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# Mellowed PM Harper Meets Canada's Ethnic Press

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Sep 16, 2008

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Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper at a meeting with ethnic media in Toronto on Tuesday. (Matthew Little/The Epoch Times)



TORONTO—Charming is not a word often used to describe Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. But an election-time meeting with ethnic media in Toronto on Tuesday left some talking about what seemed to be a softer, more easy-going Tory leader.

Perhaps Harper's comfortable lead in the polls has made him more relaxed. By many counts, his Conservatives are polling nearly 10 points ahead of the closest opposition, the Liberals, in the second week of the federal election campaign. (Canadians will vote Oct. 14.)

Or maybe it was his audience. Reporters for ethnic media do not normally fire the same pointed questions Harper faces from the newshounds in the national press corps. That might have been especially true on Tuesday as the PM's aides asked that questions be submitted in advance (though reporters were apparently selected at random to pose questions).

Or perhaps it was the blue-sweater effect. The Conservatives have been working to remold their leader in a softer, gentler light after years of criticism that he is cold and aloof. Campaign ads show the prime minister in a blue sweater discussing his love of the piano and his family.

Regardless of its cause, the change Tuesday was clear. In this up-close meeting, Harper sounded decidedly less partisan. He carried himself with a calm sincerity that stood in sharp contrast to the more hesitant, sometimes awkward demeanor he has shown in more crowded settings.

One reporter for an Iranian publication said he was surprised by how approachable Harper seemed in the roundtable, given that he's so often characterized by the press as being stiff.

Harper courted the ethnic vote at the event, lauding his party's ethnic members of parliament—many of whom were the first of their ethnicity to be represented in the Parliament. He went on to play up the Conservatives immigration record and repeat a pledge to help foreign-trained professionals be accredited in Canada.

But Harper did face some difficult questions, including allegations that Bill C-50 was being used to deny or hold up some immigration applications. The controversial bill gives the minister of immigration the power to intervene in immigration applications, primarily so that people with skills needed by Canada's economy can be brought in more quickly.

Harper said any delays were due to the backlog of immigration applications rather than the new legislation.

Other questions were much milder.

In the last question he faced, a reporter asked Harper what his best and worst moments were as prime minister.

Harper declined naming a single highlight—listing the recognition of Quebecois as a nation within Canada, the historic Indian Residential School apology, and the Chinese Head Tax redress as candidates. But he didn't hesitate to name the most difficult part of his work.

"The most difficult thing about being Prime Minister is having to call the families of men and women in uniform who have been lost serving their country," he said.

"You have here people who are capable, disciplined, professional, deeply compassionate, people who are willing

to put their lives in danger, to serve the greater interests of their country and . . . to directly help their fellow human beings."

"I can never say it enough to the families; it is a tremendous tragedy whenever we lose someone like that."

*Last Updated*  
Sep 16, 2008



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