Oh Canada: Here Comes Frank Luntz

by Bill_Berkowitz

In late May, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that he would no longer be giving news conferences to the national media. Speaking to A-Channel in London, Ontario, Harper said that, "Unfortunately, the press gallery has taken the view they are going to be the opposition to the government." "They don't ask questions at my press conferences now. We'll just take the message out on the road. There's lots of media who do want to ask questions and hear what the government is doing," he said. Harper's new policy appears to come directly from the media strategy playbook of U.S. President George W. Bush -- sidestep the so-called hostile national media and play to a more receptive local media. Interestingly enough, Harper's announcement came less than two weeks after meeting with Republican strategist and pollster Frank Luntz. From Canada to Britain, from Iowa to Washington, Luntz has been racking up the frequent flyer miles these days. President and CEO of the Virginia-based Luntz Research Companies, he is the still boyish-looking and highly-respected Republican consultant and message massager who appears to be at his best when he's darting from one place to another dispensing advice. After an affable meeting with Harper, Luntz went on to speak at the Civitas Society, an influential Conservative group whose members include Harper's chief of staff Ian Brodie and his former campaign manager, Tom Flanagan. "Luntz's links with the Canadian right go back to the days of the Preston Manning-led Reform party, but he characterized himself yesterday as a 'casual observer' of Canadian politics," the Toronto Star reported. Luntz hammered away at the corruption of Canada's previous Liberal government and he suggested that Harper and comrades should not be afraid to repeatedly remind Canadian voters about that corruption. "Canadians shouldn't have to go through what Americans are going through,'" Luntz said. "The U.S. system is rife with corruption, or perceived to be rife with corruption, and Canadians have an absolute right to know what previous governments did with their hard-earned money." In a report posted at Canada.com, New Democratic Party Leader Jack Layton expressed concern about Harper's meeting with Luntz: "I think if Mr. Harper was listening to Canadians instead of American right-wing pollsters, he would be taking very different positions on issues." "He would be trying to do something to achieve the Kyoto (Protocol) objectives instead of just saying we can't do it. He would be taking immediate leadership on issues like Darfur. He would be moving on issues like child care and all the other things that Canadians have spoken about. But I guess if he's going to take his advice from an American pollster, we can't exactly expect that he's going to follow the recommendations of Canadian public opinion," Layton said. "Why is the prime minister taking direction from Republican pollsters?" Liberal MP Mark Holland asked during a question period after the meeting. "Why are they more important to him than the elected premier of the province of Ontario?" In mid-May, in what appears to be a mini Luntzian "mission accomplished" moment, CTV.ca reported that Canadian environmentalists charged that "the Conservatives' communication strategy on climate change almost exactly echoe[d] advice in a three-year-old briefing book" written by Luntz for the U.S. Republican Party. In his 2003 memo, Luntz advised against using "economic arguments against environmental regulations, because environmental arguments would always win out with average Americans concerned about their health". "If you look at the advice he (Luntz) gave to the Republicans some time ago and compare it to how the Conservatives are talking about these things, it's just cut-paste, basically," Stephen Guilbeault of Greenpeace Canada told CTV.ca. "Since the Conservatives took office, they have consistently stressed their commitment to clean air and water, and tried to avoid discussion of cutting back environmental programmes -- although many have been eliminated," CTV.ca reported. Over the years, Luntz's contributions to framing the political debate make for an impressive Greatest Hits package. Prior to the 1994 Republican "Revolution", which saw the Republican Party take over Congress for the first time in several decades, he helped then House Speaker Newt Gingrich craft the party's "Contract with America". In 2002, Luntz wrote an extensive memo advising the Republicans to soften their linguistic approach to discussing environmental issues, and a June 2004 memo entitled "Communicating the Principles of Prevention and Protection in the War on Terror" offered Republicans sound-bites to be used in the November presidential election, that connected the war on terror to the war in Iraq. Luntz is also an adjunct fellow at the Hudson Institute, a profoundly right-wing anti-environmental Washington-based think tank founded in 1961 to advocate for "free markets", "individual responsibility", and "the preservation of America's national security". He has been called "a focus group guru", by the Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch and "one of the most accurate political analysts of his generation" by the

London Sunday Telegraph. Time magazine named him one of "50 of America's most promising leaders aged 40 and under." Although he has earned the reputation of a man who reads the political tea leaves and transforms that reading into a winning message, it hasn't always been smooth sailing. In 1997, he was formally reprimanded by the American Association for Public Opinion Research over questionable polling practices revolving around the Republicans' "Contract with America." And while he is still dispensing advice to Republican members of the U.S. Congress, he and House Majority Leader John Boehner -- selected for the post after the soon-to-be-former Texas Congressman Tom DeLay resigned the position earlier this year -- aren't bosom buddies. "Frank Luntz is the Republican Party's undisputed master of right-wing propaganda, conservative spin-meistering, political-deception, diversion, redirection and focusing the imagination of an unsuspecting audience in ways that bring about specific outcomes or foster public support for anti-environmental, anti-democratic or pro-business positions," Scott Silver, the executive director of the Oregon-based environmental group Wild Wilderness, said. While providing winning advice to the Republicans, Luntz may also succeed in further diluting the already paper-thin democratic discourse. "Luntz combined the most effective techniques of Madison Avenue with the most effective tools of the psychoanalyst's couch and figured out how to apply them for the purpose of political persuasion," Silver added.

"He elevated to a science the persuasive art of the naturally gifted politician. Through the nearly universal adoption and application of Luntz's new science, all of political discourse has become less honest, less open, less productive and more divisive."

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