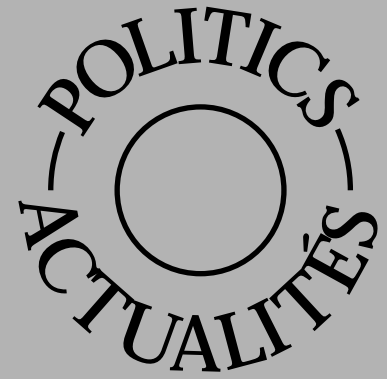


# THE CONSERVATIVES AND THE MINORITY HOUSE: A TALE OF TWO HARPERS

Graham Fox



In the first six months of this minority Parliament, Conservative leader Stephen Harper successfully consolidated the merger on the right, appointed promising caucus members to his shadow cabinet, and purged the demons of the far right at the Conservative convention in Montreal. But in the last six months, Harper bet the farm on defeating the Liberals on a confidence motion that failed by a single vote when Belinda Stronach crossed the floor to join the Liberal cabinet. “The hard work of the first six months — as well as the lead in the polls — melted away,” writes Graham Fox, a former chief of staff to Joe Clark. What will the next six months bring in the run-up to the promised election in early 2006? “Fundamentally,” Fox writes, “Harper has to decide whether he wants to lead a social conservative movement or a brokerage party.”

Au cours des six premiers mois du présent gouvernement minoritaire, Stephen Harper a su renforcer l’union de la droite, nommer à son cabinet fantôme des membres prometteurs de son caucus et neutraliser la droite extrême de son parti au congrès de Montréal. Les six mois suivants ont été moins reluisants. Le chef conservateur a tout misé sur la défaite des libéraux lors d’un vote de confiance perdu par une seule voix, celle de la transfuge Belinda Stronach. « Les résultats des six premiers mois — ainsi qu’une belle avance dans les sondages — ont fondu comme neige au soleil, observe Graham Fox, ancien chef de cabinet de Joe Clark. Qu’attendre au juste des six mois qui nous séparent de l’élection promise au début de 2006 ? Fondamentalement, note l’auteur, Stephen Harper doit choisir : désire-t-il diriger un mouvement pour le conservatisme social ou un parti d’accommodement ?

**T**he 38<sup>th</sup> Parliament has thus far been a difficult one for the Official Opposition and the Conservative leader, Stephen Harper. In contrast to the year before — during which Harper oversaw the merging of two political parties, his election as leader of the (re)united Conservative Party, and the reduction of the Martin juggernaut to a minority government — the last six months have not been kind to the Conservative leader.

Indeed, with a handful of summer polls showing the Liberals widening their lead over the Conservatives to as much as 10 points and inching toward majority territory, it is difficult to remember that it was not always thus. In the first six months following the Speech from the Throne in October 2004, the Harper Conservatives were nipping at Martin’s heels and were beginning to look like a government-in-waiting.

Then came the defection. And the defeat in the House. And the flash of anger. And the hard work of the

first six months — as well as the lead in the polls — melted away.

So what happened? How did the Conservatives manage to mount such an effective challenge to the Martin Liberals early in the game, only to be sent back to the locker room at halftime with nothing on the scoreboard? Perhaps more significantly, why did they allow their quarterback to be so thoroughly pummeled that some are now predicting that he cannot see the game through to the end of the fourth quarter?

To be sure, Harper is not the sole author of his predicament. After a few stumbles early on, the Liberals have proven more adept at navigating these minority waters than anyone had anticipated. Led by House Leader Tony Valeri, and guided by the expert parliamentary hand of Jerry Yanover, the Liberals were clearly one step ahead of their rivals at every turn.

That said, to explain the squandered opportunity of the last year, the Conservative leader need look no further than

to the small cadre of advisers on whom he relies daily, and to the exclusion of all others. In large part, they are the source of their own misfortune. In contrast to the Liberals, who seem to have deliberately reached out to those who knew about the dynamics of minority Parliaments, the Conservatives were reluctant to reach out to others, made themselves vulnerable and, in the end, paid a hefty price.

**I**mmediately following the last election, many political pundits and observers (including this one)

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argued that the key to victory for Harper and the Conservatives lay in broadening the party's appeal beyond the traditional conservative base and moving to the centre on specific issues to appease voter fear of a so-called hidden agenda. The core issue of the next campaign would be competence, not ideology, and the Tories needed to show they had the mettle to govern and the discipline to stay in the mainstream.

