

# REBUILDING THE MULRONEY COALITION — WELCOME THE “NEW HARPER CONSERVATIVES”

Jaime Watt

In the days following the election, the communications consulting firm Navigator conducted focus groups with Conservative voters in Halifax, Quebec City, Toronto and Vancouver to determine what had driven their voting choice and what they expected from the new government. Navigator Chair Jaime Watt writes that the new Harper coalition is a reconstituted version of the old Mulroney coalition of *bleu québécois*, Red Tories, Blue Grits and Western Reformers. “The New Harper Conservatives,” he writes, “hold significant differences in their values and expectations. And they hold significant differences within themselves.” Their expectations of the new government are high, especially on accountability and integrity in government.

Au lendemain des élections, la firme de communications Navigator a réuni des groupes témoins d'électeurs conservateurs à Halifax, Québec, Toronto et Vancouver pour déterminer ce qui avait motivé leur choix et ce qu'ils attendent du nouveau gouvernement. Selon Jaime Watt, président de Navigator, la coalition Harper serait une reconstitution de l'ancienne coalition Mulroney de « bleus québécois », de conservateurs sociaux, de bleus « purs et durs » et de réformistes de l'Ouest. Sous la gouverne de Stephen Harper, les conservateurs d'aujourd'hui cultivent donc « des valeurs et des attentes très variées et sont très différents les uns des autres ». Mais tous attendent beaucoup du nouveau gouvernement, surtout en matière de responsabilisation et d'intégrité.



One of the things we all tend to forget is just how tough Canadian voters can be when they get mad. We have become used to a “stable period” in federal politics that has lasted since the collapse of the Mulroney coalition. It’s become easy to forget just how often we actually do “throw the bums out.” The split on the right that destroyed Mulroney’s coalition didn’t really end until Monday, January 23. The 2004 election came too soon after the shotgun marriage for voters to feel confident about Stephen Harper, his team of survivors from a badly broken family and, more importantly, his agenda for Canada.

One of the most significant lessons of the campaign recently ended is that the old coalition is new again. It’s an old coalition that has been extensively remodelled during its decade in the political repair shop. We’ve dubbed this new old coalition the “New Harper Conservatives.”

On January 23, Canadians participated in the biggest poll our country conducts, and their verdict was clear. It is a result that will challenge the new government to deliver

on some key commitments, but to do so in the context of working with the opposition. Our firm set out to understand why Canadians made the choices they did, why they decided to join this new coalition, what their expectations of their new government are and what it all means for you and your businesses. We held eight focus groups, two each in Vancouver, Halifax and Quebec City on January 25, two nights after the election. The next night, we were in Toronto. This is qualitative research. Our observations are based on in-depth conversations with 72 Canadians who voted for the Stephen Harper Conservatives. This type of research allows us to get well below the surface with a group of regular Canadians. While it gives us good insight into what people are thinking, it does not allow us to draw statistically backed extrapolations of the views of the larger population.

When we talk about the New Harper Conservatives, what or who do we mean? At the core of this nascent coalition is the old Western Reform/ Alliance. These voters have been joined by a group of new Quebec

supporters, a crucially important group, whose distinct motives and unique expectations we will look at in detail. Joining them is a group of angry, somewhat right-of-centre Liberals concentrated in British Columbia, Ontario and the Atlantic provinces, along with most of the traditional Red Tory vote in what is now an extensively remodelled home.

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Understanding these values and expectations, who holds them and how they are different, allows us to assess how the Harper government will likely move forward and how it will manage its cross-pressures. That's why we convened focus groups. We wanted to understand the differences among seemingly similar people. One way to understand the differences can perhaps be illustrated by looking at two groups of shoppers as stand-ins for Canadian voters.

One could look at the people who shop at Loblaws and make generalized conclusions about what the shoppers look like, what their income is, where they live, and so on. But that would

only tell part of the story. A more detailed look would reveal that there is one group of Loblaws customers that makes a special trip to their stores because of the cheese selection, and a second, possibly larger group that shops only for weekly specials. The people who run Loblaws need to know not only how many customers they

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have, but also why they shop at their stores. This requires drilling deeper into their decision-making process, which is what we have tried to do with this study.

