HOW HARPER FORCED A CONSERVATIVE SPRING

L. Ian MacDonald

The eight-week campaign turned a lot of assumptions on their heads. Canadians didn't want a Christmas election, but in the event they didn't mind. They wouldn't come out to vote in January, but in the event turnout went up from 60 to 65 percent. A negative campaign would turn voters off, but in the event they were offered positive choices between the Conservatives and the Liberals. The Conservatives would crash and burn, as they had in the 2004 campaign, but in the event the Liberals ran one of the most inept campaigns in modern times. Most of all, Stephen Harper was an angry man running on scandal, but in the event he ran, and won, on ideas. The Conservatives couldn't elect anyone from Quebec, but in the event, they elected 10 MPs, with strong representation of five ministers in the new cabinet. *Policy Options'* editor provides a narrative of the campaign.

Les huit semaines de campagne sont venues infirmer plusieurs hypothèses. Les Canadiens ne voulaient pas d'élections en période des Fêtes, disait-on, mais peu leur importait finalement. Ils ne se déplaceraient pas en janvier pour exprimer leurs suffrages, mais la participation électorale est passée de 60 à 65 p. 100. Ils se désintéresseraient d'une campagne négative, mais ils se sont vu offrir des choix positifs entre libéraux et conservateurs. Ces derniers allaient s'effondrer comme en 2004, mais ce sont les libéraux qui se sont ridiculisés en menant l'une des pires campagnes de l'histoire récente. Stephen Harper, surtout, n'était qu'un acharné surfant sur une vague de scandales, mais il a plutôt défendu des idées qui ont assuré sa victoire. Enfin, les conservateurs ne feraient élire personne au Québec, où ils ont finalement obtenu dix sièges dont cinq des titulaires sont aujourd'hui ministres. Notre rédacteur en chef retrace le déroulement d'une campagne inattendue.

There is a place in Oshawa called the Polish Hall, which is an obligatory campaign stop on the political pilgrimage to power. When Stephen Harper went there on the final Friday before the January 23 election, the hall was filled to overflowing with 2,500 people, easily the biggest meeting of his campaign.

This was in Ed Broadbent's Oshawa. More to the point, it was in Buzz Hargrove's Oshawa, home of General Motors and spiritual centre of the Canadian Auto Workers, whose leader had urged his members to vote strategically for the Liberals.

Looking out over the surging crowd from the podium, Harper noticed it didn't consist of Tory blue-rinsers or the party rank and file bussed in from other ridings. It consisted mostly of suburban families, parents who had brought their kids along to see the history of it — the making of a prime minister. People like Harper, dads who drove their sons to hockey practice and their daughters to ballet on Saturday mornings. People who, as he said in a campaign refrain borrowed from Bill Clinton, "work hard, pay their taxes and play by the rules."

"This," Harper thought, as he later told Senator Marjory LeBreton, "is a middle class revolt."

These were the voters who had bought into his promises on daycare, the GST, and the health care guarantee. On these issues, Harper and the Conservatives successfully aligned themselves with consumers, while the Liberals and the NDP were captives of the service providers.

On daycare, Harper promised parents $100 a month for every child under the age of six. Paul Martin and Jack Layton wanted to create more publicly funded spaces, more jobs for daycare workers.

On the GST, Harper promised to reduce the consumption tax, from 7 percent to 6 percent to 5 percent over five years. For someone buying a $30,000 car, that would mean a saving of $600. Harper was appealing to consumers doing their Christmas shopping. Martin's appeal was to

economists, supporting the GST as an efficient tax.

On health care, Harper was endorsing Liberal Senator Michael Kirby's 2002 proposal for allowing patients to go outside the system, and even the country, for publicly funded treatment if elective surgeries were not available within acceptable waiting times. Martin initially said he supported the *Canada Health Act*, and the recommendations of Roy Romanow, whose royal commission wanted to force semi-private and private health care providers out of business and back into the public sector, a system that is broken, as anyone who has been to an emergency room can attest. One-hundred thousand Canadians are waiting for elective eye surgery.

