

Stephen Harper's style

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No one ever expected that power would turn Stephen Harper into a warm and cuddly soul. It's simply not in his nature. He holds babies at arm's length. He makes small talk with the stilted charm of an alien. His smiles often look pained. In a delicious moment last May, on a tour to endear himself to Canadians, he plunked himself down at a knee-high table, peered at finger-painting toddlers and, when they waved their tiny hands in his vicinity, muttered, "Don't touch me." Last January, at the end of the second English-language leaders debate, he gave up the pretense. "My strengths are not spin or passion," he told viewers. "I know that you know that. But my policies are clear and my intentions are straightforward." Fair enough.

Such cool control has engendered a novel, if politically risky, approach to governance. Although former prime minister Jean Chrétien did not often pop up before the cameras, he allowed his ministers to run their departments and freely speak their minds. His successor, Paul Martin, and his coterie of advisers anxiously backed up their public appearances with so-called talking points, putting their spin on almost every political event.

In startling contrast, Mr. Harper figures out his strategy, tersely communicates it and then marches off somewhere else. For two weeks after he appointed former Liberal David Emerson to cabinet and pitched the unelected Michael Fortier into the Senate, Mr. Harper was simply unavailable to answer questions as hotline callers ranted. Instead, he issued a blizzard of announcements, popped into the occasional photo op and gave a cursory speech in Nova Scotia. When his own press aide squawked about the strategy, Mr. Harper fired him. Finally, at what was billed as "media availability," the Prime Minister was dismissive of his critics. "I certainly was aware of the criticism that would be forthcoming," he virtually shrugged, explaining that he had made a calculated tradeoff to ensure a stronger cabinet. He added curtly: "I will be available whenever I have something to announce."

It is true that each prime minister must find his or her style. In Mr. Harper's case, sudden bonhomie would be alarming. But he should remember that journalists are really conduits between him and the public. He could do more to explain his approaches to Canadians. As well, he should remember his basic political texts. Astute prime ministers build a foundation of trust and familiarity so that voters will accord them the benefit of the doubt in dicey situations. As political strategist Robin Sears, a partner at Navigator Ltd., has warned, "If the only time you get seen is in a crisis that you don't own or control or in a transparently staged photo op, people's judgment is not likely to be very sympathetic when events force you to appear."

Events have cropped up quickly. A mere day after Alberta Premier Ralph Klein tabled proposals to allow individuals to pay for publicly funded health care, the Prime Minister was virtually forced to hold a news conference in the House of Commons lobby. Mr.

Harper did not have much to say beyond the fact that Ottawa would study those proposals. But as the nation agonized over Alberta's apparent defection from medicare, he had to say it.

Somehow Mr. Harper will have to establish a better balance. U.S. President George W. Bush may not hold frequent press conferences -- though their frequency has increased as his political popularity has waned -- but his aides and advisers give almost daily briefings on events. So far, polls clearly indicate that Canadian voters have given Mr. Harper the benefit of the doubt. He is, after all, still figuring out the system, and how he wants it to work. He, in turn, could give them more credit. They just want to understand where the nation is headed.