

# A MESSAGE OF HOPE — HARPER'S BEST DEFENCE AGAINST A LIBERAL STRATEGY OF FEAR

Graham Fox

The Canadian political landscape has shifted remarkably with the emergence of the united Conservative Party as a competitive force. Yet for their strong showing of 99 seats, the Tories fell short of mid-campaign expectations that they would form a minority government, and saw voters move away from them in droves in the final days of the campaign. Equally damaging as the radical right-wing statements of some Conservatives was the failure of their war room to quickly repudiate them. Stephen Harper also allowed the Liberals to brand him as an extremist in their advertising campaigns, which makes the 2005 Conservative policy convention all-important in the positioning of the party, and its leader, as a broad, modern and mainstream political force. "What are Harper's priorities?" asks Graham Fox, a former chief of staff to Progressive Conservative leader Joe Clark. "What is his vision for the country? The Conservatives' best defence against the Liberals' strategy of fear is a message of hope." Both Harper and Paul Martin were chastened by the voters on June 28. Whoever figures out why, and solves it first, is likely to emerge the winner of the coming runoff election.

Le paysage politique canadien s'est transformé sensiblement depuis que le Parti conservateur unifié est devenu une force avec laquelle il faut compter. Et pourtant, malgré les 99 sièges qu'ils ont remportés et malgré l'espoir qu'ils avaient de former un gouvernement minoritaire, les Conservateurs ont perdu un grand nombre d'électeurs au cours des derniers jours précédant le scrutin. Les déclarations extrémistes de certains candidats ont certes été dommageables, mais l'inaction du conseil de guerre face à ces déclarations ne l'a pas été moins. En outre, Stephen Harper n'a guère bronché lorsque les Libéraux l'ont qualifié d'extrémiste, ce qui montre à quel point il importe qu'au congrès de 2005, le parti se définisse ainsi que son chef, comme une force inclusive, moderne et ancrée dans le courant dominant de l'opinion publique. « Quelles sont les priorités de Stephen Harper ? » se demande Graham Fox. « Quelle est sa vision du Canada ? La meilleure défense des Conservateurs contre la stratégie des Libéraux est un message d'espoir. » Harper et Paul Martin ont tous deux été châtiés par les électeurs le 28 juin. C'est probablement celui des deux qui, le premier, saura comprendre pourquoi et saura en tirer les leçons appropriées qui sortira vainqueur de la prochaine élection.

**I**t has almost become a cliché nowadays to remark on how much the landscape on Canada's political Right has been transformed in so little time. In six short months, two parties that for over a decade battled each other more than the governing Liberals were united under one banner. More quickly and more successfully than anyone dared to predict even a year ago, the hatchets were

buried in one of the most bitter family feuds in our political history. By the time the writ was dropped in the spring of 2004, the forces of the Right had pledged their support to Stephen Harper and had their crosshairs focused on a listless Liberal government weighed down by scandal and made vulnerable for the first time since 1993 by the casualties of their own civil war.

Indeed, the week Harper squared off against Paul Martin in the televised leaders' debate, political pundits and Conservative supporters alike had begun to consider seriously the possibility of a Tory victory. The Martin Liberals had stumbled badly out of the starting blocks and, at least until that point in the writ, the Conservatives had run a focused, disciplined and largely mistake-free campaign.

The picture on election night was, as we know, dramatically different.

In a way, the results on election night confirmed the decision to "unite the Right" and gave supporters of the new party justification for their enthusiasm. Canadians returned 99 Conservative candidates to the Commons — 23 more than had served in the previous Parliament. To give credit where credit is due, proponents of uniting the two parties — Stephen Harper and Peter MacKay first among them — deserve recognition for the courage they showed in doing so effectively what some said could not be done at all.

Paul Martin was handed back the keys to 24 Sussex with a stronger minority than had been anticipated. The Tories, in contrast, did not break the threshold of 100 seats and the anticipated breakthrough in Ontario barely exceeded what is normally considered rock bottom results for a Conservative Party in that province. In the final 72 hours of the campaign, thousands of voters — particularly in Ontario — held their nose and, to borrow a phrase, cast their ballot for the devil they knew.

So what happened? How did the wheels fall off the Harper campaign bus? Did the Conservatives snatch defeat from the jaws of victory? Or were expectations of a Harper government grossly exaggerated and never actually within reach?

The answer, it will not surprise, probably lies somewhere in the middle. To be sure, by the time it crossed the finish line on June 28, the Conservative Party had in fact come a long way. The process of uniting the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party had proved less divisive than had been feared, and

Stephen Harper's convincing win in the leadership race left little doubt as to his claim to the party's top post. Conservatives of all stripes rallied behind their leader in a welcome show of unity and, energized by the prospects of having to fight on only one front, ran a more spirited campaign than they had at any time since the free trade election of 1988.