Harper won all three issues before the holiday break, aligning himself with the middle class voters who turned up in Oshawa. Martin was not only aligned with the service providers, he had no space between himself and Jack Layton, from whom he needed qualitative and quantitative distance in order to close his proposed deal with strategic voters. Layton's positions on daycare and health care at least resonated with his base. Martin lost out on conviction, and was left with an appeal to pragmatism — the Conservative hordes are at the gates, hold your nose and vote Liberal to stop them.

Paul Martin's Liberals, as they styled themselves to the detriment of the renowned Liberal brand, also made several strategic errors at the outset of the campaign. First, they thought they could roll the tape from the 2004 election, when their vicious attack ads on Harper were performance-validated by a series of damaging bimbo and bozo eruptions by Conservative candidates.

Second, the Liberals front-end-loaded their campaign, playing all their big cards in the first week. First, they indulged in an orgy of pre-writ announcements, no fewer than 80 of them, totalling $11.3 billion in the week before the fall of the government, blowing the Liberal brand reputation as prudent managers of taxpayers' money. Then Martin tried to transform the election in Quebec into a referendum, as a choice between federalists and "separatists," between federalism and "separatism," terms most francophone Quebecers haven't used for two decades, preferring instead the softer formulation of "sovereignty" as the choice of "sovereignists." Martin's message track was incoherent from the beginning.

Third, in his famous bear hug with Hargrove, Martin played the strategic voting card at the end of the first week of the campaign, rather than at the end of the last week as he had in 2004. Though NDP leader Jack Layton took a hit initially, he also had seven weeks left to recover, orchestrating plenty of endorsements from other trade union leaders, including CAW locals, who were infuriated by Hargrove's betrayal of the movement. In a bold gambit in the last week of the campaign, Layton deftly turned the tables on Martin, urging progressive Liberals who were ashamed of their party's embarassing campaign to come over to the NDP, just this once.

Finally, the Liberals underestimated their opponent, always a fatal miscalculation in politics. The Liberals assumed Harper had learned nothing from his mistakes in 2004. They equally assumed he would fold in the stretch of the unusually long eight-week campaign in 2006. Instead, they were confronted with the re-make of Harper, who had learned the remorseless rules of campaign discipline — stay on message, meet the retail demands of kissing babies, and, above all, as his handlers told him every night as he tucked in — keep smiling.

In the first half of the campaign, Harper and the Conservative high command also discovered a secret weapon — Laureen Teskey Harper, an independent, attractive and articulate woman who narrowed her husband's gender gap, and reminded suburban voters that the Harpers were just like them — parents of young kids.

It wasn't just the turtlenecks, open collar shirts and re-styled hair that invited women to take another look at Harper. It was also the increasing presence of his wife in the news coverage. In the first weeks of the campaign, while they always entered the room together, she would usually sit off-stage during the speech, and was seldom seen on television. Watching live events on all-news channels via satellite from their winter home in Florida, Brian and Mila Mulroney, who know something about campaigning as a couple, wondered about that.

"Where's Laureen?" the former Conservative prime minister asked Harper in a telephone conversation before Christmas, urging him to put his wife "in the shot." By the time the campaign resumed in early January, she was clearly her husband's greatest asset. By the time it ended, she was a central figure in the campaign, as vivacious as he is reserved. If she saw something in him, some women thought, then he must have something going for him.

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The daily announcements highlighted the first phase of the Harper campaign before the holidays, a time when it seemed the Conservatives were on the field alone, not scoring touchdowns, but moving the ball downfield. The Liberals, meanwhile, ran nothing but threes and out, punting on every possession of the ball, while the Tories had them back on their heels on defence.

Not only was Harper inoculating himself against the inevitable Liberal attempts to demonize him, he was demonstrating newly developed skills as a field general. With every passing day in the first half of the campaign, he appeared increasingly confident and serene — quiet, calm and measured in his daily sessions with the media. In an important leadership moment, in a scrum just before the holidays, Harper brushed off Martin's aggrieved demand for an apology for suggesting the Liberals preferred the separatists to be in power in Quebec. "I don't go around asking for apologies," Harper said. "I can take a punch." And in his stump speeches, his newfound confidence translated into a politician who had found his voice, and his cadence, in both languages.

