

Stephen Harper meets the Tory legacy

Bob Plamondon

How does Stephen Harper, in his second term as prime minister, measure up to his Conservative predecessors, from John A. Macdonald to Brian Mulroney, on leadership attributes ranging from nation building to party unity? In this exclusive excerpt from his new bestseller, *Blue Thunder*, Bob Plamondon takes the measure of Canada's 22nd Prime minister.

En ce deuxième mandat à la tête du pays, comment Stephen Harper se compare-t-il aux premiers ministres conservateurs qui l'ont précédé, de Macdonald à Mulroney, sur un ensemble de questions allant des qualités de leadership au développement du pays en passant par l'unité du parti ? Dans ce passage exclusif de son nouveau best-seller intitulé *Blue Thunder*, Bob Plamondon prend la mesure du 22^e premier ministre canadien.

It's been tough being a Conservative in Canada. For every three years Liberals have been in power, Conservatives have held office for two. But to their credit Conservatives have done some tough sledding while in government, often in difficult circumstances, and usually to their political detriment. It is on this maddening legacy that Stephen Harper has his opportunity to build.

Sir John A. Macdonald gave the Tories a rousing start winning six of Canada's first seven elections. He fashioned Confederation to strengthen the bond amongst North American British colonies to spurn the influence of the United States. He gave us a robust central government while affording provinces sufficient power to sustain local practices and cultures. Under Macdonald, Tories recognized the French and English as the founding races of Canada and masterfully built the coalitions required to govern the nation over most of the nineteenth century. Using nationalist trade policies, Macdonald put Canada on the path towards economic independence.

After Macdonald's death, the party floundered until opposition to free trade with the Americans provided Robert Borden with a winning issue. Then World War I gave Borden's Tories a new policy plank: conscription. In the face of Québec's widespread opposition to compulsory service, Borden stood firm with the Empire and Canadian soldiers who had paid the ultimate sacrifice. While popular in most of Canada, conscription placed Tory party fortunes in the ash heap in Québec. The Québec Tory caucus was reduced from 26 to three in the 1917 election and then to zero in 1921. The number of seats won by Conservatives in Québec over nine of the ten elections between 1917 and 1953 can be counted on one hand. Yet conscription had only a symbolic impact on the outcome of the war. As spontaneous protests were breaking out in Québec, the United States entered the war, marginalizing our incremental contribution from conscription. Borden's policy gave comfort to our soldiers overseas, but it undermined national unity.

Through three elections in the 1920s, the Tories under Arthur Meighen

could not break free of its conscription legacy. The party was non-existent in Québec and too rigid and authoritarian to appeal to mainstream Canada. Meighen nearly held a winning hand in 1925 but was outmaneuvered by a clever Liberal leader who cast Tories as more committed to Great Britain than to an independent Canada.

Governing during the Great Depression was a mixed blessing. In response to unprecedented economic challenges, the government of R.B. Bennett established transformative institutions — the Bank of Canada, farm marketing boards, credit agencies, and the CBC — all of which remain cornerstones of Canadian life. Despite valiant reforms, his depression-era government was doomed. It did not help that Conservative forces had split just prior to the 1935 election, with H.H. Stevens and his Reconstruction party taking 8.8 percent of the national vote. Though Bennett held government for only a single term, his legacy is not to be diminished.

For the twenty-year period surrounding World War II, the Tories struggled for identity and relevance. Was the party modern, inclusive, and compassionate? Or was it hard-hitting, anti-communist, pro-business? Neither Bracken nor Drew could overcome Québécois' distrust of the Tory

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brand or present the sorts of social policy reforms that voters wanted. Against a nation eager to modernize, the Tories looked like patricians trying to take the fun out of Canada.

In the late 1950s, a charismatic, populist leader redefined the party's image in a single stroke. Inspiring with a grand Northern Vision, he was the most captivating campaigner the Tories had ever known. His distrust of authority generally, and President John F. Kennedy specifically, made him a better agitator than prime minister. But this does not make him the madman as he is so often portrayed in historical accounts. He is a prime architect of Canadian freedoms and was a trailblazer for tolerance, equality, inclusiveness, and diversity.

The Conservative party took on a softer and more progressive tone in the decades after Diefenbaker. It became the champion of the provinces, developed greater sensitivity to Québec, and established policies to deliver sustainable economic growth. But Stanfield and Clark were not sufficiently skilled or determined to win and hold office. Stanfield was better suited to governing than campaigning while Clark was simply inept.