We wanted to listen to the newest additions to the Harper coalition, those who probably had the weakest attachment. After all, for Harper to become the next Brian Mulroneys and not the next Joe Clark, he will have to keep these voters satisfied enough that their loyalty deepens and they vote for him again.

Our choice of cities was based on their closeness to “New Harper Conservative” heartland. In Vancouver we drew voters from outside the downtown core, to better examine the areas of Conservative strength on the Lower Mainland, and not the Liberal/NDP core. Similarly, in the Toronto area we brought together 905 voters, where the Tories had strength, and steered away from the downtown ridings. In Quebec, we decided that the 418 area code in Quebec City, an area where the Tories showed amazing last-minute strength that yielded four MPs, made more sense than the island of Montreal. Finally, in the Halifax/Dartmouth area we drew voters from across the region.

Our groups uncovered significant differences in motivation and expectation. Many were pushed, some were pulled, and others joined the New

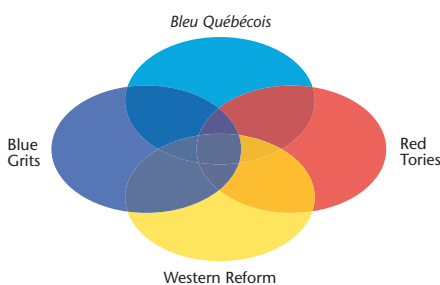
Harper Conservatives while closing their eyes and crossing their fingers.

For several reasons, the 2006 policy agenda on which the Harper team campaigned was crucial to its success. First, it diluted anxiety about a hidden social conservative agenda. Second, it demonstrated that the Conservatives had surpassed a gov-

ernmental competence threshold. What had been so easy to mock in 2004 was now out of the Liberals' reach. Third, it gave a credibility to the Harper campaign that was noticeably absent from the Liberal campaign in those frantic closing days. In Vancouver, we found a greater number of “believers” than in any other of the cities we studied.

That being said, had we gone to Calgary, we would have found an even larger loyal core. But we wanted to find voters who had moved, whose choice was new, and perhaps uncertain. GTA Tory voters were less convinced than westerners. Talk of a majority government and the pounding of negative advertising took its toll in the closing days of the campaign. However, when it came to expectations of prosperity, Ontarians were the most bullish of all. The Quebec voters are the newest members of the New Harper Conservatives, some having made their decision less than two weeks before the election. Their late conversion was not a hesitation about the substance of Harper so much as a concern about wasting their votes on what was seen in Quebec as a losing proposition. Finally, Halifax participants wanted a very constrained minority. They voted to achieve it and are delighted with the outcome. A conditional mandate. A tight leash for Harper.

FIGURE 1.  
THE HARPER COALITION



Source: Navigator Focus Groups, January 25-26, 2006.

This “conditionality” suited many of the New Harper Conservatives. They see their support as phased or staged and likened it to the learner’s permit new drivers are given.

For some, uncertainty about Stephen Harper remains. But if he takes the right lessons from this victory, if he delivers on his key commitments, if he demonstrates strong management skills in the tough Parliament that he has been handed, he will be well rewarded by Canadian voters next time round.

Perhaps the mixed message that voters are sending the New Harper Conservatives can be best seen through the lens of Canada-US relations. In all of our groups, it was clear that the Ottawa-Washington relationship has both a practical and a symbolic meaning to Canadian voters. It maps the complexity of our views of America and ourselves. Participants expected a Canadian prime minister to manage the US relationship competently and effectively. They expect results with as little confrontation and rhetoric as possible. The Canadians in our groups want Stephen Harper to demonstrate his ability to ease frictions in areas such as softwood lumber and agricultural trade. They expect that the discourse between the capitals will be professional and independent, sovereign but respectful.