At the start of the campaign's second half on January 2, Harper presented a top-five check list for a Conservative government: the *Accountability Act*, daycare cheques, the GST cut, the health care guarantee and a crackdown on crime. At this event, he confidently ditched his podium, walking around the stage like Phil Donahue, with a hand-held mike. The same day that Harper was announcing his priorities for government, Martin went to a bagel shop in Ottawa.

The Harper campaign presented a portrait of competence, and of a leader moving his party to the centre, where elections are won and lost in this country. But Harper also caught some major breaks over the holidays, supposedly the period of the Christmas truce. The juvenile and insulting Rob Klanders Web site reinforced the impression of the Liberal "beer and popcorn" campaign, the frat boys. The Boxing Day drive-by shooting in downtown Toronto dramatized the issue of murderous gang warfare in the heart of the country's largest city. Most Canadians didn't see it as sociological issue of communities failing young blacks. They saw it instead as a question of restoring law and order in the peaceable kingdom, which played to Conservative strength.

Then on December 28, the RCMP announced a criminal probe into the income trust leak, and the resulting war- type headlines not only reinforced the impression of Liberal entitlements, they validated a Conservative attack ad in which customers in a coffee shop sat slack-jawed while Paul Martin, on television behind the counter, insisted "the Liberal Party is not corrupt." It was the tipping point. The Liberals, who had been leading by 10 points in the final CPAC-SES tracking poll before Christmas, went into free fall.

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By the time of the leaders' debates in Montreal on January 9 and 10, the Liberals were trailing by as much as 10 points. Clearly desperate, Martin opened the English debate by promising to renounce the federal government's use of the notwithstanding clause in the Charter of Rights. This constitutional Hail Mary failed when Harper refused to engage, saying Canada's constitutional tradition was an appropriate balance between British parliamentary paramountcy and the supremacy of the courts in America. Martin's desperate ploy grew out of Liberal focus groups in which women said that their right to choose was not at issue in the campaign. By bringing up the notwithstanding clause, confided one close member of his entourage, Martin hoped to bring the abortion issue into play by insinuating Harper might invoke the notwithstanding clause to limit a woman's right to choose.

In their initial debate preparation, all parties focused their planned attacks on Martin. But by the time of the second pair of debates in the sixth week of the campaign, there was a new frontrunner, and a new target — Harper. In his closing statement in the French debate, Gilles Duceppe struck an ominous note when he suggested parties whose leaders were "from Toronto and Calgary can't represent the aspirations of Quebecers." For a leader who had gone to extraordinary lengths to build a rainbow coalition of ethnic voters, it was a return to the old exclusionary theme of "le Québec aux Québécois." It was indicative of the Bloc's growing frustration with Harper's surge in Quebec and their increasingly desperate attempts to stop it.

In informal focus groups, the staff of the Institute for Research on Public Policy sat around the board room table of our Montreal office, on the morning after the two debates. There were 16 people in the room, 12 francophones and as many women —

Herman Cheung

Stephen and Laureen Harper on the ferry crossing from Quebec City to Lévis on the picture perfect morning of January 17. It became the photo of the campaign, with the signature of the city's skyline, the Château Frontenac, as a backdrop.

most of them mothers as well as career women. After the French debate, the group agreed that Duceppe had won, but so what? He had a home ice advantage. They were impressed with Harper's improved French, and some were equally taken with his demeanour, quite struck that he treated his opponents with courtesy, and offered information rather than finger-pointing theatrics. If the debate was a job interview, Harper was winning the job.

Then in a half-hour interview with Radio-Canada anchor Bernard Derome on January 12, Harper delivered a command performance that became the talk of the province. Derome is the Walter Cronkite of Quebec. He has interviewed every prime minister since Trudeau. Just sitting with him for half an hour in a Halifax hotel room enhanced Harper's stature with the audience. The interview was taped early in the day, when Harper's French is strongest. Derome later said he was impressed not only by Harper's improved fluency in French, but equally by his comprehension of the questions and the depth of his answers. Claude Charron had the same sense when he interviewed Harper the next week in Quebec City for the TVA network. Asked about the possibility of a Conservative breakthrough, Harper replied that Charron and the Parti Québécois were in a similar position when they won six seats in the Quebec National Assembly in their first election in 1970. "Not only was I impressed by his French," said Charron, spending the day with the Harper tour in the Beauce, "I was quite struck that he knew exactly how many seats we had won."