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**O**n the other hand, in celebrating their achievements, Conservatives would do well to not let themselves ignore the severe lessons those same results contain. If the seat count tells a positive story about the Opposition's campaign effort, the popular vote paints a dramatically different picture. In 2004, the Right earned the support of less than 30 per cent of the electorate for the first time in over four decades. Not since before the time of John Diefenbaker has the Right garnered so little popular support in a general election. This must be cause for concern.

With only 12 to 18 months to prepare for his rematch with Paul Martin,

what should Stephen Harper do to ensure a Conservative victory next election day? He must build the broad coalition that formed the basis for every Conservative victory in the history of this country. He must adopt a policy platform that will appeal to that broad base, look to the future and protect the party against allegations of extremism. And he must articulate a message of hope as a counterattack against the Liberals' fear tactics.

The obvious starting point is, of course, to continue to bring the party together and to ensure the collective leadership of the party reflects the breadth of its membership. During last winter's leadership race, Harper pledged to bring together conservatives of all types and to build a big tent party. In his victory speech, he spoke of creating a party in which social and economic conservatives would work hand in hand with Red Tories, Libertarians and democratic reformers.

Of course, there was no time between his election as leader and the start of the general election to give effect to this campaign promise in any significant way. In fact, many of Mr. Harper's closest advisors have cited these time pressures as justification for the fact that the leader's inner circle is identical to the one he had with him during the leadership race and indeed during his tenure as leader of the Canadian Alliance. With a few cosmetic exceptions, the team around the leader draws all of its experience and expertise from the same pool. This cannot but limit the range of advice offered to the leader.

With the election behind him, now is the time to walk the walk. And, to give Harper credit, his choice of shadow cabinet is a promising start to rectify the situation. Taken together, this group is arguably as diverse and as representative of the country as the Martin ministry and shows tremendous promise as a cabinet-in-waiting.

Learning from Paul Martin's mistakes, however, the leader must now show that he trusts them by making this group, and not his senior staff, the driving force of the party's parliamentary effort and the face of the party in the eyes of the electorate. He must also continue to show his determination to broaden the party's reach by striking a similar balance within the structures of the Conservative Party, the national office and the Office of the Leader of the Opposition.

The challenge in all of this is that it will not be enough to convince the party that the Conservative Party is a broad, modern and mainstream political force. He must convince the country. In any circumstance, this would have been a top priority. But the events of the election campaign have turned this priority into what can only be described as the crucial, defining moment of Stephen Harper's leadership. The duration and success of his tenure at the helm of the Conservative Party will largely be dictated by how well he handles this delicate task.

On the eve of the last election, Stephen Harper and the new Conservatives had to contend with the danger/opportunity of not having yet been defined in the mind of the electorate. To be sure, the lack of so-called "name rec" is a serious impediment to getting one's message across and makes one more dependent on the intermediaries of the fifth estate. However, on the flip side, it does provide a real opportunity to project a positive image to the public that then becomes the frame for how one is perceived in future situations.

Simply put, the Conservative Party utterly failed to take advantage of this opportunity. Rather than project a positive and moderate image for the party, the central campaign let the party be defined by its opponents, with a noteworthy assist from members of its own team, whose ill-conceived, ill-advised and ill-timed comments only confirmed the public's worst fears about the Conservatives.

More puzzling than the actual comments, however, was the central campaign's inability or unwillingness to put some distance between the leader and them. The events that surround the issuing of a news release alleging that Paul Martin supported child pornography are a wonderful illustration of this.

The release was a colossal mistake that simply cannot be forgiven in the major leagues, but it was just that: a mistake. No one would believe that a staffer in the Tory war room actually thought the prime minister supported harm being brought to children. It was an overzealous reaction to the cut and thrust of an election campaign. The bigger mistake was the leader's unwillingness to acknowledge the incident

for what it was, apologize and move on. The event should have been a stumble that lasted one hour. It became a debacle that lasted several days and forced a break in the leader's tour to make time for a team huddle and regroup.