In the early days of this minority Parliament, it seemed Harper agreed with the diagnosis. He took steps to redress his disadvantage in *la belle province* and set out to broaden his pool of advisers beyond the University of Calgary alumni.

Harper also named young and dynamic MPs to his shadow cabinet, explored new ideas to round out his party's platform and took his message on the road, heading to Atlantic Canada, Ontario and Quebec — acknowledging that more work needed to be done in those regions if he were ever to form a government. The party leadership also took steps to ensure the

convention scheduled for Montreal in March would allow the membership to exorcise a few policy demons in time for the rematch with Paul Martin. By early 2005, it looked like Harper's pledge to lead a moderate, mainstream conservative party would become a reality.

Then, the Gomery commission headed to Montreal to hear the testimony of the advertising executives involved in the sponsorship program. With each explosive headline, the Official Opposition's commitment to the long game weakened. Rather than build a case for a

Conservative government riding by riding, policy by policy, the Tories bet the farm that they would succeed in a) bringing down the Martin government on a confidence motion and b) convince the electorate that "not being Liberals" was a sufficient condition to be handed the keys to 24 Sussex.

For a time, it seemed like the plan would work. Supported by Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe, Harper laid the procedural landmines throughout the parliamentary calendar right up until the last week of June. In a little over six weeks, the Tories would have several opportunities to bring down the government and were determined to see the strategy through. Buoyed by polls that had them in the lead nationally and in battleground Ontario, and supported by a numerical advantage in the House of Commons, a spring election seemed inevitable.

**S**omething changed, however, on the way to the confidence vote showdown. Paul Martin secured the support of Jack Layton's NDP to make

the numbers game a much closer call. In his televised address, he also turned the tables on the Conservatives and saddled them with the burden of making the case for an immediate election.

Then came the master stroke. On the morning of May 17, two short days before the vote of confidence in his government, Paul Martin announced the appointment of a new minister of human resources and skills development and democratic renewal. To the surprise of exactly everyone, the prime minister had convinced Belinda Stronach to cross the floor. The runner-up in the Conservative leadership race — and arguably the most moderate voice on the Opposition front bench — broadcast to the world that their suspicions about Stephen Harper were well founded. If Belinda couldn't find it in herself to support him, why would anyone else?

By the time the networks went live to the House of Commons the following Thursday to witness the confidence vote, the political universe had been transformed. Everything had changed — that is, everything but Stephen Harper's strategy.

More than Stronach's decision, Harper's reaction proved to be the revealing moment of that skirmish. Harper should have acknowledged that the game had changed the night Paul Martin took to the airwaves to plead for 10 more months in office. And he should have known the game was over when Martin showed up at the National Press Theatre with Belinda Stronach by his side. Instead, he stuck to his guns and wagered his entire political future on the vote of an independent MP.

Harper's decision is particularly important because it establishes a pattern. Just as in the final weeks of the last general election, he showed he was unable to adapt his strategy to new dynamics. As the front-runner in a

leadership contest, the discipline to stay on message is critical to the campaign's success. But Harper is now vying for the highest elected office in the land. If there is one certainty in elected office, it is that one cannot map out the full four years of a government's mandate: wars break out, recessions set in, natural disasters strike. In that context, voters want to know that the person they elect as prime minister has the ability to deal with the issues they haven't foreseen. Adaptability is an essential feature of any successful government, and so far Harper has shown himself incapable or unwilling to deviate from the pre-game strategy.

**T**he Conservative Party's persistence on the issue of same-sex marriage, even after a defeat in Parliament, is another case in point. Despite the passing of bill C-38 into law, polls showing that Canadians have moved on, yet with no plan as to how a

Conservative government would "unmarry" gay couples, senior party officials insist that defending traditional marriage will be part of the Tory campaign strategy in the next election.

This rigidity extends to the internal dynamics of the party as well. Blaming Ontario voters for their continued support of the Liberal Party remains a central theme of internal discussions about the party's fortunes. Blaming the media and communications staff for the fact that the party's message has not yielded any gains in popular support also features prominently in the habits of the leader's entourage. Senior bureau chiefs, or entire media outlets, are blacklisted. Senior members of staff are driven to resignation. But the core strategy remains intact.