Fortunes rose in 1983 when, for the first time, the party elected a Québécois as leader. Like Macdonald, Brian Mulroney built a Grand National

Coalition and led a disciplined and united party. His vision was of economic renewal and constitutional reconciliation. Mulroney rewrote our foreign and domestic policies and gave Canada one of its most conservative administrations ever. He took a diametrically different position from his predecessors

on the United States, leading to a Free Trade Agreement and a treaty on acid rain. However, Mulroney's coalition imploded in its second term. In the midst of a worldwide recession the Reform party hived off the western faction, while the Bloc Québécois took hold in *la belle province*. Kim Campbell's incompetence and lack of vision sealed the Tory fate in 1993 and a decade of futility ensued.

Not until 2003 did the Conservatives muster the maturity and unity necessary to restore meaningful democracy to Canada. Under the bold leadership of Peter MacKay and Stephen Harper, the party broke through its divisions. Harper offered Canada a moderate, inclusive, and national alternative that was worthy of support from one end of the country to the other. The party also benefitted from an unfocused and undisciplined Liberal government. Paul Martin was supposed to win the largest majority in Canadian history, but his government was reduced to a minority in 2004 during phase one of the Tory rebuilding process. In 2006 Stephen Harper led a mainstream Conservative Party to power. His first minority government proved to be the most productive and long-lasting in Canadian history. Harper was rewarded with another minority on October 14, 2008, although a majority had been in his grasp.

Few Conservative leaders have mastered the art of coalition building. Fewer still have enviable election records. Against most of his predecessors Harper ranks high, with one defeat and two minority victories. It is inevitable that any Tory leader with even a modicum of success will be compared with Macdonald, or more reasonably other multiple Tory winners (Mulroney, Diefenbaker and Borden). So how does Harper stand up against the very best of Tory leadership on the qualities that made them successful?

Nation Builder: To win and sustain office the top Tory must have strength and relevance in all regions of Canada; even better a nation-builder. Harper sought the conservative party leadership from a strong base in Western Canada and healthy respect in rural Ontario; but he was weak in Québec, Atlantic Canada, and large urban centres. Despite picking up seats in vote rich Ontario in 2004, Harper won only seven of the 107 seats east of the Ontario border.

After contemplating resignation, Harper determined to do what was necessary to earn the keys to 24 Sussex Drive. In 2006, he apologized to Atlantic Canadians for his previous remark that they were afflicted by a "culture of defeat." The Tories picked up only two additional seats in Atlantic Canada in that election, but it was a necessary first step to re-establishing Tory roots in the Atlantic region. As prime minister he became a surprising advocate for regional development programs, but lost ground by clashing with some Atlantic premiers over offshore royalties and federal transfers. In 2008, Tory gains in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia were offset by losses in Newfoundland, where its pugnacious premier went to extremes to express his displeasure with Harper.

Harper's next area of weakness was urban Canada. But Tory strategists were prepared to forgo seats in large

urban centres in favour of building a reliable following in rural and suburban Canada. In 2008 the Tories went zero for thirty-three in the Montreal area and zero for twenty-two in the city of Toronto.

Where Harper had pinned his hopes for a breakthrough was Québec. Following Brian Mulroney's advice the payoff in 2006 was ten new Québec seats. Then in November 2006, amidst the turmoil of a Liberal leadership campaign, a sure-footed Prime Minister Harper introduced a resolution in Parliament that recognized "that the Québécois form a nation within a united Canada." In one bold act, Harper disrupted the Liberal leadership race, discomfited the sovereigntist Bloc Québécois, bewildered the national media, and strengthened his hand as a champion of Québec nationalism. Sir John A. Macdonald would have saluted Harper as a brilliant tactician. Of Québécois, Macdonald had said, "Treat them as a nation and they will act as a free people generally do — generously. Call them a faction and they become factious."

Come 2008, Harper was poised to convert his kinship with Québec nationalists into a majority government. But to solidify his social conservative base, Harper launched a salvo against what he called the "cultural elite." More tolerant and culturally protective than the rest of Canada, Québécois dramatically turned away from Harper. Four years of cultivating support in Québec went down the drain.

