

Harper's steady statesmanship earns him title of Newsmaker of the Year

By Mike Blanchfield (CP) – Dec 23, 2009

OTTAWA — Stephen Harper began the year facing crater-sized political potholes at home, so he adopted a time-honoured coping mechanism of Canadian prime ministers: he hit the road internationally.

New York, China, India, South Korea - all were ports of call aimed at burnishing Harper's image at home as a trusted economic helmsman in a time of unprecedented financial uncertainty.

The strategy, it seems, worked like a charm: Harper used a steep recession to his political advantage and emerged stronger than ever in his four years in office, a feat that has earned him the title of 2009 Newsmaker of the Year in the annual survey of news organizations by The Canadian Press.

"His personal forays onto the international stage and his surprising positions on major issues such as climate change are criticized, but he sticks to his guns," said Maurice Cloutier, managing editor of Sherbrooke's La Tribune.

"Mr. Harper seems to have won his bet that Canadians are less concerned with Canada's image abroad and more so with more personal interests in issues such as the economy and public security."

It's Harper's second straight year as top newsmaker. He garnered 24 per cent of the votes to edge out Jim Balsillie (19 per cent), the billionaire CEO of Research In Motion who fought unsuccessfully to bring another NHL hockey franchise to Canada.

Other notable contenders for top newsmaker included Victoria (Tori) Stafford (11 per cent), the young girl from Woodstock, Ont., whose April abduction and murder shocked the country, and Dr. David Butler-Jones (11 per cent), the chief public health officer who became a household name to Canadians in the throes of a flu pandemic.

Two high-profile international events bookended Harper's year: welcoming the immensely popular U.S. President Barack Obama to Ottawa in February and making an overdue sojourn to China in December. Both generated mainly positive reviews.

2009 was the year the prime minister became, well, more prime ministerial, said political science professor Faron Ellis of Lethbridge College.

"Harper shined, in my opinion, on the international stage," Ellis said. "He does appear prime ministerial, but he doesn't appear stuffy and aloof."

Harper's most important speeches - whether to bankers in New York or to business leaders in China - might have come on foreign soil, but they were designed to play back home, said Ellis. They inspired confidence among Canadians facing economic uncertainty and helped his party make inroads with visible minority communities.

The end-of-year accolades were a far cry from 2008, when Harper closed out the year with a rare political misstep that left him dangerously close to squandering power. His luck started to turn on a chilly Ottawa February day when he basked in the honeymoon glow of the newly elected U.S. president.

The prime minister's easy rapport with Obama and his decision to hitch Canada's environmental policy to that of a Democratic administration gave him political cover that left "no ability for his opponents to attack him for being a Canadian Republican, or 'Bush-lite,' or the most right-wing government in Canadian history," said Ellis.

His most successful photo-op of the year was probably his surprise appearance at the National Arts Centre gala in October. Backed by celebrated cellist Yo-Yo Ma, the prime minister warbled a passable version of The Beatles' "With A Little Help From My Friends" while at the piano.

The performance won raves but for the few who suggested he intentionally chose a song that was sung by Ringo Starr, the one Beatle who couldn't really sing.

Indeed, not everyone was spellbound by Harper's 2009 performance.

"It's been a quiet leadership," said Antonia Maioni, a political scientist at McGill University and director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada.

After brainstorming for highlights, the best she could come up with was "him playing piano at the National Arts Centre. If that's the only inspiration, we have a problem in terms of leadership."

Andrea Kriluck, managing editor of The Standard in St. Catharines, Ont., said she voted for Harper because he seemed to turn up everywhere.

"He fought the recession by doling out gobs of funding to Canadian communities, was on the international hot seat over Canada's lack of action or plan on climate change, showed off his musical talents on a piano at the National Arts Centre, and was even parodied by a Liberal supporter as an assassination victim," Kriluck said.

Still, Harper also seemed to know instinctively when not to lead. He spent less time in the

Map

