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The Hill Times, March 2nd, 2009

Harper's New York trip a good strategy, says pollster

Nik Nanos says Prime Minister Stephen Harper is trying to counteract the 'Michael Ignatieff effect.'

By Harris MacLeod

Before U.S. President Barack Obama's whirlwind visit to Ottawa on Feb. 19 Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) was being criticized for spending his time on photo-ops instead of talking to Canadians about the economy. Post visit, however, the Prime Minister was once again talking about the recession and his economic stimulus plan—just not in Canada.

"It's a good strategy for him to get into the U.S. [media] because it makes him seem more statesman-like and also kind of elevates his reputation," said pollster Nik Nanos, of Nanos Research.

Mr. Nanos said that Mr. Harper's recent batch of interviews in New York, which PMO director of communications Kory Teneycke has called the biggest U.S. media blitz ever by a Canadian Prime Minister, is part of a new Conservative strategy to counteract what he called the "Michael Ignatieff effect."

He said that unlike in the past when the Conservatives' strategy was to launch negative attacks against Mr. Ignatieff's predecessor, former Liberal leader St  phane Dion (Saint-Laurent-Cartierville, Que.), the Tories are now trying to build a more positive, proactive image around Mr. Harper to make him appear more competent than Mr. Ignatieff.

"Michael Ignatieff is trying as much as possible to look like a prime-minister-in waiting, so it's important for the Prime Minister to get ahead of that and to show that he is the Prime Minister," said Mr. Nanos.

Toronto Star columnist Chantal H  bert noted in a column on Feb. 11 that while Mr. Obama was out selling his economic stimulus plan to the American public, Mr. Harper "can't seem to get his fill of carnivals, hockey tournaments and holiday dinners." But fast-forward to last week when a picture of a buoyant looking Stephen Harper walking through Times Square appeared on the front of *The Globe and Mail* over the headline "Harper Steps Onto World Stage."

The Prime Minister was in New York to meet with bankers and business leaders, as well as United Nations Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon. While there he did a series of interviews with American media where he talked up Canada's "cautious" banking system and the importance of Canada-U.S. trade.

"That was a beautiful piece of PR for Harper in the case of that photo, and in terms of the other media coverage I think it was smart of Harper to follow up on the reasonably successful meeting with Obama by going down to the United States this week and doing what he's doing," said *Globe and Mail* columnist Lawrence Martin.

Mr. Martin also noted that Mr. Harper faced a lower level of scrutiny from U.S. interviewers than he most likely would from Canadian journalists.

"I noticed the U.S. interviewers are certainly not going back to last fall and some of the statements made by [Finance Minister Jim Flaherty] and Harper, which of course they had to do total about faces on in a sort of red faced way. Their promises of no deficits for years to come, which they totally flip-flopped on, so they do get an easier break from American interviewers who aren't that grounded on what happened last fall when the Prime Minister had to run off to the Governor General to save his skin," said Mr. Martin.

Last week Mr. Harper's communications team was playing up the Prime Minister's interviews in New York. PMO press secretary Dimitri Soudas sent Parliamentary Press Gallery journalists notifications and pictures of Mr. Harper's interviews with American news organizations, which included Fox News, CNN, CNBC, and *The Wall Street*

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The PMO held a briefing about Mr. Harper's trip to New York for Canadian journalists on Parliament Hill on Tuesday, however, when asked when the Prime Minister would speak with Canadian media about the economy a PMO spokesman said reporters would have opportunities to ask Mr. Harper questions following "government announcements."

"We'll continue to be having interviews. The Prime Minister will have media availabilities associated with government announcements on an almost weekly basis, so there's no shortage of opportunities for questions to be asked on the economy. I'm trying to think of the last time we've had a media availability or an interview where questions on the economy weren't front and centre, so that will continue to happen," said the spokesman.

Conservative strategist Tim Powers said that Mr. Harper's appearances in U.S. media present the opportunity to showcase him as a leader and also to help bolster Canada's leadership role internationally. He noted that this is often a good strategy for Canadian leaders in terms of their popular support at home.

"Most Canadians enjoy seeing Americans showcase us in a positive light. It never seems to hurt the leader on display at home with his voters," Mr. Powers said.

In the lead up to President Obama's visit, Liberals were playing up Mr. Ignatieff's connections to members of Mr. Obama's administration, as well as the fact that both the President and the Liberal leader attended Harvard University, where Mr. Ignatieff also taught. The evening following Mr. Obama's visit to Ottawa the Liberals arranged to have a picture of Mr. Ignatieff and Mr. Obama beamed onto a video billboard in Times Square, and also onto a similar billboard on the Strip in Las Vegas, Nevada. The Liberals paid \$2,000 for the public relations strategy.

"Michael is somewhat known in the northeastern United States and it was the President's first visit to Canada so we thought it was important to commemorate the meeting," said OLO spokesperson Jill Fairbrother.

Ms. Fairbrother said that Mr. Ignatieff has received an invitation to speak at a think tank in New York, and also interview requests from American media organizations such as Bloomberg and PBS, however, she said he is not currently planning on following Mr. Harper's lead by going to New York.

"Michael is here talking to Canadians about what's going on with their jobs and the economy. We're going to pay attention to what Mr. Harper is saying down there ... as it reflects his thoughts about stimulating the economy here in Canada," she said.

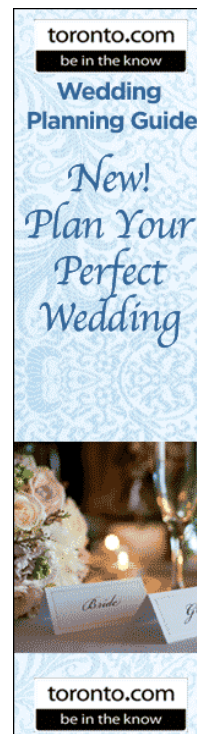
Mr. Nanos said Mr. Harper has an advantage over Mr. Ignatieff in that he is the Prime Minister, and therefore there is more widespread public interest in what he has to say. He said that Mr. Ignatieff must incrementally introduce himself to Canadians.

"It's usually one of the problems that all leaders of the opposition have, getting attention. So it's just going to take more time for Michael Ignatieff to do that," said Mr. Nanos.

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