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## NATIONAL NEWS

at 16:41 on July 10, 2009, EDT.

### Harper apology to Ignatieff raises questions about staff, judgment

Jennifer Ditchburn, THE CANADIAN PRESS



Prime Minister Stephen Harper takes part in a press conference Friday. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Sean Kilpatrick

OTTAWA - Stephen Harper just couldn't hold it in any longer.

The prime minister had kept his Wolverine-style, dagger-like claws retracted for a spell, calling a smiling truce with the Liberals late last month for the greater good.

But just like X-Men's brooding hero, the knives eventually popped out, this time causing some political embarrassment and raising questions about Harper's instincts and about his advisers.

Harper was forced to apologize to Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff on Friday after he launched into an unsolicited - and it turns out unwarranted - tirade against his political rival.

He took time out of a closing news conference at the G8 summit in Italy to attack Ignatieff for

something the man never said and no reporter had asked about. The misattributed comments were about Canada possibly becoming irrelevant at major international summits, and were made by an academic.

One of Harper's senior assistants, Dimitri Soudas, had circulated the comments to reporters shortly beforehand.

"Mr. Ignatieff is supposed to be a Canadian," Harper said at the news conference.

"I don't think you go out and throw out ideas like this that are so obviously contrary to a country's interest and nobody else is advocating them."

But Ignatieff had never made those comments, and Soudas took the blame for misinforming his boss.

Turns out they were made by former diplomat Gordon Smith, now director of the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria.

Harper later said he was sorry to Ignatieff, but only to a television camera. Journalists weren't invited to hear those comments.

"I learned shortly after the press conference this was not a quotation of Mr. Ignatieff," Harper said. "I regret the error and I apologize to Mr. Ignatieff for this error."

Ignatieff responded in a written statement.

"I accept the prime minister's apology. It's unfortunate that these remarks have come at the end of the G8 meeting when Canada's efforts would have been better spent engaging with global leaders on shared issues."

Going for the jugular has gotten Harper into hot water before, most famously when he tried to cut off public funding for political parties in last fall's throne speech.

That move threw the country into political mayhem, with the opposition parties uniting in a coalition to replace the Conservatives.

His very public criticism of the Chinese during a trip to Asia in 2006 sent a chill through bilateral relations that is only now warming up.

Earlier this week, Harper was criticized for allegedly stripping junior cabinet minister Diane Ablonczy of a funding portfolio after she approved a tourism grant to Toronto's Pride Week.

Some believe that Harper's baser instincts cost him the 2004 election. Among other things, he refused to apologize for an inflammatory news release that baldly stated Liberal prime minister Paul Martin supported child pornography.

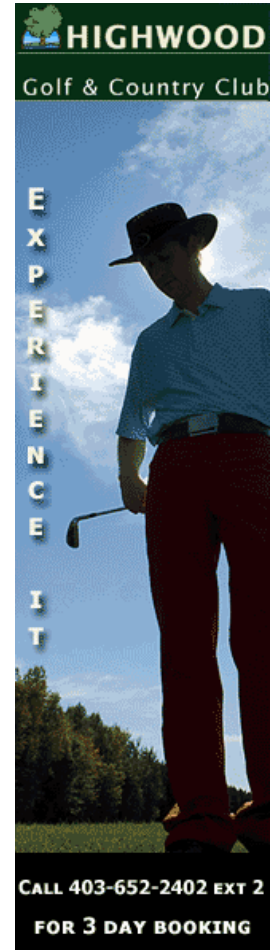
Polster Nik Nanos said Harper missed a valuable opportunity to positively define himself with voters, instead exhibiting weakness and feeding into doubts Canadians might already have about his character.

"In a way, this summit is really a platform for him to look prime ministerial and statesmanlike, but instead of building up his personal image he looked at it as a partisan platform," said Nanos.

Liberal foreign affairs critic Bob Rae said the latest incident shows Harper's true colours.

Rae has lashed out at Harper before for suggesting former Liberal leadership candidates were anti-Israel. Rae's wife is Jewish.

"I think all Canadians have to recognize that we have the smallest man on the world stage that it's possible to imagine, and that's Stephen Harper," Rae said in an interview.



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"He never misses an opportunity to stoop. Not to conquer, just to throw mud."

But going negative has also helped Harper. Attack ads inflicted mortal damage on former Liberal leader Stephane Dion, and new batch might well be slowing some of the momentum the Liberals had been enjoying up until the spring.

Still, Conservatives around Ottawa have been grumbling for months that Harper has surrounded himself with people who only feed into his most partisan tendencies and that could be dangerous.

Former chief of staff Ian Brodie and parliamentary expert Bruce Carson were said to be a moderating influence on Harper, but they have been gone for a year.

"Too many young partisan kids who, when they get tired, showcase some of their worst tendencies," said one Conservative. "No mature steady hand in places where it is needed."

What kind of advice and help Harper is getting came into play in two other recent incidents.

Harper accepted the communion host at a Roman Catholic funeral service held for former governor general Romeo LeBlanc, not putting it in his mouth immediately. Why the non-Catholic was put in the position of accepting the host in the first place is unclear.

And G8 leaders snickered as Harper was late again for a group photo at the end of the summit, something his aides wouldn't explain.

Accidents happen, one Conservative strategist shrugged.

"The challenge for a prime minister or minister in a situation like this is that you're basically flying blind because you don't have time to read the media first hand, so you have to depend on your advisers."

Friday's mess was not the first time that Harper's staff provided reporters with erroneous information.

A year ago, also during a visit to Italy, reporters were told that Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi had decided to remove all conditions on sending troops to Afghanistan following a meeting with Harper.

When that turned out to be false, every reporter travelling with Harper was given access to his airplane's satellite phone in order to clear the matter up with their newsrooms.

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