

Leaders use Stampede to rustle up some votes

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Day two of the Calgary Stampede got off to a tasty start Saturday, thanks to the breakfast-serving skills of the prime minister and his chief political rival.

Every year, the Calgary Stampede serves as the unofficial start of the summer political season. The opportunity to don a Stetson, serve a hearty breakfast and show off their personality proves irresistible to politicians in their time away from Ottawa. And this year is no different.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper started his day at the Braeside Community Association Stampede Breakfast. Flanked by bodyguards, Harper spent an hour flipping pancakes and chatting with attendees.

Across town, Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff served eggs to the crowd gathered at Stampede Park. Later, Ignatieff received a white Stetson in the Stampede's famous White Hat Ceremony.

"I'm thrilled to kick off the Liberal Express tour at the Calgary Stampede, one of Canada's greatest summer events," Ignatieff said Saturday, setting up his summer-long tour across the country.

"I hope people take a look at me, and say he's not as bad as I thought," Ignatieff said.

According to pollster Nik Nanos, however, the Liberals' poll numbers are bad.

"For some reason, the Liberals have been unable to connect with voters," Nanos told CTV News. "As a result the personal numbers for Michael Ignatieff haven't moved significantly, and as a result the party numbers for the Liberals have been trailing the Conservatives."

Harper's party has not fared much better. Despite his international summit success, and the country's solid economic recovery, Conservative support hasn't gone up either.

Even so, last week's warning by Conservative Senator Doug Finley that his party is prepared for a snap election over changes to their massive budget implementation bill has all parties bracing for a possible vote this fall.

"Let's wait for an election," Ignatieff said Saturday. "I'm ready for the battle. I'm looking forward to being on the bus and shaking every hand in the house, and kissing every baby, but god help the poor babies."

Polls suggest little would change if an election were held today. And it appears no leader is going to win votes on the basis of personality.

"They're not gregarious," Nanos said. "They're very cerebral thinkers ... and it's reflecting in the polls."

The "greatest outdoor show on Earth" got underway Friday, marking 98 years since the first Stampede in 1912. In the years since, the annual festival has grown to attract as many as 1.2 million attendees to its unique mix of concerts, midway rides and rodeo competitions featuring approximately \$2 million in prizes.

Organizers are hoping to attract large crowds during the 10-day event this year. Despite two days of great weather, so far the numbers aren't adding up. More than 88,000 people visited the Stampede Grounds Friday, down more than 2,600 from opening day last year.

The opening-day attendance record was set in 2000, when 107,268 people took in the festivities.

Prepared with files from CTV's Richard Madan