This tendency to blame others and shut out divergent opinions establishes a second troubling pattern. Despite occasional drives to reach out, Harper's instinct is to circle the wagons. In fact,

it is precisely at those moments, when a broader range of advice would most benefit the Tory leader, that he moves against those who might disagree. At any time, these weaknesses would make it difficult for any party to succeed. But they are more problematic today because of the current state of political parties in general and the Conservative Party in particular.

The Conservatives have always been successful when the many factions within the party found a way to coalesce around a dynamic leader who can articulate a sense of common purpose. These are the necessary conditions for a Tory victory. More than the Liberals, for whom the discipline of power is a sufficiently compelling motivation, Tories have always needed an idea around which to rally and a leader who reaches beyond the party's base, as Brian Mulroney did in 1984 and 1988.

The challenge for Tories is made even more difficult by the structural

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weakness of the party as it is today. In other times, a strong institutional party, with regional opinion leaders who enjoyed some measure of independence from the central office, would have acted as a powerful counterweight to the national leadership. The party apparatus — as distinct from the campaign team, the leader's office or even national headquarters — had a real say in the direction of the party, or its position on a specific issue.

**T**oday, in contrast, the leader controls all the levers of power within the party. Once the mandatory review vote has been held, the volunteer base has no mechanism to express its opinion on the course set by the leader. By circumstance and by design, the internal processes of the Conservative Party are driven by the centre, with little input from the membership. The result is a party structure completely devoid of checks on the leader's power.

As an aside, it is interesting, and somewhat counter-intuitive, to note that the new Conservative Party inherited the more centralizing features of its constitution, not from the old Progressive Conservative Party but from the Canadian Alliance. After being decimated in 1993, the PC Party underwent a constitutional overhaul that decentralized decision-making in a way not seen in any other Canadian political party before or since. Such decentralization created its own problems for the PCs, as it required a stronger volunteer and membership base than was available to them at the time, but recreated today with the current strength of the new Conservatives, the old PC structures might well finally produce the strong, independent, national party that had been envisaged by the drafters of the 1995 PC constitution.

Instead, the new Conservatives

opted for a more centralized model, which has as a consequence — intended or not — to limit the expression of divergent views on party strategy.

**B**yond the events of the last six months, however, there is a broader point to make about Stephen Harper and reaching out. As William Johnson explores in his recent biography, *Stephen Harper and the Future of Canada*, Harper is fundamentally a social conservative who has believed for some time that politics in Canada require a fundamental realignment. In many ways, this belief is at the heart of his insistence on staying the course and of his break with Preston Manning and the Reform Party in

In any political party, it is the leader's ultimate responsibility to leave to her or his successor a stronger party institution than the one they themselves inherited. Stephen Harper's initial success is undeniable, but his ultimate duty to the Conservative Party is no different. Fundamentally, Harper has to decide whether he wants to lead a social conservative movement or a brokerage party.

1996. As he demonstrated in the fall of 2004 and the summer of 2005, Harper is comfortable reaching out to people geographically. But he has much more difficulty when it comes to reaching out on issues — especially in areas of social policy.

To be fair, a glimmer of hope that Harper understands the challenge before him emerged on the horizon late in August. The new wave of advertising aimed at Ontario does what the party should have been doing all along. Rather than preach to the choir, the TV spots speak to the real concerns of voters who are beyond the Conservative base. They feature the young talent that makes up much of Harper's front bench. And they ignore the issue of same-sex mar-

riage. Whether they are enough to turn the tide of public opinion remains to be seen, but for those who still think a Tory victory is possible, the ads offer some reassurance that reaching out may still be a possibility. The trouble is the advertising campaign runs counter to the well established media frame around the Conservative leader. With each passing day, changing voters' views of Harper becomes more difficult.

In any political party, it is the leader's ultimate responsibility to leave to her or his successor a stronger party institution than the one they themselves inherited. Stephen Harper's initial success is undeniable, but his ultimate duty to the Conservative Party is no different. Fundamentally, Harper has to decide whether he wants to lead a social conservative movement or a brokerage party. If he opts for the former, he must do so with the clear understanding that he will not form a government, but can shape political discourse in a significant fashion. He must also be open and honest about that choice with the members of his party, and with Canadians.

But if, on the other hand, he thinks the Conservative Party has an obligation to democracy to present itself as a viable alternative to the Liberal Party, he must recognize the need for the party to broaden its base and make the kind of policy compromises inherent in that shift. Then he must decide whether he is the person to lead that process. If he is, he must break with the past and move immediately to make that shift a reality. If he is not, he must make room for someone who will.

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