

Is Harper right to stand by his minister?

-  Article
-  Video
-  Comments ( 117)
- 

GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE
SEPTEMBER 18, 2008 AT 8:12 PM EDT

What's the best way for a leader to handle a controversy like the one Gerry Ritz got himself into? Is Stephen Harper right to stand by his minister, or should he have been dumped from cabinet?



Greg Lyle (*former chief of staff for premiers Gordon Campbell and Gary Filmon*): If campaigns are a mix of art and science, the decision on when to back a minister who makes a verbal miscue and when to run is all art. There are no firm rules here. This is where gut instinct triumphs over cold calculation.

In what he thought was a private moment, Gerry Ritz indulged in some black humour. Who hasn't? But what we do as private citizens is held to one standard. What ministers do as public servants, even in private moments, is held to another, tougher standard.

Mr. Ritz did the right thing in apologizing quickly. Still, media stories reported that relatives are divided on the issue, with some accepting the apology and some not.

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00:01:19

Harper stands by his man

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So what is a prime minister to do?

The moral calculus is grey. What the minister did was wrong, but it is not part of a pattern of inappropriate behaviour; it appears to be a one-off. He apologized. If the offence had been so severe that no one who was directly affected would accept an apology, the minister would have had to go. But at least some relatives accepted the apology. In that scenario, most Ministers would normally be given a pass on a first offence since no one can live up to a standard of perfection.

But this is an election, and just as the moral standard is higher for politicians than private citizens, the political standard is tougher in an election than outside one.

The political calculation in an election is clear, but not simple. Fire the minister, take a big headline for one day and live with the precedent in the future. Or stick by the minister and run the risk of the story continuing, but without having to live with a precedent.

The PM is sticking by the minister. Hopefully he is doing so in the full understanding that the story will likely linger for more than one news cycle. But if he had fired the minister, the hunt for more would be in full flood. From my corner, once any relatives gave the minister a break, it was the right call.



Scott Reid (*former communications director for Paul Martin*): Obviously, each situation must be evaluated unto itself. What was said? Who was speaking? How grave was the insult offered? Whether it's a defecating puffin, a smear directed toward a fallen soldier's father or — in my own case — an unacceptable wisecrack about beer and popcorn, a range of sanctions are available to the leader to respond to campaign gaffes.

But this example does not properly belong to that category. Mr. Ritz was not speaking on the campaign trail or toiling in the war room. He was the responsible minister. He was on the job chairing a meeting of officials and co-ordinating the federal government's response to the loss of lives due to the listeriosis crisis. Nevertheless, he joked about the deaths of those Canadians and laughingly expressed hope that his most ardent political critic might also perish. By any sensible definition, it was indefensible.

Yet Mr. Harper has demanded the least severe admonition — a public apology. As a consequence, it is now the Prime Minister's judgment that is under scrutiny. He is forced, at least in part, to defend and diminish his minister's transgression.

That would be a bad position for any party leader to adopt. It is particularly weak territory for Mr. Harper. His character — defined so greatly by his nasty,

partisan impulses — has been an issue of political liability ever since the infamous child pornography outburst in 2004. He is making the exact same mistake again. Mr. Harper is inviting — even insisting — that voters recall the hyper-partisan, mean-spirited nature that he has sought to obscure since this campaign began. It is a puzzling political calculation that perhaps can only be explained by noting that, deep down, this is who he is.



Gerald Caplan (*former NDP campaign manager*): The perfect test case was in 1984, when Brian Mulroney, then in his first campaign, observed to the boys and girls on the bus that there was no whore like an old whore. I thought he was referring with unusual candour to himself, but it was taken as an unkind reference to Liberal war horse Bryce Mackasey.

The Tory campaign manager was Norman Atkins, one of the best there's ever been. He took no chances that this silly crack would have legs. Mr. Mulroney was flying from Ottawa to the Sault. The second he got off the plane, without being asked, he apologized. End of legs.

It's taken several campaigns for Stephen Harper to overcome his instinctive obstinacy and learn Sen. Atkins' elementary lesson. (His unconscionable 2004 refusal to contradict a hack who accused Paul Martin of being soft on child porn will follow Mr. Harper forever, as well it should.) But Normie Atkins has already saved him considerable woe in this campaign, even while messing up the message of the day. And with a 24/7 spin cycle now driving both pols and media crazy, if you handle it right an apology can deep-six a gaffe in just a few hours. Soon the cycle will have some new phony crisis to consume it.

The Gerry Ritz boo-boo, though, may not go away quite so easily. Talking about "death by a thousand cold cuts" when Canadians were actually dying seems to go well beyond the realm of mere tastelessness, as Mr. Ritz now says his comment

was. And actually hoping (even in jest) that one of the fatalities was a particular Liberal MP is really sicko stuff.

Let's remember this: A verbal gaffe almost always reflects something the speaker is actually thinking. They don't come out of nowhere. They're said because they're meant in some way, however sub-consciously. Whatever jerk smeared Paul Martin was actually thinking that there's nothing too base to say about the man. It takes no Freudian psychoanalysis to figure out that Mr. Ritz has something against Wayne Easter. This is taking political enmity a good number of steps too far.

Because the PM hasn't given Mr. Ritz the old heave-ho, this little gaffe could well have legs - and deserves to.

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