The Harper government’s communication strategy: The message, the message, the message

By Fred Fletcher
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Policies and practices that seem to make no sense in tactical terms may reflect the longer-term agenda. The most obvious example is the decision to make the long-form census voluntary. Commentators have variously interpreted this action as a gesture to the Conservative party’s libertarian wing or as a plot to dilute the data needed for an effective welfare state. It seems more likely that it was designed to undermine the independent status of Statistics Canada, independent by convention and not by law.

From this perspective, the decision was part of a campaign to control government messaging by weakening the independence of government agencies that provide information or oversight independent of the government of the day. In its edition of January 15, 2011, the Toronto Star identified eight agency heads replaced by the Harper government. Others, like the chief electoral officer, were the subject of public attacks, a violation of the convention that public servants were not to be criticized for partisan ends. Any official who came to office when Liberal governments were in power seemed to be suspect, regardless of credentials.

The Harper communication strategy is novel not only in substance but also in tone and process. The tone is ultra-partisan, displaying in particular a distrust of the Liberal Party. The process involves several key elements: very tight central control of government information (exemplified by the Message Event Proposal system, instituted in 2007); a general failure to distinguish government and party-related messages; attempts to intimidate independent watchdog agencies; interference with the access-to-information system; and extensive use of centrally drafted “talking points” for both government and party messaging, including orchestrated interventions by party supporters on call-in shows and online commentary sites. The highly partisan tone and the questioning of the motives of party leaders in a variety of forms, including recent pre-writ advertising, also pushes the conventional boundaries of political discourse. The Harper team apparently sees no reason to treat opposition MPs as “honourable members,” as Globe and Mail public affairs columnist Lawrence Martin put it recently, regardless of parliamentary tradition.

Pushing boundaries: Redefining political culture

In pursuit of both short-term tactical advantage and longer-term change, the Harper government has repeatedly overridden established conventions of the Canadian parliamentary system. Like other Westminster parliamentary systems, the Canadian variant does not have written rules on such fundamental issues as the formation of governments after an election, nor on some aspects of when Parliament may be prorogued or dissolved and an election called. As Peter Russell, quoted in Walrus (March 2011, online commentary sites).
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DEMONIZING COALITION GOVERNMENTS

The one clear win for the Harper government’s communication strategy is the demonization of coalition governments, having successfully exploited the ill-advised Liberal–NDP coalition (with BQ support) proposal in 2008. Conservative ads and spokespersons denounced the coalition as a plot to overthrow the duly elected government. Although public opinion seems uncertain about coalitions, the Conservative strategy has at least made many voters nervous about them.

While the specific concern about coalitions may not last, given that most of the 55 parliamentary systems in the world are often governed by formal coalitions or party alliances, the shift in how the public views parliamentary government may have more staying power.

In response to the coalition in the United Kingdom, the Conservative talked of a government. It is part of the general trend over the past several governments toward executive dominance—an emerging presidential system without most of the checks and balances. The convention in Westminster parliaments is that the government must have the support of a majority in the House, regardless of party label.

The prorogation of Parliament in 2008, with an implied threat of a public attack on the governor general if the adjournment was not granted, may have been a desperate tactical gamble but, like the attacks on parliamentary oversight of government, it reflected a kind of contempt for Parliament. In this case, however, the online-organized public outcry may have ensured that prorogation in the face of a united opposition in the House of Commons will not be so easy in future.

LOST CONFIDENCE: A TURNING POINT

Nevertheless, the Conservative party actually made gains in 2008, despite the fact that the prime minister had violated the spirit of his fixed-date election legislation, advancing the argument that an election was required because the House of Commons had become dysfunctional. This was a dramatic reversal of the central tenet of responsible government. The election was called not because the House had lost confidence in the government but because the government had lost confidence in the House. This argument was not, it seems, decisively rejected by voters.

The prime minister took this view, he now says, not only because the government’s legislation was not being passed as quickly as he wanted, but also because the level of rancour in Parliament was at a high level. In most minority situations, the government reaches out to the opposition parties and seeks to find enough common ground to get legislation passed. This has been done
ties to oppose the bills and somehow satisfy their more enlightened followers that they still have a few principles.

The Conservative “tough on crime” agenda has run into trouble with the provinces that have already spent billions building more correctional facilities to imprison the growing numbers of prisoners. In the federal–provincial division of powers, the provinces are obliged to imprison all those who are sentenced to less than two years. The provinces are pushing the federal government to pick up some of the tab for the growing prison population produced by the “tough on crime” legislation.

**CRIME IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM**

Alternative strategies for dealing with the roots of crime, such as poverty reduction, education, job opportunities, treatment for mental health problems, treatment for alcohol and drug addictions, early childhood education, and after-school programs, are dismissed by the Conservatives as “bleeding-heart-liberal, soft on crime” solutions. However, it is telling that Conservative senator Hugh Segal wrote an opinion piece in the *Toronto Star* (February 20, 2011) in which he argued “to be tough on crime we must be tough on the causes of crime.” He identified poverty as the key cause of crime and advocated a guaranteed annual income as a solution to poverty. It may be a sign that some red Tories are prepared to break ranks with Harper and to speak out against Harper’s agenda.

**MORE PRISONS, MORE INMATES**

Still, the federal Conservatives seem determined to build more prisons regardless of the cost, even when faced with a massive debt. They refuse to reveal the projected costs to the opposition, but the Parliamentary Budget Officer estimates a price tag of $10 to $13 billion.

Recently, there have been encouraging signs that the Liberals will be prepared to fight against the “tough on crime” agenda in the next election. Should the opposition parties join hands in this effort, they may discover that they can all benefit by helping the Canadian public to see the destructive nature of the “tough on crime” agenda. Perhaps then a discussion about real solutions to criminal behaviour can begin.

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Since the hostile takeover of the Progressive Conservative Party, Canadian political discourse has been marked by a notable disrespect not only for opponents and the long-standing welfare state consensus, but also for the very institutions of democratic government in Canada. The past chicanery of the Liberal Party notwithstanding, the Harper revolution threatens more than political discourse.

**A DEMOCRATIC AUDIT**

The unravelling of some key elements of Canadian parliamentary democracy may require more than a change of heart or a change of government to fix. When a convention is violated and the public acquiesces, the convention itself may well have changed. Where there is a strong public backlash, a subsequent government may be motivated to enshrine the rule in law or regulation. Once abrogated, it is unlikely that a convention will be complied with in the absence of a legal sanction. The developments briefly outlined here make the case for a democratic audit to review the entire range of Canadian institutions and practices and to consider formalizing key elements of the system.