On the afternoon of the French debate on January 10, the Liberals delivered a flight of 12 attack ads to television outlets across the country. Within hours, they were forced to pull one, the one about Harper proposing to station "soldiers in the streets of our cities." In the ensuing furor, Martin told both CTV and CBC that he had approved the ads, then said that he hadn't. Liberal candidates across the country angrily distanced themselves from the ad, which insulted veterans and Canadians in uniform.

Conservative Senator Hugh Segal heard an echo of the 1988 free trade campaign when he knocked the Liberal ad erasing the Canada-US border off the air with a counter attack ad vowing "this is where we draw the line." Within 48 hours the Tories had turned around an ad featuring candidate disclaimers and video of Martin

saying he had approved the ad. The Conservative counter-punch effectively discredited the entire flight of Liberal attack ads, and knocked them off the air for days.

But the biggest story of the campaign wasn't on television, it was the Conservative momentum surge in Quebec. Barely nudging 10 percent in the polls there before the holidays, Harper grew to 20 percent by the January debates, and 25 percent by election day. On who would be the best prime minister, a leading indicator of voting intention in Quebec, Harper rose to 31 percent in the final CPAC-SES poll on January 22, while Martin plummeted to 13 percent, dead last as a sitting prime minister in his own province. Pollsters say there comes a point where the numbers are talking to you, and by the last week of the campaign, Harper's numbers were talking. They were talking because 25 percent was an efficient number, concentrated in the 418 area in Quebec City and the South Shore. The question was, could the chronically weak Conservative ground game deliver those numbers with help from Jean Charest's Big Red Machine? Or was the Conservative tide rising high enough that it would deliver itself?

There was another question — how real was the Conservative momentum on the ground in Quebec? And the answer, in the final week of the campaign, was very real indeed. No one in his right mind would have suggested, at the beginning of the campaign, or even a week before the end, that Stephen Harper would spend three days in the final week of the campaign barnstorming in Quebec.

But there he was on the morning of January 17, crossing the St. Lawrence by ferry from Quebec City to Lévis. Harper had awakened that morning to the very good news of an endorsement by André Pratte in *La Presse*. In *Le Soleil,* the dominant paper in Quebec City and eastern Quebec, there was a front page story of a CROP poll that indicated Josée Verner in Quebec City and Maxime Bernier in the Beauce were both leading their Bloc opponents by margins of at least 2-1 and heading to certain victory. The long awaited *percée bleu* was at hand, the only question was how many more seats Harper would win. But there was no other way to read those numbers as anything less than 10 seats.

"Then, I'll be dancing," Harper said privately on the Thursday before the vote.

His rise in the polls in January was a combination of hard work and good luck. After winning only 8 percent of the vote and zero seats in Quebec in 2004, Harper rejected advice to ignore Quebec and instead re-doubled his efforts there. He invested heavily of his time in the 418 area, where he cobbled an alliance with Mario Dumont and the Action Démocratique du Québec, which had a strong base in the region. "We did a lot of visits," Harper said during the last week of the campaign. Laureen was just saying to me, 'you must feel really good to get some results for all that work.'"

Demonstrating the talent of a *rassembleur*, Harper brought Verner and the ADQ faction together with remnants of the Progressive Conservative Party, represented by the likes of Senator Pierre-Claude Nolin. He put the Verners and Nolins on the same page and on the same team — no small achievement. "One of the things I kept insisting on" Harper said, "was that I wanted to keep everyone on board, all the factions. The most exciting thing about the campaign is the breakthrough in Quebec. Our people have worked so hard, and waited so long."

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At the Conservative Party convention in Montreal in March 2005, Harper moved the party to the centre when he took hot-button issues like abortion off the table, and killed stupid Reform era ideas like recall referendums for MPs. As Mulroney told him: "It's very simple, Stephen, you just have to figure out how to move your furniture from Stornoway to 24 Sussex."

