

Ottawa is worth a Mass

Stephen Harper's rise to power

by Tom Flanagan

MAY 26, 2006, WAS THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF STEPHEN HARPER'S speech to the Winds of Change conference, held in Calgary to discuss a possible merger of the Reform and Progressive Conservative parties. That speech turned out to be Harper's roadmap to power.

What Harper said that day now seems like common sense, but it was novel at a time when political analysts were still struggling to make sense of the 1993 election. In that election two new parties, Reform and the Bloc Québécois, had taken over most of the formerly Conservative ridings, and the PCs had been reduced from a working majority to a mere two seats in the House of Commons.

Winds of Change, organized by David Frum and Ezra Levant, was a failure in the short term. It was well attended by Reformers and provincial PCs from Ontario and Alberta, but senior PCs from the federal party stayed away. At that time, they were still hopeful that their new leader, Jean

Charest, could restore their party's fortunes. Charest's veto of a proposal to try a joint Reform-PC candidacy in the Ontario riding of Brant was an indication of their lack of interest in cooperation.

In the medium term, Winds of Change was a partial success inasmuch as it began the discussion leading to formation of the Canadian Alliance in 2000. It was a step toward unity on the right, but only a tentative step. The federal PC Party, now led by Joe Clark, again refused to cooperate. In the long term, however, the strategic ideas Harper set forth in his Winds of Change speech led to the unification of the political right and a change of government in Canada.



Harper marshalled historical evidence to show that all winning Conservative coalitions in 20th-century Canadian history had consisted of three factions: a populist element, strongest in the West but also present in rural Ontario; traditional Tories, strong in Ontario and Atlantic Canada; and francophone nationalists in Quebec. The electoral disaster of 1993 was not a random event: it represented the splintering of Brian Mulroney's grand coalition along ancient fault lines. Conservatives, Harper said, would never win another national government until they brought these factions back together.

The speech made a deep impression on me. I called Harper's wife Lauren that afternoon and said, "Stephen sounded like a prime minister today." Ten years later, he is

the prime minister. I wish my record of picking winners could always be so good!

Afterwards, when I helped Harper write up his proposed strategy for publication, I dubbed it "The Three Sisters," after a prominent mountain lying between Banff and Canmore. Initially, it seemed impossible to bring the three sisters back into a single party, so we speculated on various ways of forming a coalition among sister parties, but that turned out to be even harder to achieve than simple unification.

In 2001, Harper started the active implementation of his plan by running for the leadership of the Canadian Alliance. His victory in that race won him the western populist sister. Political junkies will remember that his first act after becoming leader of the Alliance was to seek a meeting with Joe Clark to discuss cooperation with the Progressive Conservatives, but again that party was not interested.

For Harper, however, it was only a detour on his roadmap. He successfully wooed the second sister, the traditional Tories, in the fall of 2003, when he and Peter MacKay negotiated a merger of the Alliance and the PCs. The results in the 2004 election confirmed the strategy of the three sisters. The new Conservative Party won more seats than the sum of the Alliance and PCs had in 2000, but unable to win any seats in Quebec, it could not yet beat the Liberals.

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Immediately after the 2004 election, Harper set out to court the third sister. He decreed that the Conservative policy convention be held in Montreal; he appointed Josée Verner to the caucus to act as a Quebec representative; he hired new francophone staff in the party and leader's office; and he visited Quebec as often as he could. In the longer term, he recruited lead candidates, such as Lawrence Cannon, Derek Blackburn and Maxime Bernier, to showcase Conservative strength across the province.

For an agonizingly long time, the dam containing Quebec Liberal voters held, but in December 2005, following Harper's rousing campaign speech in Quebec City, it broke. Yet breaking the dam was not just one speech: it was the culmination of months of patient, often frustrating work to resurrect the party's fortunes in Quebec.

Obviously, more remains to be done. Ten seats in Quebec is a marriage proposal, not a wedding. It is hard to visualize a Conservative majority government until the third sister is fully brought home, with at least 20 or 30 Conservative seats in Quebec.

