

CanadaWatch

PRACTICAL AND AUTHORITATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY NATIONAL ISSUES

EDITORIAL

Harper's Canada: Dissecting the revolution

A REVOLUTION MANQUÉ

Harper was elected as a no-nonsense conservative who promised to shrink the size of the government and reduce its role in the economy. His “red-meat” conservatism promised to lower taxes and usher in an era of smaller government, but after five years in office, his governance revolution has stalled.

New hires in the civil service and military have added more than 30,000 people to the government's payroll. Spending jumped both pre- and post-recession. The plan to restore fiscal bal-

BY DANIEL DRACHE

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ance and return the national accounts to the black has failed. The government's actual and projected deficits are larger than any the Liberals managed to achieve. On fiscal management, Harper is hardly a textbook conservative—the Pentecostal preacher espousing small government.

Significantly, many Canadian families like what they see from some of his pol-

icies. Families get small tax credits for sports equipment, apprenticeship tools, and trucker's lunches. Harper has added some big-ticket items such as the tax-free savings account and added to the child tax benefit that replaced the discredited Keynesian-inspired family allowance. For young families, these giveaways lend credibility to his “conservative-who-cares” image.

Ideologically, though, his government revolution will not be remembered for these small gestures. If one looks at the

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THE MAN AND THE REVOLUTION

2010 in review: Canada's values

THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF EVERYTHING

Social and technological changes over the past half-century have produced powerful tensions that leaders who would seek to govern highly educated societies like Canada must navigate. Socially, the decline of deference toward traditional forms of institutional authority has meant that bureaucrats and elected leaders can no longer assume that the public will assent to their decisions or assume that mandarins know best (even when they do). Technologically, the Internet has enabled an incredible proliferation of disruptive practices, from citizen journalism published on blogs, to Twitter-fueled activism, to the forced transparency imposed from the outside

BY MICHAEL ADAMS

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in by WikiLeaks—whose teeth have proved a little sharper than those of Canada's increasingly dysfunctional access to information regime.

Even as online idealists herald the “democratization” of everything and advocate for open data, open government, and new forms of citizen participa-

tion, Stephen Harper's Conservatives have now governed for half a decade and Canadians are apparently unperturbed by the steely hierarchy over which the prime minister is said to preside.

HOW WE SEE OURSELVES

What do Canadians think about how their country is faring these days, with its perennial minority governments and its old-fashioned top-down leader? Are

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redefine THE POSSIBLE.

bigger picture, the Harper government cannot claim to be minimalist in the lives of Canadians. It has already added \$200 billion to the national debt, and only some of this was used to fight the recession. The government's approach to the massive structural deficit it created is to ignore the opinions of experts who advocate restoring the cuts to the GST and eliminating any further tax cuts to Canada's corporations. Ronald Reagan in the United States and Brian Mulroney were "tax-cut" conservatives who spent billions and created a poisoned chalice of massive debt mismanagement.

SUCCESS BY A THOUSAND CUTS

Harper's own agenda is not very different in broad outline from that of other conservative leaders, like Ronald Reagan, who ran up massive deficits. However, his made-in-Canada, kick-ass conservatism has changed the institutional makeup of Canada and its state-citizen culture. The HST has jacked up the cost of consumer goods, and the tax grab pushed Gordon Campbell to resign as the premier of British Columbia. Globally, Canada's role has been downgraded, as the Harper government has become an avatar of US geopolitics in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Human rights and middle-powership, once the foreign policy signature of Canada, have been put on the back burner. Canadians live in a more unequal society than ever before, and Harper's goal to gift more public resources to private enterprise goes further than those his Liberal predecessors lavished on corporate Canada. His tough-on-crime legislation and his low-profile management of the Canada-US relationship have paid handsome dividends in his political heartland.

Many in the media portray his "bite-by-bite" approach in Parliament as a winning strategy against a lacklustre opposition. He has cut the public service through attrition rather than a bloody-minded wholesale restructuring of government. If you cut enough muscle, it goes without saying, the government

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cannot continue to row or steer the machinery of the state effectively. For a prime minister who prefers stealth to accountability, what better way to achieve the first and most difficult of his government objectives? There is none better.

Michael Ignatieff is the weakest Liberal leader since John Turner. The struggle for control between the Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin loyalists left the Liberals divided, feckless, and confused in the eyes of the Canadian public. The Liberal Party has been kicked around in the rough and tumble of "no-rules" partisanship in this minority government.

Harper's mixture of ruthless pragmatism in dealing with Parliament, the micromanagement of government, and the relentless strategy of one-way messaging has provided him with the tools to govern as if he had a majority. He has centralized more power in the Prime Minister's Office than had any of his predecessors; the result is that he has almost total control over every aspect of government, from Cabinet ministers to the civil service on downward. The critical test remains, can Harper succeed in winning over the public to his political brand of conservatism? So far, he has not found a way to bridge the growing divide

between his values and the priorities of Canadians.

THE TRUST FACTOR: WHAT YOU SEE IS NOT WHO HE REALLY IS

Nik Nanos is one of Canada's best pollsters in tracking the shifting moods and expectations of Canadians. A February 14, 2011 poll revealed that none of Harper's red-meat issues are top priorities for Canadians. Nanos asked over one thousand Canadians, What is the most important national issue of concern? Health care, at 22 percent, was the top response; jobs and the economy came second, while 10 percent prioritized the environment. Only 5 percent of respondents put debt and deficit reduction as their top priority.

