

# See ya, Stephen? [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

As Stephen Harper stood outside a Conservative caucus meeting late last week, the inevitable question was asked about whether he felt any jitters at the prospect of an impending campaign. "No, I don't think so," he told reporters. "You know, there's always lots of work to be done, always lots of preparations. It's always a hectic time. But, no, I'm looking forward to it.

Harper's assessment is - as it was this spring when the Tories nearly forced an election - that the scandal-plagued Liberals are teetering and that he is the man to administer the decisive push to oust Prime Minister Paul Martin.

But given that the Conservatives sit in the polls more or less where they did after the last election, there are doubters within the party who are skeptical of Harper's ability to lead them back to government. And though Harper professed to feel no nervousness, the Tories are deadly serious entering the campaign, with good reason.

"The stakes are very high for everybody here," said a senior Tory.

Several party officials privately admit a loss will almost certainly spell the end of Harper's leadership, a view that's also shared by many Tory watchers.

"If they don't win a minority, Stephen Harper will be looking for work," said Nelson Wiseman, a political science professor at the University of Toronto.

But retiring MP John Reynolds (West Vancouver-Sunshine Coast), a staunch Harper ally who is a co-chair of the national campaign, said he has no such fears.

"The only person who should worry about that is Paul Martin. ... This is a government that's under a big cloud of suspicion, and I think the public is really looking forward to Stephen Harper's reign as prime minister of Canada," Reynolds said.

The party platform has been crafted to be sufficiently close to Liberal priorities that the Tories hope to snuff out the spectre of the "hidden agenda" criticism that plagued them in the last campaign.

The Conservatives will roll out several key pieces of their platform in the opening week to 10 days of the campaign.

According to sources within the party, key planks like the financial platform - which will contain tax cuts for small businesses and middle-income earners - environmental policy and the Tory accountability package will be unveiled early in the campaign. Other pieces, such as child-care and health policy, will follow soon after.

There is an expectation a strong NDP showing will hurt the Liberals in the key province of Ontario, and the Conservatives also see a favourable tendency in their polling because there is a strong will for change.

But Wiseman said change is an ephemeral concept, and that for Harper to win he must correct the mistakes his party made in the last campaign.

Bold predictions of a majority government, allusions to Martin being soft on child porn, ill-advised comments on bilingualism and bumbles by loose-lipped MPs all hurt in the final stages in June 2004.

- Reprinted from the Toronto Star

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