

## Harper predicts a rural rout

### 'When I become prime minister' slips into his speeches

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SEAN GORDON  
OTTAWA BUREAU

GUELPH, Ont.—Conservative Leader Stephen Harper predicted the Liberals will be shut out of Canada's heartland and reduced to an urban rump in Monday's election.

Harper said yesterday he thinks the Liberal party will recede to its core support in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, and that Conservatives will also make inroads in the country's largest cities.

"Here's the reality. We have some seats already in urban areas, I think we'll pick up (more). The Liberals? They have very few seats in rural areas. I think they're going to lose every single one of them," Harper said during an impromptu chat aboard the media bus as it idled outside an event at a Guelph golf course.

The Liberals currently occupy many rural seats, mostly in Atlantic Canada and Ontario, a province where they held 74 seats at the dissolution of Parliament.

Steven MacKinnon, national director of the Liberal party, responded: "Mr. Harper takes much for granted. His grand predictions of crushing rural Liberal voices will come back to haunt him on Monday."

Harper described himself as "optimistic" — an EKOS Research Associates poll conducted for the *Star* and published yesterday gave the Tories a 10-point lead with two days left in the eight-week campaign — and even began a sentence of his speech in Guelph with "when I become prime minister," quickly catching himself and adding "if I become prime minister."

Speaking to a large, vocal crowd at an evening rally in Sarnia, where the Tories have targeted popular Liberal MP Roger Gallaway, Harper once again made a reference to "when" he becomes prime minister, and again quickly corrected it.



CHARLA JONES/TORONTO STAR

Conservative Leader Stephen Harper gets prepped for a Global TV interview in Toronto. The Tory chief is predicting a rural sweep for his party in Monday's election.

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The Tory leader's tour made a foray into three Ontario ridings that are long shots, and one, Lambton-Kent-Middlesex, that the party lost by only 164 votes in 2004. Limiting himself primarily to scripted partisan addresses, Harper made his first stop in Don Valley West, where Liberal cabinet minister John Godfrey won by more than 15,000 votes in 2004.

"I can tell you he won't be winning by 15,000 votes on Monday. We're in areas where we think our appearance will make a difference," Harper said.

The caravan then began a westward journey to Guelph, Strathroy and Sarnia that will see Harper campaign in Windsor, Winnipeg and British Columbia today. He'll wrap up the campaign in his Calgary stronghold on election night.

In Strathroy, Harper held a rally in the Gardenia Family Restaurant — where former prime ministers John Diefenbaker, Lester B. Pearson, Pierre Trudeau and Jean Chrétien all campaigned — mere days after Liberal Leader Paul Martin. It was the same locale where Canadian Auto Workers boss Buzz Hargrove's ill-timed encouragement to vote for the sovereigntist Bloc Québécois over the Tories embarrassed the Liberals.

Harper, 46, set his sights squarely on Martin, saying "He hasn't provided a single compelling reason why his government should be re-elected.

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**`The Liberals?**

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**STEPHEN HARPER,**

**Conservative leader**

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"And he has utterly failed to answer three important questions: Mr. Martin, where is the missing money? Mr. Martin, why do the scandals, such as income trusts, keep happening?" he said. "Mr. Martin, how, after two referendum defeats, could you let separation get back onto the national agenda?"

Harper, who has held daily media sessions throughout the campaign, marked a first by not scheduling one yesterday — the official explanation was that he is "too busy" to schedule press conferences.

In private, party officials admitted they are keen to play it safe in the campaign's closing hours, especially after three days of minor stumbles, and the less exposure Harper has to unscripted moments, the better.

For the third straight day, the media were prevented from questioning a local candidate. Yesterday it was Don Valley West's John Carmichael, who was targeted by the Liberals and by gay-rights groups after he attended a speech by influential U.S. evangelical leader Ralph Reed, who has advised President George W. Bush.

On Thursday, Kitchener candidate Harold Albrecht was whisked away from reporters who wished to question him on statements he's made about same-sex marriage and on Friday, Mississauga candidate Carl DeFaria was pulled into an elevator before he could be asked about a controversial flyer the Liberals say was distributed by his campaign.

Yesterday a volunteer security guard grabbed a reporter from the TVA network by the shoulders to restrain her from speaking to Carmichael at a campaign event.

He later apologized, as did senior campaign officials, but Harper's opponents wasted no time in exploiting it.

Martin told supporters in London that "we're already beginning to see" what Harper "really thinks."

"Stephen Harper says he believes in open and accountable government," he said. "But now he'll no longer make himself available to the press."

It was only after the footage of the incident was broadcast that party officials confirmed Harper would be making an "informal" appearance on the media buses.

Harper defended the party, saying there was no order telling candidates not to speak to the media — although an Alberta-based party strategist told the *Star* last week candidates had been told to avoid interviews.

"I haven't made any rules," Harper said. "I'm proud of the job our candidates are doing to make sure they campaign in their own ridings. The job of the team is to let the leader speak for the team, and that's what they're doing." The Conservative war room fought back with accusations that socially conservative Liberals are also ducking the press, and Harper asked rhetorically: "Are the Liberals having their individual candidates come on and give national interviews? I hadn't even noticed that."

The Liberals retorted that Judi Longfield, the sitting Whitby-Oshawa Liberal MP, was widely quoted after a rally at which Martin appeared, saying she hasn't changed her opposition to same-sex marriage.

With files from Graham Fraser and Les Whittington

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