For the Conservatives, the million-dollar question is how to increase national support from the current 35.9 percent to win a majority government. Pollsters tell us that 35 percent of Canadians would give the Tories 138 seats if an election were held today; that is 5 seats less than they currently hold. The Liberals, even under the lacklustre leadership of Ignatieff, continue to garner the support of almost 30 percent of Canadians. Amazingly, the Liberal brand remains a powerful vote-catcher. If an election were held today, projections claim that the Iggy Liberals could pick up an additional 10 or more seats in the House, believe it or not.

The next Parliament will be larger with new seats created in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario, reflecting fast-growing urban areas. However, these are not likely to alter Harper's chances for forming a majority. In 2008, the Conservatives were 13 seats shy of a majority. On his website, threehundred-eight.blogspot.com, Éric Grenier has created an electoral profile of the new ridings, which shows that Harper stands a reasonable chance of taking only three out of the seven new seats.

Much will change between today and election day. The New Democratic Party

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(NDP) may bear the full brunt of the current state of disunity on the left. It is almost axiomatic that as Liberal fortunes rise, the New Democrats numbers nose-dive. They are fighting for the loyalty of an immense number of centre-left Canadians. According to current scenarios, the NDP would lose to the Liberal and Conservative front-runners in almost every part of the country except Quebec and the Maritimes.

Canada's political map has changed since the Liberals' repeated successes between the 1960s and 1980s, when their status as Canada's governing party was unchallengeable with Ontario and Quebec voters in their back pocket. Today, Canada's political system is both regionalized and fragmented. In the standoff between Canada's four political parties, each one has a sizable regional political base, but no single party has a winning national strategy. The electoral heartland of all of Canada's political parties has been regionalized to an unprecedented degree.

THE ETHNIC VOTE: HARPER'S STRATEGIC VARIABLE

The breakthrough in this unwieldy political landscape lies in Harper finding a framing issue around which to swing anywhere from 10 to 20 seats to his favour. His target audience and potential vote bank—Canada's ethnic voters—stand between Harper's big victory and failure. A leaked document reveals that the ultra-secretive Conservative election machine's plan of attack is to blitz Toronto's and Vancouver's immigrant communities with TV ads, radio messaging, and social media networking. The four target ethnic groups are Chinese, South Asians, Ukrainians, and Jews; communities that inhabit suburban ridings and have voted Liberal for generations may determine the outcome of the next election.

Harper's work is cut out for him. Tories fare worst with South Asian and Chinese voters, who remember the anti-immigrant policies of the Reform Party

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and Harper's role leading the attack on Canada's immigration-friendly policies. In the Indo-Canadian community, Harper hopes to capitalize on their opposition to same-sex marriage and split their vote. The stakes are high and the question is—will Canada's multicultural train switch tracks to embrace Harper's hard-line conservatism with its pragmatic edge? However, experts argue that his party's chances at splitting off chunks of the vote from the Liberals are much exaggerated. Missing from this picture is the deep well of voter distrust around Harper's policies as well as his leadership. The distrust factor has become the most important liability after five years in office. There is a lot about his management style to upset Canadians.

Harper's most dim-witted policy mistake was the attack on Statistics Canada's long-form census and the fabricated argument that the census violated the privacy of Canadians. The subtext is that the vital social information the long form provides is a critical tool for Canadians to understand how their society functions, where it is succeeding, and where the big and small gaps are. What Canadians saw was a political leader who forced the head of Statistics Canada to resign in protest and on principle. Canadians were not wrong to ask themselves, what does Harper fear from this strategic information-gathering exercise? Is it rational?

THE ALIENATED CENTRE: HARPER'S BAD-HAIR ELECTION NIGHTMARE

The dumbest thing that Harper has done in the last five years is anger and alienate centre, liberal, and left Canadians, who constitute well over 50 percent of voters. (If Bloc support is included, this grows to over two-thirds of the Canadian elec-

torate.) The 2008 budget statement that precipitated Harper's greatest political crisis—prorogation and the short-lived, ill-conceived attempt at governance by a Liberal-NDP coalition with Bloc support—stands out as his greatest blunder. Harper prorogued Parliament for two months in order to avoid testing the confidence of the House in his policies as required by the Westminster model of parliamentary government.

His unwavering support for environmentally disastrous projects like the oil sands has hurt his electoral chances in large urban centres, with young and first-time voters and with angry environmentalists. Without the support of the broad centre, Harper will not get his cherished majority.

For a brilliant tactician, Harper's gaffes, mistakes, and miscalculations are self-inflicted—the product of his rigid ideology and personal temperament and hence his greatest burden. This kind of ideological head-butting sends a viral message to many Canadians that this government cannot be trusted. It is a government that prides itself in one-way messaging to Canadians; it has no feedback loops and is not engaged with the public. It acts in a discriminatory and mean-spirited way to those who disagree with its ideological ends, and it takes pride in being a government whose agenda does not include social justice. In Canada's fragmented, regionalized political system, Harper's governance revolution is founded on the black arts of secrecy and stealth as much as ideology. What Canadians fear most about his conservative revolution *manqué* is not knowing what other programs would be dismantled, lost, or marginalized if he possessed the jewel in the crown—a majority government. 