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Harper's low-profile strategy invites scrutiny

[THOMAS WALKOM](#)

The bad news for Paul Martin is that a good many Canadians are on to him. They see through his blah-blah and refuse to uncritically accept that his Liberal government would be any better than the one that has governed this country for the past 11 years.

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The good news for the Prime Minister is that all of this has happened so quickly. With 27 days to go before voting day and the Liberal campaign in desperate shape, Canadians are becoming dimly aware that Stephen Harper and his Conservatives might just win.

This may give pause to many voters who had been planning to vote against the Liberals, not so much to push them from office altogether as to teach them a lesson.

Certainly, it will force Canadians to pay more attention to just who Harper is and what he stands for.

The new leader of the new Conservative party is no longer just an instrument to punish the arrogant Grits. He's someone who has a very good chance of becoming prime minister on June 28.

Voters will have to decide whether they really want this.

Many do. Those who struggled to promote the right-wing vision of Reform and the Canadian Alliance found much to celebrate in a Star-EKOS poll last week that showed the Conservatives closing the gap on the Liberals, particularly in Ontario where the two parties are running virtually neck and neck.

So did those former Progressive Conservatives nostalgic for the glory days of Brian Mulroney, when Ottawa was blue and the hated Grits relegated to opposition.

So did those who simply want to kick the bums out.

But others, even those who want to see the Liberals humbled, may not want an out and out Tory victory.

Last week, I telephoned many of those who had been polled by EKOS in Ontario. And I was intrigued to discover how many were planning to vote against the Liberals — but assumed Martin would win anyway.

The most common comment I heard was that voters wanted to teach the Liberals a lesson — that they wouldn't be unhappy if Martin were returned as prime minister but didn't want him to enjoy the *carte blanche* of majority government.

Few that I spoke to knew much about Harper. Some had misgivings about him but were planning to vote for the Conservatives anyway, on the theory that Harper's party couldn't possibly win.

However, politics is difficult to calibrate precisely. If enough people vote Conservative on the theory that Harper can't win, he will win. That is the logic of a system where all cast their ballots simultaneously and no one knows how anyone else is voting.

Harper seems to understand this. So far, his campaign has been masterfully disciplined.

A man who in the past couldn't resist commenting on virtually every aspect of public policy is, this time, keeping his more interesting ideas to himself.

When he does comment, it is only to present positions that have been carefully scrubbed to remove any hint of the more robust economic conservatism Harper used to publicly espouse.

He carefully limits his contacts with the media and avoids unscripted situations. The reporters on his campaign may grumble. But who cares about them?

And when party stalwarts inadvertently refer to long-held Reform-Alliance positions (as Lanark-Carleton MP Scott Reid did when he suggested, not unreasonably, that official bilingualism in Canada is overdone), Harper quickly gags them.

Clearly, Harper's game plan is to head off any Liberal attempt to portray him as a right-wing madman. But it has also served to gloss over any real differences that do exist between the Liberals and Conservatives, while giving voters the notion that Harper is just another boring, fiscally conservative centrist — a kind of younger Martin without the baggage of the gun registry or the sponsorship scandal.

In reality, Harper is much more interesting than that. His conservative views on the role of the state in the economy and his radically decentralist vision of federalism would, if implemented, alter Canada dramatically.

However, neither Harper nor his campaign team are confident that these views will be widely accepted. So they've hit upon the strategy of not raising them.

Had the turnaround in public opinion held off until later, Harper's low-profile, don't-scare-the-natives strategy may well have worked. Voters who decide late in a campaign that they no longer trust the governing party don't always have time to fully investigate the alternative before casting their ballots. The surprise election of Bob Rae's Ontario New Democrats in 1990 bears witness to that.

But the Martin team has done so badly so quickly that, after just one week of campaigning, Canadians are being presented with the real possibility of a Conservative victory.

This will cause voters to look more closely at Stephen Harper. Many will be surprised by what they find. Some will be alarmed.

Thomas Walkom's column appears every Tuesday. twalkom@thestar.ca.

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