

# 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-fuelled 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.

Canadians frustrated, impatient for increasingly direct democracy (or at least proportional representation) as technology enables new forms of participation and the culture increasingly values autonomy and self-expression? Or in a time of economic uncertainty and roiling geopolitical complexity, do Canadians appreciate a strong, single-minded leader who has a vision or at least an agenda and tirelessly exacts compliance from the institutions of government?

This fall Environics updated its Focus Canada public opinion research program, which began in 1976. The picture that emerges from our most recent sounding is of a society that has considerable faith in its institutions, but a somewhat diminished confidence in the people running them. Canadians are more positive than ever about our parliamentary system; they express little interest in tinkering with our electoral process, our system of government, or our Constitution. (In other polls over the past few years, Environics has found that while pundits fret about minority governments, the public is unperturbed by them.) At the same time, Canadians are considerably less confident than they have been in the past about the politicians and political parties working the levers of our institutions.

## CULTURAL CONFIDENCE

On more general issues of national identity and the state of the country, Canadians are sanguine. They are culturally confident: proud of their country, its freedom, its diversity, and its symbols. In addition to Parliament, at least in the abstract, Canadians continue to place great importance on such national symbols as the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the flag, our national parks, and the national anthem.

We also like the RCMP, multiculturalism, and Canadian literature and music. Further down the list of national symbols that make us proud are hockey, bilingualism, the CBC, and our national capital.

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The Queen, however, is not widely seen as an important national symbol—and, alas, we went into the field too early to ask about William and Kate.

## CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM

On the pressing issues of the day, Canadians think our economy is relatively strong and that our standard of living is good. In fact, nine in ten of us feel that our quality of life is better than that of our southern neighbours, a finding our Fathers of Confederation would surely find reassuring. On the whole, Canadians are relieved that we seem to have dodged the “great recession” but express caution about the near term, saying this is no time for a shopping spree.

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Our beloved health-care system is the most sacred of our cows and Canadians strongly continue to endorse the public system, with eight in ten saying it should be funded through tax dollars rather than private insurance and their own pocket-books (although a more impatient boomer-driven majority now believe we should be able to purchase medical services to ensure timely access).

## CRIME AND SECURITY: NO AUTOMATIC BUY-IN

On other issues, Canadians today are less likely than at any time in our 35 years of tracking to believe crime is increasing. What’s more, in terms of crime-related

public investments, most Canadians favour a focus on prevention over enforcement and punishment. Public support for the death penalty remains at an all-time low. Over the past decade, in fact, Canadians have increasingly expressed the view that convicted murderers should be sentenced to life imprisonment with no parole, instead of execution. The categorical good-and-evil moralism that rationalizes the death penalty diminishes in appeal with each generation.

As well, increasing majorities of Canadians favour gun control (this before the Tucson shooting), abortion rights, and same-sex marriage. In addition, six in ten Canadians believe that the global economic crisis is no excuse to stop working on environmental issues.

Pluralities of Canadians believe that Aboriginal problems are more the result of public attitudes and government policies than they are self-inflicted. Canadians want the emphasis of government policies to be on improving the lives of Aboriginal peoples both on- and off-reserve—as opposed to focusing on legal issues like self-government and settling land claims.

## IMMIGRATION GOOD FOR CANADA

Canadians continue to be open to immigration, and are much more likely than any other society in the world today to believe immigrants are good for the country. Still, Canadians would like to see more evidence that immigrants are adopting “Canadian” values, which, for many, means embracing gender equality.

## JUDGING AMERICA IN SMART WAYS

Far from being automatically anti-American, Canadians appear to be judging America according to its actions and its leadership and are quite prepared to admire and even follow America when they believe it is headed in the right direction. Public opinion data show that positive opinion of the United States surged by 14 percentage points between June and December 2008, in the wake of President Barack Obama's election.

Most of the views that I have been writing about here have been stable or evolving slowly over the past three and a half decades, although Canadian confidence in our economy and the way it is regulated, and our pride in national symbols have increased notably over the past three years.

A close look at the numbers suggests a shift occurred in the late 1990s when the views of baby boomers became mixed with growing numbers of their Gen X and Gen Y offspring, not to mention an increased proportion of immigrants, who tend to express as much or more pride in their adoptive country than do Canadian-born citizens.

## DISSATISFACTION WITH LEADERS

Other factors influencing the evolution of public opinion in Canada have been a generally robust economy, an increasingly educated population, and a media environment in which communication and self-expression have exploded. These last conditions bring us back to the question of whether Canadians believe that our leaders' current approach to governance remains appropriate in a wired, egalitarian, globalized, urban world. As the foregoing numbers suggest, the people of Canada are proud of their country—especially its democracy—and tend to think it is on the right track. Perhaps because they believe things are going reasonably well, Canadians are not pushing for some kind of social media-driven revolution. Their dissatisfaction


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with their political overlords suggests to me that they simply want their leaders to exhibit some of the wisdom, dignity, and even idealism that our institutions seem to point them toward.

It is important to note that Canadians' dissatisfaction with political leaders cuts across parties and personalities. Although expert opinion might suggest that the Harper government has made a marked departure from the style of previous governments (including Progressive Conservative ones), the public does not seem to blame the Conservatives disproportionately for the combative tone in Ottawa or for any radical change to the direction of their country.

As for Harper himself, Canadians find him a less-than-magnetic figure, but they don't distrust him as much as his political opponents and educated urban elites would like them to. People like the fact that he is a decisive, if sometimes controversial, leader, and in the absence of apparent leadership at the helm of the Liberal Party, the plurality find him acceptable as prime minister.

## CANADIANS ARE NOT DRIFTING TO THE RIGHT

At the same time, there is little evidence to suggest that the unforeseen stability of the current Conservative government is a symptom of a more conservative population. If Canadians are moderately satisfied with the Conservative government (enough to give them successive minorities and keep them polling in the mid-30s), it is not because Canadians are drifting to the right. Canadian public attitudes on major economic and safety net issues have changed little in recent decades. It is important to note that Canadians' dissatisfaction with political leaders cuts across parties, and on social issues Canadians are generally becoming more liberal. The prime minister was quite right when he observed that he and much of his caucus are more conservative than the political centre of gravity in this country. But for now, Canadians seem to be willing to be governed by a steady hand who embodies neither their greatest hopes nor their deepest fears. 

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