FOR THOSE WHO ASK HOW HARPER WILL govern, there should be no surprises: just look at how he came to power. He developed a plan and stuck to it. The 2006 campaign platform, which he is now methodically implementing, is a plan for growing the Conservative Party into a majority governing coalition, and he will stick with it. Now there's a novel idea – that you can predict the government's behaviour by reading its election platform!

Harper's attempt to forge a national governing party means not just quantitative expansion in popular support but also a qualitative change in the party itself. The

Reform Party appealed intensely to a relatively small slice of the Canadian electorate – populist conservatives in Western Canada and rural Ontario – and it took clear ideological positions popular with those voters. As such, its base was too narrow to govern, so it ended up exercising influence in the political system rather than authoritative power. Reform's accomplishments were far from trivial – blocking the Charlottetown Accord, changing the conventional wisdom on deficit financing and forcing the Liberals into cutting taxes – but they were inherently limited. There is only so much a party can achieve if it eschews that which goes with government – if it is never in a position to draw up a budget, to initiate legislation, to appoint judges and members of regulatory bodies. The Canadian Alliance aspired to be a governing party, but it never really departed from the Reform model of being a “party of influence,” not of government.

Governing is not a right; it is a privilege earned by building a large coalition of voters, donors and activists. In the course of building such a coalition, compromises inevitably have to be made in the realm of ideology. The Conservative Party made many of those compromises at its Montreal convention in March 2005, when the delegates voted to endorse bilingualism and the CBC, to jettison direct democracy, to defend supply management in agricultural markets and to support the Canada Health Act. These were, it should be emphasized, voluntary decisions; if not unanimous, they were certainly endorsed by solid majorities. The desire to build a governing party is not just Harper's; it runs throughout the Conservative grassroots.

In the jargon of political science, this means moving toward the position of the

median voter – the only position from which, at least in normal times, it is possible to win control of the government in a two-party or two-party-plus configuration. Reform thrived as a party of influence by positioning itself to the right of the Progressive Conservatives, just as the NDP exercised influence over the years by positioning itself to the left of the Liberals. But such positioning will never win a government unless the system is in the midst of crisis; and contemporary Canada, while it faces many challenges, can hardly be described as a system in crisis.

A well-known proposition of political science is that, as parties converge ideologically, they have to put more emphasis on nonideological competition. Adscam came along at just the right time to allow Harper to portray the Conservatives as the party of accountability and integrity. He has also been working hard to differentiate himself from the executive style that led to Paul Martin being tagged, perhaps a bit unfairly, as Mr. Dithers. Harper's now-famous “Five Priorities” are meant to be evidence of a decisive, well-focused mind in command of the government. By branding himself and the Conservatives as honest and efficient, he may be able to win over voters whose natural positioning is closer to the Liberals (or in Quebec to the Bloc), but who value competence in government.

Being a party of government rather than one of influence also involves a change of style. Both Reform and the NDP have been famous for their outspoken members, who never hesitate to challenge the conventional wisdom, official party policy and even their leader. From the beginning, Harper understood that that style would never succeed for a governing party in a parliamentary system, so he has worked to establish discipline and

control, both internally over staff, caucus and cabinet, and externally over media relations.

As an early Reformer, I miss the exhilaration of a party that expressed my own views with clarity, of being able to challenge all the conventional wisdom and gore all the sacred cows of Canadian politics. I am proud of what Reform accomplished; without the Reform Party, or something like it, Canada might never have escaped the vicious circles of deficit spending, high taxation and appeasement of separatism. But it was also obvious that Reform was never going to govern.

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“Paris is worth a Mass,” said Henri of Navarre, as he abandoned his Huguenot Protestantism and converted to Catholicism in order to become Henri IV, King of France. It was not a purely self-seeking change of “brand,” as we might say today. As king, he established religious liberty with the Edict of Nantes and ended the wars of religion in France. It was France's loss that subsequent monarchs were not as wise and drove the Huguenots out of the country.

If Paris was worth a Mass, Ottawa is worth some ideological compromises – as long as worthwhile changes come out of it in the end. That is Harper's personal and political challenge: to move the country gradually and incrementally in a conservative direction, building a wider coalition around a moderate conservative consensus. ■

Tom
Flanagan on
Stephen Harper

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