

He's still here

BY SETH FELDMAN

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THE GIFT

Seven years ago, when *Canada Watch* published "The Chrétien Era: A Red Book Audit," a special issue on the legacy of Jean Chrétien, it was hard to imagine that we would be repeating the exercise with an issue on Stephen Harper. Harper was, after all, an anomaly in Canadian politics: a man with an overriding ideology and a determination to enforce that ideology upon a country with little sympathy for it.

As a vocal libertarian, he was by definition an outsider. Canada, in contrast, is a country that usually requires its leaders to pay their party dues or at least to demonstrate some interest in public administration. Even Pierre Trudeau had to fight his way through Parliament and the Liberal Party before getting the keys to the Prime Minister's Office.

In contrast, the Canadian right had simply handed Harper the leadership. The Alliance/Reform/Conservative opposition had become so hopelessly divided and ineffectual that there was nothing to lose by entrusting an outsider with its fate. These were people who had at one moment, accidentally, or not, named themselves the Canadian Reform Alliance Party. Who was CRAP to object if a bright and articulate guy wanted to ignore its self-derision and take it to victory?

Harper's election victory was less his doing than Prime Minister Paul Martin's. Martin's coup was a twofold miracle. He had dethroned the most popular prime minister in modern times. In so doing, he had also split a party that believed in nothing so much as remaining, at all costs, united.

LIBERALS DOWN AND OUT

It has been five years since Harper took office and the Liberal Party has still not fully recovered from that division. It has no "A" list in its upper echelons and its "B" list leaders are barely coping. Worse still, it is stalled in a kind of limbo: too weak to take power and too strong to

been slipstreaming the rise of the Tea Party. The well-funded and staged reaction to Obama has not entirely put 2008 down the memory hole, but it has provided an ongoing legitimacy to the zeitgeist that very nearly bankrupted the industrial world and left us with Sarah Palin.

CANADA'S LUCKY FORTUNE

Like the Tea Party, Harper rides the wave of a demographic relatively unaffected by the great recession. That Canada was spared the worst of the recession is perhaps Martin's third and most significant gift to Harper. The barriers Martin erected between Canadian and American banks, supplemented by some good sense on the part of Canadian bankers themselves, have made it possible for Harper to govern one of the few G20 countries where newly impoverished citizens are not taking their frustrations out on their national governments.

There have been other strokes of good fortune, enough to make one believe that a party full of creationists can indeed get some heavenly consideration for its leader. The unchecked growth of the oil sands has made his Alberta base rich, confident, and hungry for power. Conversely, the damage the recession has caused to the Ontario economy has humbled and angered a third of the Canadian electorate, putting their once predominantly Liberal loyalties up for grabs.

LOST OPPORTUNITIES

Perhaps the real tragedy of Harper's reign can be measured in lost opportunity costs. While even the Americans talk about high-speed rail, we keep chugging along on 19th-century railroads. As Obama, in the face of enormous opposition, finds the money for an improved health system, Harper is busy buying a new generation of jet fighters for an air force that has not fought a dogfight in the last 60 years.

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Harper was appealing to the electorate's fear of a non-existent crime wave when Egyptians were appealing to Western leaders for support. Would it have been so difficult for him to give them encouragement or, at least, to distance himself from President Hosni Mubarak's take on governance? Or put another way, could Stephen Harper support democracy with a straight face?

It does not seem that way. A colourless introvert, he has cultivated the image of a man who is smart enough to provide sound management so long as you do not ask him how. Michael Bliss has compared him to MacKenzie King, the one-man show of a prime minister no one knew or liked, but at the same time, the politician no one could dump.

THE "BIG MAN" AS PRIMO LEADER

The dark side of Harper's image is the authoritarian, the man who has continued to work as if he were still moulding CRAP into gold. CRAP is seldom asked for its opinion of the process and Harper treats his caucus accordingly. He has been merciless to those who make the party appear foolish or corrupt. The resentful and disloyal have been cowered into a very low profile.

As befitting a libertarian, he has more or less the same opinion of Parliament and of government as a whole as he has of his caucus. Chrétien was also accused of dictatorial practices. However, while Chrétien wheeled and dealt, punished and rewarded, Harper has been more inclined to fire and prorogue.

It is a reasonable fear that, given a majority, he would extend his disdain for the democratic process to encompass an equally virulent disdain of the electorate. No Canadian deserves to be treated like a Tory backbencher. Yet this may be our fate.

THE UBER POLITICAL HONCHO

Here too, though, Harper has been lucky. A world in hard times looks for strong leadership, and we have been taught that

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strength is focused, arrogant, and unforgiving.

So here we are at the end of year five. The unlikely Mr. Harper, at the helm of a minority government, has redefined both sides of the parliamentary aisle as increasingly marginal irritants in his running of the country. His bullying of the other parties has made them into a truly loyal opposition.

Harper has pacified the Senate he once promised to reform. He has compromised and when possible eliminated the concept of "arm's length" in the civil service. And in what we hope are sops to his right-wing base, he has reminded us that none of the social reforms enacted in the last hundred years are immune from repeal.

WELCOME TO THE LONG WAR

Canada under Harper has become an environmental menace and enthusiastic participant in America's state of permanent warfare. "Social justice" is devolving from an ideal to a half-remembered abstraction. The census has been tweaked to discourage bad news. In wars on the deficit, all the wrong belts get tightened.

In five years, Stephen Harper has gone from an accident of history to an embodiment of his era, a time when power is managed like and equated to the daily news cycle. Ruling one hundred years after Wilfrid Laurier, he is less concerned about the century belonging to Canada than he is about Canada belonging to him. 



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