

## Two of our local election campaigns are truly local, with no mention of party policy or leaders

*More to the Story*

By Ben Bennett

How do you win a campaign when your main platform plank is rotting before your very eyes? Send everyone to sleep.

This appears to have been Stephen Harper's strategy when he interrupted everyone's summer holiday by starting our federal election campaign six weeks early, and then by taking a low profile in the first debate.

Trying to understand anything this fellow does is a challenge, but let's try.

When questioned about such a long haul, Mr. Harper said something about the campaign already having started, or some such nonsense. The irony of course is that no one expects anything he says to have any real meaning, so he doesn't bother providing any and we don't bother looking for any.

The main media theory for the early start is that the Tories have way more cash and will be able to outspend the Liberals and NDP, and possibly bankrupt them at the same time.

It is not as if the Tories needed any help to maintain the propaganda assault. They had plenty of taxpayer-funded ad opportunities to do that. Although, if people have been paying attention to the constant promotion of the government's fabulous action plan, they might wonder why the economy is headed into the toilet again. Then again, they might wonder why we are celebrating Canada 150<sup>th</sup> birthday two years early.

And let's not forget those photo-ops showing government (read taxpayer) largesse in supporting local projects in community after community -- especially Tory ones -- across our fair land.

If you are a parent, you had already seen those nice cheques rewarding you for making babies, but it was nice to be reminded how generous your government is – even when it meant that, oops, balancing the books this year will take a bit more creative accounting than was expected.

And by doubling the campaign length, Mr. Harper has effectively doubled the cost to taxpayers. Twice. Once for the 100% increase in the Elections Canada costs for staff and office space, and again for the extra expenses of the extended race incurred by the major political parties and reimbursed to them after the fact.

Any ads we see now – and we'll see lots – will be paid for by the parties themselves (subject to the taxpayer subsidy).

What we will no longer see are the ads that were funded by so-called third parties. For the first time I can recall, we saw quite a lot of them this year, and all critical of Mr. Harper.

I think those ads were working and this is why Mr. Harper went to see the Governor General early. With the official writ now dropped those ads must end.

In the only debate we will likely see with all the major parties participating, Mr. Harper kept a fairly low profile, leaving Mr. Trudeau and Mr. Mulcair to do most of the jousting.

Last weekend he threw a little red meat to his core with a proposed travel ban that actually won't mean anything but sounds good to those who believe a few misguided young people will be dissuaded by more legislation.

Looking at the local picture, there's something rather odd. Only two of the major parties - the NDP and the Greens -- have any references to their leaders and parties on their candidates' websites.

You won't find anything about Mr. Harper on Gloria Kovach's site, and there is nothing on Lloyd Longfield's site about Justin Trudeau. At the time of writing, I couldn't even find links to their parties or references to party policy. Both candidates have much to commend them so neither has reason to hang on to anyone's coat-tails. But are their leaders and their parties really such liabilities? The usual party logos are nowhere to be found on either site, either. In fact, Ms Kovach even has a big red maple leaf as part of her campaign logo.

I haven't seen many flyers yet but I am sure the amount of content about their parties and leaders will tell us a lot about how they feel their camps are doing.

At some point people will wake up, and maybe even smell the coffee. But if they are looking to learn more about the party policies, their local choices are limited.

(Ben Bennett's past columns can be found at [www.bbc.guelph.org](http://www.bbc.guelph.org).)