

Harper's big gamble turns up snake eyes

By BRIAN LAGHI

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The man who prides himself on his skill as a political tactician lost the biggest gamble of his political career last night. And, at least according to some, it didn't need to be that way.

After his defeat on a vote designed to force a spring election, Conservative Leader Stephen Harper finds himself today with a chunk of his political capital spent, a temperamental image with the Canadian public, and some members of his party sniping at him for what they believe was the frittering away of the massive advantage given to him by the sponsorship scandal.

"He lost sight of the big picture," one senior Tory said.

"You get so consumed by what's going on in Parliament, sometimes you forget what it looks like from the outside."

Tories and other observers call the loss of former leadership foe Belinda Stronach to the Liberals the ultimate mistake. But Mr. Harper was also blamed for taking the heat off the Liberals by bringing controversy on himself. And, ultimately, he miscalculated that independent MP Chuck Cadman, an old Reformer like him, would hold fast to the views of his constituents when voting on whether to keep the government alive.

Five weeks ago, Mr. Harper began his effort to bring down the government on the heels of explosive testimony at the Gomery inquiry from former Quebec ad executive Jean Brault.

Mr. Brault told the inquiry that Liberal organizers pressed him for \$1.2-million in cash, phony invoices and other disguised payments in exchange for government contracts and favours.

The bombshell sent the Liberals' fortunes into a tailspin and prompted Mr. Harper to register his disgust while raising the real possibility of bringing down the government. It was the Conservative Leader's high-water mark.

The first questions about the Harper strategy began to surface after Prime Minister Paul Martin pledged in a speech to the nation to hold an election within 30 days of the report of Mr. Justice John Gomery. In his televised response, Mr. Harper kicked off what was to become a pattern of personal irritation, calling the Prime Minister a sad spectacle.

Later, he told the Commons that Mr. Martin's career was going down the toilet, and, in perhaps the most controversial remark of all, accused the Prime Minister of waiting for two cancer-stricken MPs to get sicker so they could not make the budget vote.

Then, in an effort to demonstrate that the Liberals had lost the moral authority to govern, Mr. Harper and his colleagues shut down the House of Commons, a move that one consultant said actually took the heat off the Liberals, who were being battered daily by testimony at the Gomery inquiry.

"Rule one in politics is that when your opponent is in the process of destroying himself, you don't get in the way," said Rick Anderson, who was an adviser to Preston Manning, former leader of the Reform Party. The rushed attempt to force an election interrupted what was a growing consensus that the Liberals needed to go.

Some also believe that Mr. Harper failed to anticipate the New Democratic Party's departure from the coalition that was set against the government. A budget deal between the NDP and the Liberals left Mr. Harper with only the Bloc Québécois as his partner in bringing down the government.

That coalition was one of the reasons Ms. Stronach cited for her departure. But those close to her also say that Mr. Harper's treatment of her played a larger role.

Ms. Stronach, and the many followers who helped her to a second-place showing at the party's leadership convention last year, felt frozen out of decision-making. It is a complaint that many others in the party, including some Ontario Tories, also express.

"This is all of his making. He, from the outset, treated her with absolute disdain," said a friend of Ms. Stronach. "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. And it wasn't just her: It was everybody around her."

Some Tories note that the most successful Conservative leader in the recent past, Brian Mulroney, made a religion out of keeping his MPs happy. Former prime minister Jean Chrétien also managed, at some cost, to keep Paul Martin in his cabinet for a decade despite the enmity between the two camps.

One Tory said Mr. Harper was probably right about Ms. Stronach's ambitions. But he failed to cajole her enough to keep her happy.

"He doesn't even try to jolly her along and make her feel important, because he ultimately sees she's not going to be with him any way."

Finally, and perhaps most ironically, Mr. Harper may have lost sight of the fact that Mr. Cadman really meant it when he said he would vote the views of his constituents.

When Mr. Harper was the party's policy adviser, colleagues had often said he never really subscribed to crucial Reform policies. Last night, he found out that others do.