It is perhaps too much to ask that any prime minister know all of Canada; that any Anglophone could understand Québec. That's why, in a nation so culturally diverse, a leader needs to be surrounded by strong people from every corner of the country. There were few such regional leaders in Cabinet, or in the prime minister's office.

Given that a seemingly minor decision on culture in the 2008 election cost him a majority, we would have expected hyper-sensitivity on Harper's part on anything to do with Québec. Yet, when his government faced defeat in the House of Commons weeks after the 2008 election from a coalition of parties that included support from the *sovereigntist* Bloc Québécois, Harper lashed out because *separatists* were involved. Macdonald and Mulroney would have forcefully admonished the conspirators, but without demeaning a great many Quebecers that they might later seek to court.

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On nation-building, despite a promising start, we can give Harper a mixed grade.

Vision: Successful Tory leaders have inspired the nation with a vision that offers hope. But when Harper led the Alliance he told supporters, "There isn't going to be any visionary statement. You can deduce the vision when you see us in action, but we're not going to talk in these grand abstractions."

The cornerstone of Harper's vision for the 2006 election was *accountability*. Yet Harper immediately undercut himself by appointing a key Tory organizer from Québec to the Senate and cabinet; and then invited Liberal David

Emerson to cabinet. It showed Harper could play rough, but also displayed a variable commitment to democratic principles. Another questionable move was calling the election in 2008 in violation of the spirit of the law his government had passed setting fixed election dates. It was political opportunism, but given their history it was a strategy Tories should admire.

So what was Harper's vision for Canada? His 2008 slogan, *Canada: The True North, Strong and Free*, meant that under Harper's leadership jobs were created, taxes were lowered, the national debt reduced and criminals held to

account. Canada was to be more united and purposeful on the world stage, while *true north* recognized measures designed to defend Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic. Harper had good reason not to offer bold policy changes. Lingering concerns over a "hidden agenda" kept him in a reassuring mode; and he knew the Tory penchant for dramatic reform had kept them from maintaining office. In 2008, it was the Liberals talking about transformative change, while the Tories safely hugged the political centre.

Harper shed the Tory image as the home of heartless bankers, economists, and big business. He shunned the jargon and pretensions of economists and never spoke of ideology as a driving force behind his decisions. If he left himself open to criticism, especially from members of his own party, it was that he was too mainstream, too moderate, and too political.

He earned a stronger minority government because he was seen as competent and decisive, or at least more so than his opponents. Following a vision he described as modest and realistic, Harper won, but with the opportunity and circumstances he faced in 2008, for many Tories it felt like a loss.

Party Unity: Some leaders promote unity by tolerating dissent. Harper pre-



Corporate Knights magazine

Stephen Harper and Brian Mulroney in happier times at the Greenest Prime Minister dinner in 2006. Bob Plamondon ranks Mulroney the best Conservative campaigner, with free trade as the single most important economic achievement by a Tory leader.

ferred to cut out the “bad weeds.” Halton Conservative MP Garth Turner was expelled from the Tory caucus for publicly opposing David Emerson entering the Tory caucus and for a blog that violated caucus confidentiality. Bill Casey had voted against his government’s budget over the terms of the Atlantic Accord and was justifiably expelled from caucus. But Harper showed his mettle by dictating that there was no room for forgiveness or reconciliation.

While Harper attempted to link with provincial Progressive Conservative conferences, he was better known for his nasty disputes with Atlantic Canadian leaders over equalization payments and offshore royalties. Harper ultimately relented and compromised to gain agreements; better had he worked

cooperatively in the first place. Harper also harmed party unity by throwing Brian Mulroney under a bus by calling a multimillion dollar public inquiry to investigate allegations over conduct while Mulroney was no longer prime minister. Harper was initially dismissive of opposition requests for an inquiry, but panicked when his name was mentioned in an affidavit. Harper has and will suffer the consequences. First, he lost Mulroney and his wide network of Québec in the 2008 election where the Tories blundered. Second, inquiries are always damaging and Harper will be tainted with guilt by association. Looking ahead, what cabinet ministers learned from Harper’s shabby treatment of Mulroney was that should they ever fall out of line he would not be there to defend them. There is a place for loyalty

in politics, although it appears to be in short supply with Harper at the helm.

On the whole, however, Harper’s discipline seems to have worked. Mulroney loyalists and provincial premiers aside, Harper has united his party and filled its coffers. However, having motivated by fear, his risk is this: should things turn against Harper, loyalty from his cabinet or caucus colleagues might be in short supply.

