

How can the Tories regain control of their campaign?

- Article
- Comments (14)

GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE
SEPTEMBER 11, 2008 AT 8:29 PM EDT

AFTER BEING ON THE DEFENSIVE FOR MUCH OF THE WEEK, WHAT DO THE CONSERVATIVES NEED TO DO TO REGAIN CONTROL OF THEIR CAMPAIGN?



Scott Reid (*former communications director for Paul Martin*): Three words: Powder. Blue. Sweater.

I'm not kidding. The Conservatives don't need a new strategy. They simply need to execute the one they already had in place — i.e. hide Scary Stephen.

For the first time since this campaign began, Mr. Harper looked seriously off his game on Thursday. And it's not fair to blame it all on Ryan Sparrow. Mr. Harper began the morning by reaching to ridiculous lengths in his critique of the Green Shift - saying it would create a recession, sever the nation's unity and render Lowell Green intelligible (okay, I made up that last one).

Related Articles

Recent

- Senior Tory spokesman suspended
- Globe's Lawrence Martin on the Oct. 14 election



Then the Conservatives reverted to bad old habits by trying to muscle the media off of the Fear Factory FUBAR — even using the RCMP to run interference for the Prime Minister. Not cool.

To beat all, Mr. Harper wandered off-script by renewing complaints that Elizabeth May didn't technically merit a spot at the leaders' debate. Does he really want another piece of that action?

Firing aides and tearing the war room a new one is easy. The hard part is trying to leash a leader who likes to bare his teeth. They've got to get him back into that powder blue sweater fast. Because if he starts campaigning with the same partisan snarl that he's shown while governing, they can start to wave goodbye to that dream of a majority.



Greg Lyle (*former chief of staff for Gordon Campbell and Gary Filmon*): The highest praise for a good campaign is that it played error-free ball. No one can say that about the Conservatives this week.

Between opposing the participation of Elizabeth May in the debate, 6:00 a.m. media conferences, puffins, and misstepping spokespeople, the Conservatives' campaign just is not up to the standard they set in 2006.

Look at Stephen Harper's Winnipeg stop. Mr. Harper posed in front of a wall of vegetables to announce his plan to cut fuel taxes to cut the cost of grocery bills. A practical policy that will make a small but crystal-clear difference in every voter's life. But instead of talking about shopping bills, he had to apologize for the puffin ad.

Of course, he was also pulled off by the infamous "what vegetable would you be" question. However, even on that, Mr. Harper could have stayed on message by saying, "I'm not sure, but whatever vegetable I would be, I would cost less after this tax cut."

Hindsight is 20/20. It is easy to stay on message from the sidelines. But the Tories were far better at it in 2006 than they have been this week. They need to demonstrate that 2006 discipline again if they want a chance at a majority.



Gerald Caplan (*former NDP campaign manager*): The Conservatives have had distinctly mixed results in the first lap of the campaign.

It's not been without some considerable success. The first major victory was getting away scot-free with having violated their own legislation setting the election date for next year. Mr. Harper didn't even have to defend himself, and it's not clear anyone but us political junkies cares about it.

I also have to admit, very begrudgingly, that Mr. Harper looks and sounds much more at ease than I thought he was capable of. This new persona makes more credible those nauseating ads showing him as just another homebody (Stephane Dion's equivalent ads - "I love snow" - are equally ludicrous.) . But I always wonder why these folks who adore their kids so much choose a vocation that keeps them away from home so much.

The gaffes that have kept Mr. Harper off-balance are his own personal chickens coming home to roost. As he says, he sets the tone, and as I documented a couple of days ago, for years he's established about the most tawdry, mean-spirited tone possible - not at all consistent with the amiable Joe in a sweater. Ryan Sparrow wasn't some kid in the trenches - he was a senior Conservative official and knew exactly what kind of smears his boss went in for.

What now? First, shut down immediately the **Dion's-not-a-leader site**. It's a perfect combination of adolescence and meanness. Barbara Coloroso could use it as a perfect example for one of her anti-bullying lectures.

Second, keep Mr. Harper under wraps more. He damaged himself today with his petulance when talking about the leaders' debate and Elizabeth May, even

though she's now the most popular politician in the country. Then he accused Mr. Dion of threatening national unity. (Mr. Dion's riposte was on the money, recalling Mr. Harper's Alberta firewall manifesto.)

Mr. Harper's capacity to control his gutter instincts has always been strained. A mediocre few days has stretched the leash a lot. The man needs another few days of deep breathing.


-  Article
-  Comments (14)
- 

Recommend this article? 5 votes

View the most recommended

Business Incubator



Succeeding in the film industry 

Real Estate



A home with art in its bones

Autos



Ford plots comeback with small cars

Travel



A place to lay your laptop

Technology