**Antipathy to the American president runs high. In fact, among this group, it runs surprisingly high and is one of the defining differences of the values and expectations of members of this new collation. The prime minister-elect demonstrated his sensitivity to this point in his news conference three days after the election, when he brushed off comments by the American ambassador about Canadian Arctic sovereignty concerns, saying he will take his direction “from the Canadian people.”**

But there is a metaphoric level on which the Harper government needs to walk with great care in its dealings with Washington. Voters see that relationship as a surrogate for their fears about the dark side of a Harper gov-

ernment.’ If the two leaders become “bon chums” — in the slang of young Quebecers — it would signal the unwelcome prominence of a social conservative agenda, of the things that worry these new supporters about a Harper majority government. What’s more, the New Harper Conservatives draw a clear distinction between trade policy and foreign policy, between resolving our commercial differences and marching headlong into prosecuting an American agenda.

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Nowhere are Mr. Harper’s challenges more complex than on the issue of Kyoto. As a public policy brand, Kyoto has become shorthand for taking responsible action on the environment; for doing our part. That being said, participants have only a

dim idea what adherence to the Kyoto protocols would actually mean to their lives or pocketbooks. For downtown Calgary, ground zero of the Harper coalition, we assume opposing the Kyoto targets is next to Godliness. For

the newest members of the coalition we talked to in Quebec, abandoning Kyoto would be tantamount to abandoning them and their values. Canadians’ confidence in our ability to manage our relationship with the United States without kowtowing to Washington, our confidence in our ability to stay prosperous and be environmentally sensible, and our cherished vision of a “true North strong, free and green” are all bound up in the word “Kyoto.”

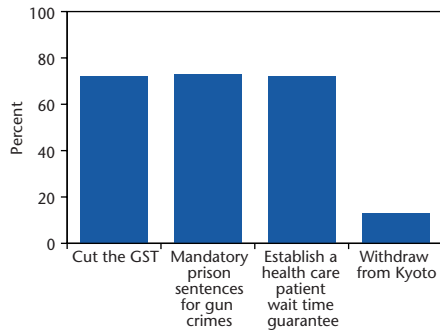
For the new prime minister, the good news is that members of his coalition are not demanding action on this issue now. None ranked it as one of the five most important issues for his government. This does not mean that the Harper government is free to abandon Canada’s commitment, and it certainly does not mean that he can join any Bush-led anti-Kyoto coalition.

Of all the issues we discussed with participants, there was one overarching concern that united them all. The elephant in the middle of the room is the violent rage of voters about corruption. It is impossible to convey strongly enough the anger directed at the Liberal Party over the issue of political corruption. That the word “corruption” is now used, and not simply “scandals,” is instructive. Political scientists and prosecutors can argue all they want about the amount of real “corruption” there was, but it is irrelevant. These Canadians simply do not accept this behaviour. End of story. They’re angry about it. Fed up. And they want it stopped.

Time and time again, we heard about how the Liberals had stolen their money. In Toronto, when one participant said, “We don’t know where that money went,” he was corrected by another participant who quickly added. “Someone knows where it went. We just don’t.”

While dealing with the American relationship and Kyoto present tough

FIGURE 2.  
CONSERVATIVE VOTER PRIORITIES



Source: Navigator Focus Groups, January 25-26, 2006.

challenges for the new government, accountability, integrity and transparency present both the toughest challenge and the best opportunity for the Harper government. First, the New Harper Conservatives have zero tolerance for corruption. Second, they have exceedingly high expectations of how well the government will perform on this file. Even with a minority government, Harper is expected to deliver, and quickly, on his accountability policy package. Third, they expect him, as an extension, to keep his promises on other commitments.

The straightjacket of a minority government gives him some room to move on promise-keeping in some areas — but none at all on integrity.

As one Halifax participant put it: “All the scandals on television make me sick. I’m fed up. Enough. There had better not be any more.”

Just as Enron, Worldcom and Tyco generated the demand for tough new rules and gave us Sarbanes Oxley and whole new standards of corporate governance, so Adscam and Gomery have raised the bar on political governance. Woe betide the next Canadian politician who is seen to break these tough new rules. Our participants will not forgive or forget being fooled again.

Stephen Harper seems to have been successful in tapping into this political anger by recasting himself as a non-politician. The “he is a parent just like me” comments came from groups

across the country.