Coalition Builder: To win government a Tory leader must draw together the wide range of conservative factions into common cause; and then add a healthy dose of non-aligned voters. Harper’s strategy was to embrace a mainstream and pragmatic form of conservatism.

Keeping the social conservative faction of his coalition onside was Harper's riskiest challenge. He succeeded in his first term as prime minister by policy shifts that appealed to social conservatives that did not offend mainstream sensibilities. On childcare, same-sex marriage, the Court

Canada's Chief Elections Officer refused to pay the full election subsidy. The marginal benefit of additional advertising was not worth the negative publicity that ensued, and countered Harper's claim that he was running a "clean and accountable" government. Another troubling incident involved BC MP

became a liability during an economic crisis that exploded in the final days of the campaign when his decisive, action-oriented leadership style was required while he continued on a reassuring "all is well" path.

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Challenges Program, patriation of Canadian nationals on death row in foreign countries, and the appointment of judges, Harper proposed policies that social conservatives could applaud, yet mattered little to ordinary Canadians. Social conservatives did not get what they really wanted — restricted access to abortions and an outright ban on gay marriages. But they took comfort knowing that none of these measures would have been introduced by a Liberal government.

Fiscal conservatives, however, were frustrated with Harper. Although he achieved modest debt and tax reductions, most economic conservatives would have preferred deeper income tax reductions over the politically popular GST cut that helped win the 2006 election. But what bothered fiscal conservatives most was that under the Harper government spending hit an all-time high.

Overall, Harper succeeded by offering small wins to each faction of his coalition; enough to maintain unity, yet obviating the creation of new political entities on the right.

Toughness: Being tough, even dark, is Harper's natural emotional predisposition. Harper has been heard to say, "When I'm hiring someone, I want to see fear in their eyes." But sometimes toughness can get out of hand.

In 2004, Tory campaign spending allegedly exceeded allowable limits by transferring national expenditures to local campaigns, against which

Chuck Cadman. Cadman's biographer alleged that Tory campaign officials attempted to influence Cadman's vote in the House of Commons to defeat Paul Martin's minority Liberal government in May 2005. Cadman was terminally ill and did not want to risk losing his Parliamentarian's million dollar life insurance policy. The Tories allegedly offered to make good on the death benefit out of their own kitty if Cadman died while not in office. Even though Cadman's wife won a seat as a Tory in 2008, the allegation, along with a tape recorded interview in which Harper discussed the matter, hurt the Tories.

After sustaining a running feud with the National Press Gallery for years, Harper's inner circle had determined he needed to project a less partisan and less combative image to attract more women voters. However, it was one thing to remake one man's image and quite another to tone down the entire Tory team. A tasteless posting on a campaign website, an aide's criticism of the father of a dead soldier, and wisecracks from a cabinet minister about the listeriosis outbreak that had killed seventeen people in Canada indicated the Tory testosterone levels were still high. Nonetheless, Harper's personal leadership numbers rose among women voters. Perhaps the Liberal carbon tax was less appealing than the \$100 per month for every child under six that Harper had delivered as prime minister. The softer Harper, however,

Harper recovered his *mojo* a mere six weeks after the election when his government proposed eliminating taxpayer subsidies for political parties. Harper miscalculated when he thought the opposition parties would vote for a measure

that could leave them bankrupt simply because they were unprepared for an election. They developed another plan: defeat the government and join in a coalition to take over the government without the inconvenience of an election. Even though Stéphane Dion had suffered the lowest popular vote of any Liberal leader, he had unbelievably crafted a credible path to replace Stephen Harper as prime minister. Harper panicked, retreated, and then abandoned all controversial measures attached to the economic statement. While the matter should have ended there, the coalition forces unwisely persisted, allowing Harper to regain the upper hand.

So Harper was never going to win a congeniality award. Likeability has never been an essential ingredient in a game where we admire intelligence and toughness, not emotional dribble. When Harper made a conscious effort to soften his voice he came across as insincere and awkward. Harper was at his best when he was tough on his opponents; but his tendency to pathological partisanship needs to be suppressed to avoid the mean-spirited and vindictive label. Being a tough, optimistic, and visionary leader, rather than a gruff loner and bully, was the path followed by Canada's most successful Tory leaders.

