

PM arrives on a wing and a prayer

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It's been eight years since a federal Liberal campaign jet touched down in Calgary.

While chasing votes on an Edmonton-bound flight midway through the 2000 campaign, a senior Jean Chretien strategist with a few too many high-altitude cocktails in his bloodstream leaned across the headrest to rule out any pitstops in Calgary during that 36-day gadabout. What, he slurred, would be the point? Death becomes any Liberal running in a city that has shut out the party since the early 1970s.

Paul Martin's prospects for a breakthrough are no brighter now than Chretien's sobering shutout four years ago, so give this prime minister full credit for gamely touring his political death zone on Friday.

But three hours after Martin's jet touched down, the merged Conservative party's Air Canada charter, dubbed United Scarelines by the media, glided down the same Calgary tarmac. Stephen Harper was back on very friendly turf.

The only election suspense left in Alberta now is the fate of powerful Deputy Prime Minister Anne McLellan in Edmonton and the ability of backbench-warming David Kilgour to survive on the electoral strength of an allegedly captivating personality, which I have yet to detect.

You'd still have to give both better odds to win than lose, but if the Liberals hit their majority rule tipping point into minority inevitability, watch out -- a Conservative sweep of the 28-seat Prairie heartland becomes a given and a severe setback for a prime minister who said he'd measure his success through seat gains in the West.

With that grim Grit scenario looming larger with every bad-news Liberal poll, Harper arrived in his hometown Friday a bona fide prime ministerial contender, declaring himself unapologetically Albertan on at least one defining point of policy: He remains a firewall believer.

In the alienated aftermath of the 2000 election, a policy wonk named Stephen Harper (yes, the same) penned a letter to Premier Ralph Klein insisting Alberta should avenge all manner of federal mistreatment by wrapping itself in a firewall and reasserting its constitutional jurisdiction.

The province should strike out on its own on pensions, tax collection, policing and go down fighting in court, even at the risk of incurring federal penalties, to interpret the Canada Health Act any damn way it pleases.

As Harper correctly observed, most of his reasserted rights he proposed for Alberta already exist in Quebec. "Martin's only problem seems to be that when he's speaking English, he has some extreme difficulty with Alberta exercising them. When he's speaking French, he seems to forget Quebec already exercises them."

Atta boy Stevie. But it's a hard-sell vision on the health care point. Opting out of the Canada Health Act is not high on Alberta's agenda.

At the time of its writing, Harper's letter was too radical for even Klein to stomach.

Harper's day started poorly in Saskatchewan where he attempted to put a firewall around the topics he was willing to discuss with media.

Amid promising meteorological signs for the Conservatives -- his visit coincided with a drought-busting downpour and the takeoff to Calgary featured an almost neon rainbow to the south, doubly impressive when seen from above in flight -- he turned a tin ear to the province's most pressing concern.

Statistics Canada reported Thursday that farm income in both Saskatchewan and Alberta fell to its lowest level in 30 years and collapsed into negative cash flow for the first time since the Great Depression.

Yet when local media tried to ferret out a Harper position, all they got was a derisive stare that looked for all the world like a leader caught with his policy pants dangling down around his ankles.

"We're doing a message event here," Harper chided the locals, as if his regurgitated babble about the sponsorship scandal was a worthy stand-alone revelation.

This is directly akin to Harper refusing to discuss energy policy in downtown Calgary or fisheries in St. John's. It can't be done. And shouldn't be done by someone in serious pursuit of the prime minister's office.

Under continued provocation and with extreme hesitation, Harper finally outlined a series of weasel worded agricultural promises to "take a second look" at this and "looking at these things one question at the time" on that before declaring "it's not for the federal government to fund every single program."

In the end, Harper summed up his communications strategy this way: "You don't really walk on your own message."

But refusing to discuss the issues that matter to the people is a sure way to get voters walking away from the message -- and the party.

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