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ANALYSIS - SEX, RELIGION, POLITICS A BAD MIX FOR CONSERVATIVES

# Tories nurse viral headache

Jul 10, 2009 04:30 AM

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**SUSAN DELACOURT**  
 OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—Sex, religion and politics are subjects to be avoided, it's said, during polite dinner conversation.

They are also subjects that have hounded Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his government in a viral kind of way this week.

First, there was the uproar over whether the Conservatives were split on a \$400,000 government investment in Toronto's Pride Week celebrations – an outlay of cash that seemed to have backbenchers in vocal revolt and Tourism Minister Diane Ablonczy punished for announcing the funding in overly gay-friendly fashion.

Then, there was the even bigger furor over how Harper handled a holy wafer he received during communion at former governor general Roméo LeBlanc's funeral. Did he eat it or commit the sacrilege of putting it in his pocket?

The controversies stirred unprecedented numbers of hits and commentary on the *Star's* political websites this week and a media-wide flurry of outrage, jokes and instant analysis.

Pollster Nik Nanos sees

## Ablonczy finds Tory support in Pride controversy

The federal cabinet minister now responsible for giving Toronto Pride Week any new grants said the government is examining what "value for money" it gives taxpayers.

initial financial support for Pride Week and on Harper appearing to be insensitive to a religious ritual would give socially conservative voters pause.

"It hurts them for their core vote," Nanos says.

"These two items are a gratuitous distraction for the Prime Minister and the government."

The stories have also been fodder for comedy.

Rick Mercer, arguably the king of Canadian political satire, says he saw the comic potential

### PM receives communion wafer

Questions are being asked about Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apparent failure to consume a communion wafer at the funeral for former governor general Roméo LeBlanc.



Questions are being asked about Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apparent failure to consume a consecrated communion wafer at the funeral last week for former governor general Roméo LeBlanc. Video of the moment has been posted on YouTube.

simmering trouble for the Conservatives. As Nanos sees it, these controversies dealt with faith and gay rights – and Harper's government has done a lot of talking on these issues in a bid to keep the core voters happy, he points out. All the attention on the government's

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immediately in the communion incident. Mercer was watching coverage of the funeral live last Friday, and when he saw Harper receive the communion wafer on TV, the comedian immediately tapped out a message on his BlackBerry to one of his conservative, Catholic friends.

"It's in his pocket as we speak," Mercer told his friend, hoping for an explosion of incredulous outrage – which he did receive. "It's in his pocket with the gum."

As for the controversy about Pride Week financing, Mercer says it had the ring of the familiar – playing into some long-rooted notions among Canadians about the Tories' limited scope of tolerance.

"There's something oddly comforting about the Harper government wanting to punish someone for helping a gay pride parade. It's like oh yes, it's back to the good old days. This we understand," he says.

Mercer says the communion story is ultimately "silly," but it struck a chord with Canadians.

"I knew it was intriguing and the type of thing that would get people talking." These are the kinds of stories that have the potential to go viral on the Internet in these days of Facebook, Twitter and blogs.

In his new book, *And Then There's This*, senior *Harper's* magazine editor Bill Wasik has analyzed how stories and events go viral in this age.

He's invented a word to describe the kind of coverage that haunted the Tories this week – "nanostories." Wasik calls them the basic unit of modern media culture.

"We have difficulty, increasingly, in processing big stories that have long-time horizons and require us to do serious thinking about the future or about the implications," Wasik says.

"Instead, we seize on these tiny little contagious, viscerally interesting stories that serve as grist for more conversation, and more satire and making our own twists and turns and arguments."

Mercer thinks there's a difference between the two controversies – the communion story looked like a gaffe to him.

But in the case of the Pride financing, Mercer believes the joke's on us – either in the media or in the audience.

It's a classic case of sending two messages, Mercer thinks – first giving the money to gay activists and then, in a rare act of tolerating outspoken MPs, also conveying the message that Conservatives didn't like giving the \$400,000.

"He's managed to have his cake and eat it too," Mercer says of Harper. "He's managed to give them the money and act like he didn't give them the money."

Nanos isn't so sure that Conservatives should be comfortable with how that story played out. Not only has this week hurt the Tories among their core voters, but their seeming embarrassment on the gay pride issue might also limit their growth potential among moderate voters, especially in Quebec.

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#### NOT a NEW LOW

CONSISTENCY BY MR. HARPER. NOW YOU SEE IT - NOW YOU DON'T. FROM ONE HAND INTO HIS OWN POCKET. wow consistent.

Submitted by seustwain3 at 10:40 AM Friday, July 10 2009

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#### I agree with pdn

Who really cares what Humpty Dumpty Harper did with the waffer? What matters is his propensity to lie about it. 'So what if it is on film - deny it anyway'. Harper lies more readily than any of the other seven PM's I can remember. This, coupled with his blatant intolerance and vindictiveness has made for a very negative three years in this country.

Submitted by Brian S. at 10:38 AM Friday, July 10 2009

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#### "Sex, religion and politics are subjects to be avoided,"

Conservatives rise up and rebel, we can't talk about the normal subjects of conversation; what will we talk about ??? Mind control has now gone too far. Shades of Orwell. Thank goodness the bedroom is not off limits or have I got that wrong ? THE GOOD SIDE - in these tough times this comedy routine gives us something to laugh about. Give thanks that Jon Stewart rarely looks northward on his Daily Report. We'd be burnt blue TOAST not toasted. SAD SIDE is that ALL us pro-con commentators will have to stop commentating on so much of life. REBEL- RAISE THE FLAG for Canadian freedom of speech. I'm deeply upset that Mr. Harper et al set up these dirty ads directed at us. Dirty ads like dirty politics should be banned. REBEL- STAND UP- GIVE VOICE for Canadian values; this is too much.

Submitted by seustwain3 at 10:37 AM Friday, July 10 2009