

Assessing Harper's platform

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GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE
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In light of current economic circumstances and their recent slide in the polls, did the Conservatives take the right approach with their platform release on Tuesday?



Greg Lyle (*former chief of staff for premiers Gary Filmon and Gordon Campbell*): I think the Tories missed the mark on Tuesday.

It seems to me that the average Canadian is hearing the Conservatives urge them not to worry but *not* hearing the Conservatives say the reason Canadians do not need to worry is that the government has already taken action. The Tory campaign has not responded to this problem, in part because it makes a virtue of not responding.

The Conservatives are victims of their own past success. In the 2006 campaign, they won because they plan their work and worked their plan. They had a campaign calendar that laid out the headline they wanted every day - one that would drive their ballot questions - and more often than not they got that headline.

Fast forward to today. The Tories once again have a plan and once again they are following it with ruthless discipline. They have had more mechanical issues this campaign, but so have the others. The problem is that this time circumstances have changed, but the campaign has not had the flexibility to respond to the new challenge.

The Tories have a good story. Their pitch is simple: We saw this coming. We took steps to protect Canada. Those steps are working — none of our banks or financial institutions are failing. Don't mess with success.

That said, I suspect most people - particularly the remaining swing voters who don't generally follow politics or business news closely - have not heard the first part of that argument. They have not heard the Tory claim that the government took steps to protect Canada and, if they did hear that, they have no idea what steps the Tories took. Personally, I am not too sure myself.

If my guess is right, the Tories need to fill the information void and make their case that they reacted earlier and Canada is safer because of that. Ideally, they would have some third-party sources back that up. To make sure everyone has heard this information, I would commit advertising to get the message through - ideally an ad that can end on a contrast with the Liberals.

It is a big mistake in any campaign to assume voters bring much knowledge to the party. They have values and strong views about party brands, but they are not equipped to pass true/false knowledge tests. Voters think the Tories should be best on the economy, but they feel leadership in a crisis involves doing something.

Right now Tory fortunes rest on the public being aware that the Conservatives were busy a year ago ensuring we would be in good shape now. Unless the Tories convince voters that is true, they will continue to remain on the defensive. Unfortunately, the Conservatives' past success limits their ability to respond to this election's challenge.



Scott Reid (*former communications director for Paul Martin*): No. In fact, most of the Conservatives I know are saying to me behind closed doors that they don't understand what Stephen Harper is doing.

Tuesday's intervention had one purpose: to alter the unpleasant trajectory of his campaign. It won't do that. In fact, it may even make things worse. Mr. Harper didn't just stick to his "nothing to see here, move it along ladies" message; he struck a nearly lecturing tone at times, telling people that he had been smart enough to see this economic weakness long ago and had already done enough to protect everyone. That kind of message doesn't just lack empathy - It smacks of superiority. And that's the last thing he needs to communicate at this sensitive juncture.

A better alternative would have been to acknowledge his original response failed to communicate the sincere urgency this issue demands. He should have spoken of people's worries as he reassured them that he was prepared to defend their interests.

After all, he didn't come entirely empty-handed - he just acted that way. He could have positioned his modest policy announcements for our aerospace and automotive sectors as corrective evidence that his greatest priority is to support job creation. Instead, he undersold what were already very minor prescriptions and missed a vital opportunity to connect with voters — particularly in Quebec. Mr. Harper looked annoyed that he was forced to explain himself and account for the wisdom of his management. Bluntly put, he sort of looked pissed-off - probably because he is.

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