To many English Canadians he has begun to overcome the “heartless rightwing policy wonk” box he used to occupy. To his fans among the New Harper Conservatives, he is viewed as a “guy who loves hockey and his kids” and shares my values and dreams. It is a positioning that resonates because these people think it is real, and it is one that will be valuable in deepening and broadening his coalition’s reach.

At the same time, it is a somewhat perilous positioning. For, if the non-politician in opposition breaks that trust as prime minister, he becomes seriously damaged. He must walk a narrow path between assuming the appropriate mantle of office, and becoming too American, too presidential. When he is seen to act like a politician — tough to avoid in a minority parliament — he begins to lose his appeal. If he is seen to be enjoying the trappings of office — the Challenger, the limos and globe-hopping international travel — he risks taking on Mulroney’s unpopularity in office.

Canadians have often demonstrated their lack of tolerance for presidential politicians. For the New Harper Conservatives we talked to, this sensitivity is higher than ever, as it plays directly into their anti-corruption expectation.

A while ago, Hugh Segal wrote a book calling for more civility in political life, to the sneers of many pundits. But Canadians from coast to coast in these sessions used words like Hugh did, words like “respect,” “professional,” “effectiveness” and “getting things done,” when describing the tone they expect. Nowhere is that revulsion at “the finger in the eye” political style more evident than in Quebec. The phenomenon of federalists and sovereignists trading insults has worn out the generation that grew up with these epic battles, and is regarded with contempt by a younger generation for

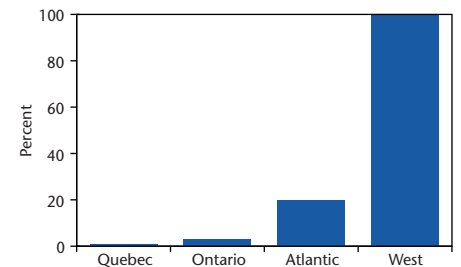
whom it simply appears bizarre.

Our BC groups want an end to “pandering to Quebec.” They see the province as a “spoiled child.” Ontario and Atlantic Canadians resent any “special deals” for the province.

Quebec voters in our groups, on the other hand, have only modest expectations of a Harper government. First they want respect. This may seem innocuous or of little consequence, but it is the very absence of that respect that lies at the heart of the rage about Gomery. They do not expect a Meech Lake II, rather they expect a relatively quiet period of negotiation on issues like immigration, training and health care between Ottawa and Quebec. They are tired of the rhetorical excess of the Bloc. After all, many of the New Harper Conservatives in Quebec were Blocistes until only days before the election. They have chosen to gamble on Harper as the only non-Liberal federalist choice they see. The NDP is rejected on grounds of not being competitive, and the Liberals are beneath contempt.

These Quebecers’ expectations of Harper seem muted. They respect his strenuous efforts to learn French and to understand the basics of Quebec political culture. His December 19 Quebec City speech made an impact on them as much for its delivery and its tone as its substance. They worry about the fiscal imbalance and expect action, but they are also brutally realistic about who they blame for the

FIGURE 3. THE HARPER GOVERNMENT SHOULD NEVER ALLOW QUEBEC TO HAVE A GREATER INTERNATIONAL ROLE



Source: Navigator Focus Groups, January 25-26, 2006.



The Gazette, Montreal

**Stephen Harper at his last Quebec campaign event in Montreal on January 18. Despite the worst weather since the 1998 ice storm, over 1,000 people came to his rally. Jaime Watt writes that in focus groups in Quebec City after the election, Harper had been transformed from a Western cowboy “and has become an object of real affection” in Quebec.**

province’s challenges. One participant recalled Harper’s campaign response to the infamous Liberal “soldiers in the city” ad: “The only soldiers in Quebec cities in our recent history were there as a result of a Liberal decision.”

