

Jun. 8, 2004. 06:57 AM

# Cool Harper riding anti-Liberal wave

[JAMES TRAVERS](#)

[Stephen Harper](#), intellectually the most clinically cool of the national leaders, is winning this election with a hot campaign that stirs the emotions and dulls the brain.

From rousing stump speeches to a party platform discreetly presented Saturday, Harper and his clever, sharply focused team are effectively tapping an apparently bottomless well of anger.

That anger is directed not just at Liberals but at all things liberal.

At whistle stops and at bulging rallies, Harper delights his decidedly older and most often white-bread audiences by piling annoyance on top of irritation until it bursts into rage.

Corruption, government waste, taxes and a justice system that coddles criminals shape the litany of Conservative complaints about the country as well as the ruling party.

Along with skilful execution, that strategy benefits from the gutsy brilliance of not letting facts get in the way of a compelling story that Canadians are increasingly inclined to believe.

If the pollsters and analysts are right, voters are not furious about any one of those issues, but they are mad as hell at Liberals and may well throw them out.

This campaign's contradictory dynamic is documented in an EKOS Research poll commissioned by the Star and published less than two weeks ago. It not only identified a movement away from the Liberals that has since accelerated, it found that the specific issues Conservatives are using to drive their campaign are not at the top of Canadian minds.

When asked to identify what will be most important over the next five years, accountability, taxation, and even the perennial right-wing favourite of law-and-order hardly register, while health care is Number 1 and comparatively off the chart.

If nothing else, Liberals can read polls and they decided long before this campaign began to make it about health care.

But they badly underestimated two key factors: 11 years in power sapped their credibility on the issue and, in any case, Harper had limb-by-limb removed the medicare monkey from his party's back.

Without health care for cover, Liberals find themselves exposed and vulnerable to the cumulative slings and arrows that inevitably injure parties that hold power too long.

The result is a shift in public opinion that centres Harper in the political sweet spot.

In that happy place, the government is the issue and this election's outcome is predetermined unless some careless Conservative makes a mistake so egregious that the herd is spooked and the stampede reverses course.

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Harper's campaign has made errors by letting fringe social issues creep back toward the centre of the campaign and by musing about transition. But so far none is big enough to save the Liberals from themselves.

Instead, the country is far more inclined to suspend its disbelief about a party that it once feared.

More in a mood to punish than question, voters are queuing for a Conservative Canada that, like the big-box stores, promises low prices and superior service.

In that best of all worlds, a Harper government would cut taxes and increase social spending on the suspect assumption that the elasticity needed to allow the two to co-exist will come from surpluses the Liberals underestimate, trimming growth from federal departments, and an economy that, despite ominous signs south of the border, will boom forever.

That same wilful skimming over the fine print also applies to those policies closest to core Conservative beliefs.

Taking hope and flexibility out of the criminal justice system will fill prisons with people with nothing more to lose, not make already commendably safe streets safer.

Rebating taxes on gasoline that is a bargain by world standards will only encourage the personal behaviour that creates the urban congestion Harper says his party will combat.

And leaving the door ajar for wrenching debates on abortion and capital punishment, coupled with Harper's willingness to use the Constitution's notwithstanding clause to deny same-sex rights, contradicts the Conservative claim that it is a moderate, mainstream alternative.

But Harper knows inconsistencies are largely irrelevant to voters who got a sneak preview of [Paul Martin's](#) government and didn't much like what they saw.

And he grasps that Conservatives are pretty well immune from attacks launched by a party that under Jean Chrétien squandered trust along with taxpayer money.

What that creates is a political spectacle that occurs every 10 years or so. Tired of an apparently exhausted Liberal party, Canadians have reached the conclusion that any change is as good as a rest.

Determined not to stand in the way of a consensus that would sweep Liberals out of office, a leader more respected for his intellect than loved for his warmth is wisely letting emotion carry him toward power.

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