



IT'S A RELIEF, frankly, to see some progress in the almost decade-long project that has been the 'humanization' of Stephen Harper

He looks so human. Encore, encore!

One small step for Stephen Harper, one giant leap for the political strategist in us all



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Enjoyable though it was, Stephen Harper's performance of a Beatles song at a ritzy Ottawa gala may wind up being a moment we come to regret. It raised the stakes to the point that all future political photo ops will require, at minimum, a pair of hip-hugging satin trousers and a "surprise" appearance during Tango Night on *So You Think You Can Dance*. Be warned: even as you read these words, Jack Layton is grooming his chest hair and thinking, "Right foot back, left foot pass—and then I rip open my sequined blouse."

The "humanization" of Stephen Harper has been almost a decade in the making, and frankly it's a relief to finally see some progress. There have been so many failures along the way—when he hired that lady to pick out his ties, when he sent his kids off to school with a firm handshake, when he publicly devoured the flesh of the weak (I'm paraphrasing). No matter how many times he pretended to write a book about hockey, he just couldn't connect with the common man.

But the efforts of the Prime Minister and his crack team of scientists at Conservative Labs continued. They tried the sweater vest. They tried photo ops with babies. (Alas, Harper kept neglecting to give the tots a kiss; instead, he'd instinctively strive to buy their votes with billions in bouncy castle infrastructure.) During the last campaign, Harper tried everything short of entering a room, approaching the microphone and uttering as his first words to reporters: "Thanks for coming—I baked muffins." Nothing worked.

But then came the Piano Man's surprise rendition of *With a Little Help From My*

Friends, complete with a backup band and Yo-Yo Ma plucking the strings of his cello in support. The crowd at the National Arts Centre, many in fancy-panted designer attire for one of the capital's big annual galas, went wild. From Row J, I could see grown women jumping up and down, shrieking, "Encore! Encore!" As the number ended, a fellow down the way remarked: "That was great. It's going to take me a few days to remember why I hate the guy."

Intermission followed the Harper cameo and the conversations were revealing. People weren't marvelling at Harper's warmth or humanity. They were marveling at how effectively he had *portrayed* himself as warm and human. They appreciated the performance not as a fleeting glimpse of the Real Stephen Harper. They appreciated it as a strategic coup—a moment that would coax all those ordinary voters out there into believing (but not us, because we're so savvy!) that Harper is one of them, an average Joe, a Bob Brewski, etc. The media picked up the theme—we declared it brilliant because we believed ordinary voters would swoon in the face of Harper's Ringofication.

But are there any "ordinary voters" left? Is there anyone who still views a political appearance—no matter how allegedly spontaneous or sincere—as anything other than the combined effort of a dozen communications advisers, a personal stylist and, in Harper's case, a prosthetic smile?

We're all political strategists now, conditioned by the media and the parties themselves to interpret everything through the prism of tactics and positioning. Everyone knows Jack Layton is avoiding an election this fall because his party is about as popular as

certain strains of salmonella. No one is bothered that he pretends otherwise. Their focus is whether his little fib—we're doing it for the unemployed people of Canada!—is likely to play well strategically. (Spoiler alert: no.)

In 2008, the Prime Minister exploited a National Arts Centre gala for personal political gain by declaring that swanky galas attended by rich artists are an affront to ordinary working Canadians. Exactly a year later, the Piano Man was exploiting the very same NAC gala for personal political gain by playing merrily to the tuxedos.

In 2008, Harper was launching a war on culture, portraying artists as leeches and moving to deny tax credits to films that include any "sexual content that lacks an educational purpose." (Under terms of this legislation, the kinky sex in David Cronenberg's *Crash* would have had to feature a subplot about the importance of regular oil changes to extending the life of your car's engine.) A year later, he was holding Yo-Yo Ma's hand in the air and bowing to the \$10,000-a-table crowd.

Is this hypocrisy? Sure. But we've all built up a pretty good immunity to hypocrisy. What we can't get enough of is The Game—who's up, who's down, what the latest poll says, what the strategists are strategizing, and what we'd do in their place. We'd make Iggy more decisive. We'd shave Jack's moustache. We'd paste Jack's moustache clippings on Iggy. We don't actually believe Stephen Harper has changed, become any warmer, grown or softened or evolved as a leader. But we admire him for being sharp enough to make it look as though he has.

Sing us a song, Piano Man. You've got us feeling all right. **M**

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