Still, going into the campaign, Harper was having trouble breaking out of single digits in Quebec. In one of their conversations, Mulroney told him: "Don't worry about it for a moment, Stephen. Focus on Ontario. Ontario will move first, and then Quebec will move, but only after Ontario, and only right at the end." He was talking about the echo effect between the two provinces. Ontarians like to vote for parties with representation from Quebec. Quebecers like to vote for a winner.

Harper caught a huge break at the beginning of the campaign when Martin played the referendum card, and Gilles Duceppe became the only one to fall into the trap, setting up the goal of reaching a winning condition score of 50 per cent plus one, a

mythical level never attained by the sovereignty movement in any election or referendum at either the provincial or federal level. While Quebecers would show up for a referendum, that doesn't mean they want one. The last referendum in 1995 was deeply divisive and troubling to the soul.

But in the previous four campaigns going back to 1993, the Liberals and the Bloc had been the joint beneficiaries of a polarized vote, in which the Conservatives were marginalized. The truth is the Liberals and Bloc had a symbiotic relationship. They needed each other, and they knew it. That was the implicit bargain between them.

But in 2006, the Liberals were burdened by a legacy of scandal and Quebecers were determined to punish them. As for the Bloc, it turned out to be a two-trick pony, scandal and sovereignty being the only things on offer from Duceppe. In this campaign, the remainder of his platform was exposed as meaningless, since he could never implement it. Harper offered something more, as he put it, "pride and power." It was an extremely resonant message.

Voters who had been held captive by the Liberals and Bloc for more than a decade were told by Harper in December that the election wasn't about a choice of country, but about a choice of policies. And the policies he rolled out before the holidays had strong appeal to Quebecers, especially on daycare and the GST.

With only 20 percent of the preschool kids in Canada, Quebec has 50 percent of all the daycare space. Costing parents only $7 per day, it is already highly subsidized space. So space and cost are not an issue in Quebec. On top of that, Harper was proposing to give parents $1,200 a year for every kid. As for the GST, in addition to the 7 percent federal consumption tax, they pay a 7½ percent compound provincial sales tax, for a total of 15 percent. Quebecers also pay the highest marginal tax rates in North America. Harper's pledge to cut the GST was another big winner.

But it was Harper's December 19 speech on "open federalism" that caught the interest of frustrated federalists and soft nationalists — the voters of the former Mulroney coalition. In what is destined to become known as the Quebec City speech, Harper acknowledged the existence of the vertical fiscal imbalance between Ottawa and the provinces, under which Ottawa sits on a ton of surplus cash while the provinces are going back into deficits providing federally mandated programs such as health care. He also pledged that Quebec could be represented at international forums such as UNESCO in areas of its constitutional jurisdiction, such as culture and education, according to the Mulroney-Johnson formula, which enabled the creation of la Francophonie in 1985. These were the two points put on the table by Charest last April 4 in his Toronto speech at the *Policy Options* 25th anniversary dinner.

Harper also promised to respect the division of powers in the *British North America Act*, vowing not to invoke the federal spending power in areas of exclusive provincial jurisdiction without the approval of a majority of provinces. This is a classic Conservative constitutional perspective, in a line of Conservative prime ministers from Macdonald to Mulroney. Ottawa does what Ottawa does in section 91 — peace, order and good government. The provinces do what the provinces do in section 92 — health, education and cities. The asymmetrical nature of the federation is apparent in sections 93 and 133, allowing for confessional schools in Quebec at the time of Confederation and the recognition of French and English as languages of the courts and legislature of Quebec. Without the division of powers, without the asymmetric features of the Constitution, Sir John A. Macdonald wouldn't have been the father of our country. While the Liberals are the Charter party, the Conservatives are the BNA party.

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Harper also made an important emotional connection with Quebec and Quebec City. Speaking in French, the boy from Toronto who became the man from Calgary, said: "Quebec is the heart of Canada." Just as significant as Harper's speech, as he said privately at the time, was Martin's immediate response, completely repudiating his own support of the identical position articulated in a speech in Laval in May 2004. "Canada speaks with one voice," Martin replied, "not two and not ten." That's the Trudeauesque view of the world, and it has no constituency in Quebec.

