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

REVOLUTION BY STEALTH

If the hallmark of revolution is fundamental change in political values or governing institutions, then the Harper government's communication strategy can reasonably be characterized as revolution by stealth or incremental revolution.

In their drive to rid Ottawa of what they regard as a pervasive Liberal/liberal culture, the Harper team has also, perhaps as a side effect, undermined long-established parliamentary practices and advanced the trend toward executive dominance in Canada, weakening the checks and balances in the system. As self-defined outsiders, who felt disrespected in Ottawa, the key people in the Prime Minister's Office apparently feel no allegiance to understandings they had never been party to.

A key element in the strategy for change has been effective control of government messaging. While certainly aimed at retaining and consolidating Conservative party control of the federal government, the communication strategy also reflects longer-term objectives. These appear to include: (1) cleansing federal institutions of what Conservatives regard as deeply embedded Liberal/liberal values; (2) eroding the Pearsonian consensus that underlies the Canadian welfare state; and (3) attacking the independence of government institutions that threaten the imperial (or presidential) prime minister. There is nothing very secret about the overall strategy and it helps make sense of what appear to be tactical lapses when viewed through an electoral lens.

TACTICS: REIGNING IN GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Policies and practices that seem to make no sense in tactical terms may reflect the

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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,

p. 30), has put it, "these matters are supposedly governed by unwritten constitutional conventions based on political consensus—a consensus that has broken down in Canada."

The consensus that supports these conventions, as well as others that establish limits of acceptable political discourse, is not so much a public consensus as an understanding among key political actors that accepting some limits on political action is necessary for the functioning and long-term survival of the system. When one actor in the system violates these understandings, the only effective sanction is loss of public support. To put it another way, when conventions are involved, a government can do whatever it can get away with.

From this perspective, an effective communication strategy is an important part of the process of structural change. If there is little or no public outrage, a convention abrogated will be a convention abandoned. In the contest for public support, the Harper government has won more times than it has lost.

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 talk-

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ing points have put forward a new convention: that only the "winning party" can legitimately lead a coalition. Prime Minister Harper himself has used this winner–loser locution several times. By winner, he seems to mean the party that wins the most seats in the House of Commons, since the Conservative received only 38 percent of the popular vote in 2008. The argument appears to be that the only way for a coalition or alliance of other parties to form a government, even with the confidence of the House, would be to overturn what the Conservative communication machine presented as the expressed will of the voters. The effectiveness of this strategy is supported in part by an Ipsos Reid poll for the Dominion Institute, released in December 2008, in which 51 percent of a national sample believe that the prime minister is directly elected by the voters. This finding was interpreted as demonstrating public ignorance of the parliamentary system, but it can also be seen as a reflection of what voters thought they were doing when they cast their ballots, an indication of a movement toward executive dominance.

EXECUTIVE DOMINANCE

The effect of Harper's institutional creep is to turn the House of Commons into an electoral college and the gaining of a

plurality of seats into a mandate to form 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 Conserva-

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tives 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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so rarely in the past five years that it is news when it does happen. This failure to initiate negotiations with the opposition can be explained, perhaps, by the longer-term goal of changing the political culture, which would be diluted by compromise and confidence in the government's capacity to control public discourse.

The government has relied on its capacity to set the agenda for public discussion and to influence the terms in which even media criticism has been framed. Only time will tell whether or not the goals of supplanting the Liberals as the natural governing party and recalibrating Canadian political culture to a more right-wing value system will succeed. A Focus Canada poll, reported by Jeffrey Simpson in the *Globe and Mail* on February 4, 2011, found the welfare state consensus holding across a wide range of specific values and policies, though a slight majority were satisfied with the general direction of government policy.

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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 institu-

tions 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. ❦