Divide and Conquer: Harper knows how to throw hand grenades. He lobbed one over Québec nationhood, and another over Canada's participation in Afghanistan. It may have

seemed peculiar that a man known to be controlling put Canada's military mission into the hands of a panel led by former *Liberal* Cabinet minister John Manley. But the panelists could be counted upon to deliver a recommendation that fit neatly with

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Harper's view of the mission, so the political mission was tactical, designed to unsettle Liberal ranks.

Harper had no difficulty going for the jugular. While Dion used his bonafides on the environment to win the Liberal leadership, the Tories accused Dion of environmental ineffectiveness. The Tory party flexed its financial muscle by purchasing commercials outside of an election period to lambaste Dion as weak and indecisive. Public perception of Dion changed from self-proclaimed international leader on the environment to the status of a poser.

While Harper was tough on Dion, he rarely confronted the NDP or the Green Party because neither threatened to govern. Allowing each opposing party some strength, while sustaining their divisions, was to Harper's advantage. But Harper's flaw was that he could not, at times, resist pummeling his opponents when he thought they were down and out. His proposal to terminate political party subsidies in the 2008 economic update gave his opponents unity and purpose. This incident, combined with a flawed 2008 election campaign, seriously eroded Harper's standing as a master strategist, but no one doubted his capacity for raw battle.

It is clear that when dealing with his opponents Harper can learn from Macdonald, who gave this advice: "The great reason why I have always been able to beat the opposition is that I have been able to look a little ahead,

while (they) could on no occasion forgo the temptation of a temporary triumph. Politics is a game requiring great coolness and an utter abnegation of prejudice and personal feeling."

Winning is everything: There is no great secret to political success. The

parties that focused on winning elections above all else formed government. The parties that stubbornly clung to ideology over people, principles over common sense, and dogma over an inspirational vision earned their place on the opposition benches.

Developing the will to win was Harper's strongest political asset. It took quite a transformation. As an MP's assistant in 1986, he was a right-wing ideologue who lacked empathy for Québec's nationalist aspirations or for the plight of disadvantaged regions. Before his first term as a Reform MP was up, he understood its fatal flaw. After Chrétien's three straight majorities, Harper built a broad centrist conservative coalition that included a merger of two political parties. Then he compromised in ways few thought imaginable and adopted the sorts of policies he had railed against in the 1980s.

To sustain his government, Harper warmed to climate change and overcame his distaste of regional development programs. He neutralized the issue of Canadian participation in the war in Afghanistan. When the 2008 campaign turned on the culture issue, Harper responded by spending millions on funding for a Québec television station and introduced a tax credit to offset the cost of art instruction for children.

Most observers expected Harper to be more ideological than political, but he was just the opposite. Some criticized him for opportunism, but he

simply stole a page from the Liberal playbook: win at all costs. Harper's determination to win is as strong as anything the Tories have ever seen.

Relative to Tory greats, Harper has earned a mixed grade. His intelligence and strategic sense, at times, has rivaled Macdonald's, but his tendency to take pointless jabs at provinces indicated he did not possess the Old Chieftain's sense of nation-building. Like Borden, Harper asserted an independent Canadian foreign policy. Harper shared

Diefenbaker's ability to pillory opponents. But Harper lacked the charisma, the oratory, and the penchant for drama that made Dief the Chief so captivating. Like Mulroney, Harper understood Canada's political history and believed that Tory success hinged on Québec. As a native son, however, Mulroney executed brilliantly where Harper has faltered. Like Macdonald, Diefenbaker, and Mulroney, Harper understood it was more important to win than to have the textbook answer to policy issues.

To his credit Harper advanced conservative-minded policies only to the extent they resonated with ordinary Canadians. He has not talked in terms of ideology, and has redefined the political centre, not in terms of socialist and capitalist extremes, but as a place of moderation that represents the wider values of Canadian society. To maintain his coalition and party unity he carefully advances an array of policies that each faction can partially embrace.

But if Harper wants to be a majority prime minister he should jettison the bully tactics, surround himself with stronger associates from across the land, and emulate the Old Chieftain more so than he has done to date. To any Tory, Macdonald is as relevant to the Tories in the twenty-first century as he was in the nineteenth.

Excerpted from Blue Thunder: The Truth about Conservatives from Macdonald to Harper, published by Key Porter Books, 2009.