transport Canada's Disaster Assistance Response Team - as the Liberal government did after the 2004 tsunami - the first aid shipments to Haiti started landing on Wednesday with heavy equipment and helicopters loaded in two massive C-17 Globemaster cargo planes purchased by the Tories in their military buying spree.

Cabinet ministers have been highly visible since the crisis began. Mr. Cannon, Defence Minister Peter MacKay, and other ministers have updated Canadians on the race to save lives three or four times a day.

Moreover, the response has taken on an unusual non-partisan hue: Mr. Cannon appeared at a televised meeting with Montreal's Haitian community on Wednesday beside local Liberal MP Denis Coderre, an atypical sharing of the government's limelight.

Opposition politicians report that government ministers have contacted them with updates. And in what is perhaps the most telling sign of the government's initial success, almost all opponents have steered clear of criticizing Ottawa's response.

On Wednesday, Mr. Harper took part in an unusual public appearance with Governor-General Michaëlle Jean, a unifying figure for Canadians and a symbol of shared grief over the tragedy in Haiti.

Partisanship would be the worst mistake the government could make, Mr. Lyle said, and so far, Mr. Harper's government seems to know it.

Canadians, Mr. Lyle said, are eager to rally behind a leader dealing with an overseas disaster, just as Americans get behind a U.S. president faced with a foreign crisis.

An effective response will transcend the partisan leanings of Canadians, who above all want their government to do the right thing. But all that potential goodwill stands to be put in jeopardy if a leader is seen to be trying to gain partisan advantage from a tragedy.

A week ago Mr. Harper was under attack for shutting Parliament until March, was perceived as hyper-partisan and was losing his edge in the polls. A successful response to the disaster in Haiti would counter all that.

"It backs him away from the mean-spirited, petty image that some would paint him with," Mr. Lyle said. "It makes him a statesman, instead of a partisan politician. And that's of great benefit to him."

CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc



CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.. Permission granted for up to 5 copies. All rights reserved.

You may forward this article or get additional permissions by typing http://license.icopyright.net/3.8425?icx_id=icopyright/?artid=1431691 into any web browser. CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc and Globe and Mail logos are registered trademarks of CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc . The iCopyright logo is a registered trademark of iCopyright, Inc.