The offence is instructive on two levels. First, it reveals the rigidity of Team Harper's approach to politics. When things are going well, that rigidity can be an asset. As was shown during the first 14 days of the election, it brings focus and discipline to a campaign. The leader and the party are "on message." However, when things go "off message," a successful campaign must be nimble enough to react to unforeseen events. More so than the offending com-



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Stephen Harper has won the uncontested right to lead the Conservatives into the next election, writes Graham Fox, a former chief of staff to Joe Clark. But the leader must make his parliamentary caucus, not his senior staff, "the driving force of the party's parliamentary effort and the face of the party in the eyes of the electorate."

ments themselves, the Conservative campaign's inflexibility in this regard proved to be its Achilles' heel.

More worrisome for Tory supporters, however, is the apparent reason behind at least some of the campaign's inflexibility. Speaking off the record, many senior Conservative strategists tell a troubling story about the discussions in the war room that followed reports of comments made by Tory candidates or other bad news items. It wasn't just that the campaign could not adapt, but that it was difficult to convince the leader's inner circle that such comments were even a problem that warranted a reaction. They could not predict that a great number of Canadians would be offended by the false allegations made against Martin and would rally to his defence. They could not foresee the backlash against their own leader and against the candidates in swing ridings.

Taken together, these anecdotes reveal an inability in the central campaign to determine accurately how issues will play out in different regions. They reveal a collective mindset that cannot yet relate to the whole Canadian community. Many supporters of the Conservative Party are legitimately upset at the inability of the Liberal Party to acknowledge and make room for the natural aspirations of regions, notably the West. For identical reasons, however, their own party's inability to predict what might become a significant problem — even a ballot issue — for large swaths of the electorate has to be of great concern.

It would be simplistic to blame the child porn news release and the absence of an apology for Harper's election defeat. But they were instrumental in solidifying the Liberal case against the Conservatives. Taken with the other comments made by Conservative candidates, they gave the Liberals the performance-based perceptions they needed to make their allegations of a hidden agenda stick.

As an aside, it must be said that, in stooping to the level of manufacturing a bogeyman, the Liberals have little to be proud of here. There were plenty of

positions taken in the Tory platform that could have been the target of fierce but legitimate points of debate. Instead, Liberal strategists chose to avoid what the Tories actually said and opted to wage a fictional battle against monsters hiding under the bed. Never has a negative ad campaign been so thinly supported by factual argument and so dependent on innuendo. Shame.

For all of these reasons, the Conservatives' founding convention and policy conference will take on a whole new importance for the party. The dominant frame around the party having been set largely by the Liberals, it will now be that much more difficult to convince Canadians their initial impression was wrong. In many ways, that convention and the policy platform that emerges from debates on the floor will therefore constitute Stephen Harper's last stand. They will determine in a much more permanent way how his party is to be judged and whether the Conservatives should be entrusted with the responsibility to govern.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Conservatives must make a positive case to the Canadian public as to why they deserve to take their place on the other side of the Commons. In the last election, they mounted a convincing argument as to why the Liberals did not deserve the public's trust but could not follow through with a compelling vision of what the country would look like under a Conservative government. If Paul Martin's priorities are health care, child care and cities, what are Harper's national priorities? What is his vision for the country? The Conservatives' best defence against the Liberals' strategy of fear is a message of hope. More than anything, this is what needs to emerge in the next 12 months if the Tories are to earn Canadians' trust as well as their vote.

The skill Stephen Harper has shown in bringing discipline to the post-Stockwell Day Canadian Alliance, negotiating terms of union with the Progressive Conservatives, winning the leadership of the new

Conservatives and running a campaign shortly thereafter absolutely earns him the right to continue to lead the party and face Paul Martin's Liberals one more time. However, if his past success was the product of keeping his hand close to his chest and surrounding himself with a small group of trusted advisors, his future success hinges on his ability to throw out his play book and take a radically new approach to leadership that instead focuses on reaching out and building broad support for his party.

Interestingly, he is not alone in facing this challenge. When it convenes for the first time next month, the 38<sup>th</sup> Parliament will be led by two men — one sitting in the prime minister's chair, the other in that of the leader of the Opposition — who came out of the election chastened by the electorate. At one time, each of them was supposed to have done better than they actually did on election night. Each of them was sent a message by voters who, for specific reasons, found their political option lacking. And, as of yet, neither of them seems to have taken any significant steps to act on the message received.

The situations in which Martin and Harper find themselves are remarkably similar, albeit for dramatically different reasons. They both lead parties within which deep divisions still run. Both are supported by a cadre of advisers whose reach and perspective are considerably more narrow than the party they lead or the country they want to govern. Both must negotiate their way through a difficult minority Parliament and resolve lingering doubts in the minds of Canadians about their ability to lead effectively and govern in the interest of the whole of Canada.

To the first of them who understands these hard lessons and acts on them will go the victory podium in the next election. Gentlemen, start your engines.

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