

Tories roll out ads attacking Ignatieff

BY ANDREW MAYEDA, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MAY 13, 2009



The political temperature on Parliament Hill spiked a few degrees Wednesday, as the governing Conservatives rolled out a multipronged ad campaign attacking Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff, who accused the Tories of abandoning their responsibility to protect the economy.

Photograph by: Reuters, Reuters

OTTAWA — The political temperature on Parliament Hill spiked a few degrees Wednesday, as the governing Conservatives rolled out a multipronged ad campaign attacking Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff — who accused the Tories of abandoning their responsibility to protect the economy.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper also appeared to shut the door on the Liberals' proposal to make it easier to qualify for employment insurance, raising the prospect of a possible election-triggering showdown over EI this summer.

A day after launching online ads attacking Ignatieff, the Conservatives rolled out new components of the campaign Wednesday, including television spots and specialized websites in English and French.

The ads draw attention to Ignatieff's absence from Canada for much of the last 40 years, attempting to paint him as an arrogant intellectual who only returned to his native country to fulfil his quest for power. Ignatieff returned to Canada in 2005 to run as a Liberal MP after a diverse career as a journalist, writer and academic in Britain and the United States.

In a new twist, two senior officials from the Prime Minister's Office — Harper's director of communications Kory Teneycke, and press secretary and senior Quebec adviser Dimitri Soudas — provided a background briefing to reporters on the campaign.

The officials said they took unpaid leaves of absence from the PMO, and were acting as Conservative party officials in delivering the briefing. It is unusual for government officials to unveil attack ads, a task that usually falls to party staff.

Ignatieff brushed off the new ads, calling the campaign an example of "old-style politics."

"On a day when we've got record bankruptcies, (when) we've got unemployment skyrocketing, all this government can think of doing is running attack ads on me," he said. "This is the old style of politics. We are in the middle of a serious economic crisis. This government needs to grow up and do its job properly."

The Liberals have been on a bit of a roll, with recent polls showing them opening a modest lead over the Conservatives.

At the party's national convention in Vancouver this month, Ignatieff said the Liberal platform would be ready in June, and he threatened to force an election if the Harper government doesn't expand jobless benefits.

To qualify for employment insurance, unemployed individuals must prove they worked a certain number of hours in the year before they were laid off. The Liberals have proposed lowering the eligibility threshold for EI to 360 hours of work from a range of 420 to 700 hours.

Last week, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty said the government is listening to opposition proposals on EI. His comments, coupled with signs the NDP and Bloc Quebecois don't want to go to the polls, suggested a summer or fall election was not in the offing. The Conservatives need the support of at least one of the opposition parties to maintain the confidence of the House of Commons.

But on Wednesday, the prime minister took a tougher stance, arguing the Liberal proposal would do nothing to alleviate the recession.

"The proposal is that a Canadian could work 45 days and collect employment insurance for a year. That would be the system in every region in perpetuity. That would do nothing for the economy or for the recession today," Harper told the House of Commons in response to a question from Ignatieff on EI.

The Conservatives launched attack ads against former Liberal leader Stephane Dion shortly after he took the helm in December 2006. The campaign is widely believed to have severely damaged Dion and the Liberals in the polls.

Pollster Nik Nanos said the ads were successful because Dion lived up to their portrayal of him as an ineffectual leader. "Once Stephane Dion's mistakes and behaviour validated those ads, the numbers started to move," said Nanos, CEO of Nanos Research.

However, the anti-Ignatieff ads might not be as effective if the Liberals find a way to use the campaign as a platform for conveying a positive message about Ignatieff, said Nanos.

"They focus on the fact that Michael Ignatieff has not been in Canada very much for the last 40 years. That, on the surface, would seem to be a good attack approach. However, what the Conservatives are doing is providing Michael Ignatieff to explain what he has accomplished in the last 40 years," said Nanos.

The Tories say the ads are being financed by the Conservative party, although they would not say how

much the party is spending.

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