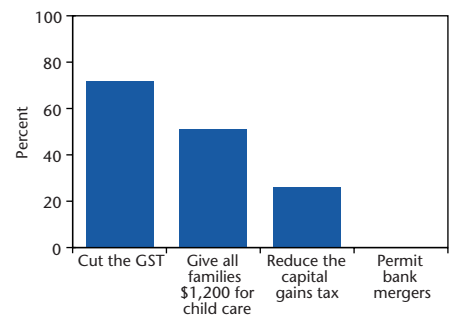
To our surprise and that of our Quebec partners, Leger Marketing, Stephen Harper has moved beyond the “my kind of non-politician” status he has in English Canada and has become an object of real affection. In Quebec his image seems to be on the verge of being transformed from the “cool, reserved” hardworking guy to a leader who is both loved and admired. A young voter said he could

see Harper developing charisma, becoming a “great Prime Minister like Mr. Mulroneu.” Comments like these seem to represent the beginning of “an affaire” between some deeply disenchanted Quebec voters and the new prime minister.

We expect to see the Harper government devoting much political energy to fostering this essential new component of their coalition. How federal-provincial relations are addressed in substance, how the fiscal imbalance is actually bridged is probably less important than that they are seen to be the object of serious political

effort by Mr. Harper, with a degree of respect for Quebec’s political itches.

**FIGURE 4. WHICH POLICY ISSUES ARE A HIGH PRIORITY?**



Source: Navigator Focus Groups, January 25-26, 2006.

This of course must be skillfully done to avoid a backlash from other parts of Harper's coalition.

There is excitement at some of the elements of the Harper economic agenda and a real belief that with it will come a new-found prosperity. Participants felt strongly that, at the end of a Harper government, things would be better economically, that their standard of living would be raised, and that they would have more of the things they wanted, more money in their pockets and more time to spend with their families.

GST reduction and child care payments are widely popular. There is neither interest in, nor opposition to capital gains tax changes. As a point of interest, we also asked our participants if they would like to see the government permit mergers among financial services institutions.

And the answer, simply put, is a resounding no. Not one ranked this as a priority issue. Many said it was something the new government should not go near.

The demand for tougher, more effective measures to keep criminals off the streets is strong and is a big winner for the Harper government. This ranks in the top three issues that these voters expect fast action on.

One surprise was the interest in health care. Although it did not seem to feature highly in the campaign, there remains a deep level of concern about the quality of health care provi-

sion across all groups and regions.

It is matched by anxiety about the future of the system and its ability to provide the care we want, when and where we want it. There seems to be, at the same time, less concern about how health care is provided than that wait times are reduced and quality improved. Harper Conservatives we talked to seemed poised to support greater flexibility in the mix of public private health care solutions. This may give the Harper government some room to move in negotiating their wait time guarantee deals with the provinces.

This is one of the areas where, despite a minority Parliament, New Harper Conservatives expect action. Canada's famous regionalism seems not to have been an issue in the decision of the Harper coalition to support the new team. In Atlantic Canada there was a weary recognition that Quebec and Ontario will always trump a federal government's agenda, but no greater unhappiness about how a Harper team will treat their region than they felt towards the Liberals.

Similarly, our BC voters understood the need to govern for all of Canada, but they believe they have some ownership of this new government, something they clearly did not believe about the previous one.

Only our Quebecers will view their deeper commitment to this new political alignment with some concern and some hesitation about the regional sensitivity of the government. They no longer see Harper as

solely an Alberta champion. In fact, several participants thought the Bloc's endgame ad featuring a mocking reference to Calgary with a cowboy hat in their ads was silly.

In summary, the cross-section of New Harper Conservatives we spoke to want the government to go to work on three issues:

- Integrity in government
- Cuts to the GST, childcare that provides for parental choice
- Wait time and health care guarantees

If Harper wants to earn the support of this coalition next time around, he must, at all costs, avoid:

- Any scandal, no matter how trivial
- Acting presidential, like the other politicians
- Becoming Bush's poodle.

In the next six months it will be crucial for the new government to demonstrate that it "knows how to do politics" without looking political; to deliver deals without looking like sleazy dealmakers; and to keep promises while being tripped daily by a hostile and experienced Parliament.

*Jaime Watt is chair of Navigator, a Toronto-based consulting firm that specializes in the measurement, evaluation and movement of public opinion; corporate and communications strategy; and public policy development. He was the senior communications advisor for the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party in the 1995 and 1999 election campaigns and held the same position in the Office of the Premier of Ontario.*

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