Quebecers were immediately onto Martin. He wasn't speaking to them. He was talking over their heads, to Ontario. It was the precise moment Quebecers finally gave up on a prime minister who had once held so promise for renewing the federation.

The policy rollouts gave Quebec voters something to think about. The Quebec City speech gave them a respectable place to go. Nor was the timing accidental. The Conservatives put everything out there before Christmas for a reason. They wanted Quebecers to talk about it around the family table over the holidays. And they did, agreeing that perhaps Harper wasn't so bad after all, and that he definitely had some interesting things to say. The fact that

he wasn't a member of the family feud, but a prospective son-in-law, actually worked in his favour. He seemed like a nice young man. He had a good job with the government, with prospects of advancement straight to the top.

"In my milieu, we definitely talked about it over dinner at New Year's," said Josée Verner, now the minister of international cooperation and la Francophonie, whose job is to deliver on the UNESCO promise.

"Yes, we talked about it," said Maxime Bernier, now industry minister, who won Beauce by 26,000 votes. "What started as a bit of protest movement then developed a life of its own after the holidays. And here we are."

And here was Harper, in the dead of a Canadian winter, forcing a Conservative spring. The ferry crossing provided what would become the photo of the campaign. The Tories didn't have a photo op for the day until an advance man named Jean-Maurice Duplessis thought of the ferry, only the previous day. The forecast was for a cold, clear winter day. They took the 8:30 morning crossing, just as the sun was coming up over the gabled rooftops of the Château Frontenac. The ship's captain agreed to stop the ferry at mid-crossing and steer horizontally to the Quebec City skyline. Harper posed with his area candidates for a thumbs-up shot.

Then, almost as an afterthought, he and Laureen posed against the signature skyline of Quebec City. They looked like any other young couple that goes to Quebec for a romantic weekend at the Château. As an added touch, Duplessis borrowed a made-in-Quebec Kanuk parka, its familiar trademark clearly visible on the collar, from a member of the RCMP detail. The visuals of the photo op, and the story of the parka, played over again on television on the final weekend of the campaign. In *Le Soleil* and *Le Devoir* the next day, the photo played over seven columns across the top of the front page. The headline in *Le Soleil* was about Bloc support bleeding to the Conservatives.

At the event in Lévis, Verner received a standing ovation from an overflow crowd just for walking into a hotel lobby.

But even as Harper was peaking in Quebec, his momentum was about to be stopped dead in Ontario. In the very last question of a scrum following the morning speech in Lévis, Harper was asked the dreaded question of whether Canadians should be worried about a Conservative majority. No reason to be concerned, he replied. There were the courts and the Senate, as well as the public service, dominated by Liberal appointees, to keep him in check. It was his only serious blunder of the campaign, and with it, any prospect of a majority disappeared.

"Get him out of there," yelled a voice in the Conservative war room, watching the event on the all-news channels. With the characteristic stubbornness of the old Stephen Harper, the new one refused to say he hadn't meant to question the independence of the judiciary. It took him three days to clear up the confusion, and that allowed the Liberals to open the closet and let out all the demons, including abortion.

By the final Thursday night, the Liberals outdid themselves in a vicious new attack ad accusing Harper of refusing to affirm a woman's right to choose. The Conservative numbers, which had been holding steady in Ontario, dropped three points in the closing three days. "Our numbers melted with women between 18 and 44," said Philippe Gervais, the Conservative deputy campaign manager. In Ontario, when a party's voting intention reaches 30 percent, there is a rule of thumb that every additional percentage point is worth five seats. The three-point drop over the final weekend cost the Conservatives 15 seats in Ontario, limiting their gains in the 905 suburban belt around Toronto and shutting them out completely in 416, where they had been looking at wins in suburban seats such as Scarborough. "We've got to find a better way of closing the deal next time," said campaign manager Doug Finley, as he left the Conservative war room two days after the vote. His final seat projection on the day before the election was in the range of 122 to 152 Conservative members — it was to come in at the lower end of the range.

In Calgary on election night, Harper's team prepared three versions of a victory speech. A slender minority, a comfortable minority and an outright majority. They never prepared a concession speech. They knew they didn't need it. And Stephen Joseph Harper is the 22nd prime minister of Canada.

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