

Solidifying Gains

Major strategists in the Conservative Party know that sticking together is the crucial thing.

TOM FLANAGAN

The Long Road Back: The Conservative Journey, 1993–2006
Hugh Segal
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Now that the Conservative Party of Canada has succeeded in winning an election, there is a spate of books on the disintegration and rebuilding of the party. William Johnson has brought out a second edition of *Stephen Harper and the Future of Canada*, and Bob Plamondon's *Full Circle: Death and Resurrection in Canadian Conservative Politics* is already for sale. These and other books still to come may be longer and more packed with information than Hugh Segal's *The Long Road Back: The Conservative Journey, 1993–2006*, but none is likely to convey so much wisdom.

The words "road" and "journey" in the title lead the reader to expect a narrative account. Indeed, the narrative is there, but it is not entirely reliable as history because it seems to be based mainly on Senator Segal's recollections and impressions. That's fine when he is writing about events in which he was a participant, but it is not so accurate when he was not personally involved. Sometimes the errors are minor (Stephen Harper is not a Straussian; the Canadian Alliance won only two seats in Ontario in 2000, not three), but sometimes they are more important.

For example, his account of the clash between Scott Reid and Peter MacKay at the 2005 Montreal convention is misleading in important respects. Reid did not propose going "back to a one-person, one-vote structure and away from the equal number of delegates per riding approach agreed to in the agreement signed between Harper and MacKay." He suggested only a modest change in the equality-of-ridings model, namely that a riding would not get its full quota of points or delegates unless at least a



hundred members showed up to vote—hardly an unreasonable requirement for a grassroots party. Stephen Harper did not direct Reid to make this proposal, but he was sympathetic to it because it represented a way of dealing with the "rotten borough" problem that the Conservative Party will have to address sooner or later. Harper was furious with MacKay for running to the media and labelling Reid's proposal a threat to party unity. John Reynolds did weigh in on MacKay's side, but on his own initiative, and actually against Harper's preference. So, *caveat lector* when using *The Long Road Back* as a source of information about events that happened when Senator Segal was not actually in the room.

But I don't want to dwell on this too much, because sympathetic insight and strategic analysis are more important than facts, and Segal has those qualities in abundance. He is a master at describing situations, analyzing the realistic options that political leaders faced, and explaining why they did what they did. Most importantly, he has used his gifts for insight and analysis introspectively, training them upon the Tory side of the merger story. He shows, in pitiless detail, how the Progressive Conservatives lost their chance at recovery when Jean Charest decamped

to the Quebec Liberals after the 1997 election and Joe Clark became leader. Even though their own party was in deep trouble, Clark and other leading Tories, including Segal himself, rejected all attempts by the Reform Party and the Canadian Alliance to initiate cooperation. Their standard response was that Manning and the Reformers were extremists who did not understand Canada.

Segal has now come to a deeper understanding of the Reform phenomenon.

This deeply rooted suspicion of central government, of the eastern establishment, and of bureaucratic arrogance is an important part of our confederal political culture. While it is sometimes over the top, it is also often backed up with genuine reality... Many Tories, including me, focused on the more anti-Quebec, anti-refugee, Christian fundamentalist strains of the movement and not only dismissed them as un-Canadian, but sought to diminish their relevance to the political mainstream. What became apparent after

the second Manning election (and his last as leader) was that the movement was not a flash in the pan, but a legitimate and important expression of western anger and disengagement.

Segal now supports an inclusive model of "a national Conservative party that embraces its broad membership along the 'rational conservative spectrum,' which includes paleo-conservatives like myself, Red Tories, social conservatives, historical conservatives, and even the more flinty-eyed neoconservatives." (Maybe that's me!)

To avoid the repetition of further disastrous splits in the Conservative coalition, it is important that Segal's Tory introspection be matched by rethinking among Reformers. What errors did we make on our side? Fundamentally, our mistake was the mirror image of that made by the Tories. Just as it took them a long time to understand crucial aspects of western political culture, we misperceived important aspects of political culture in other regions of Canada.

Preston Manning's original conception was that a national party could be built upon the tradition of prairie populism. He expected the new party to be based in the West but to attract support from resource-producing regions

Tom Flanagan is professor of political science at the University of Calgary. He managed Stephen Harper's two leadership campaigns as well as the Conservative Party's 2004 national election campaign. He worked in the war room during the 2005–06 Conservative campaign.

in northern and rural Ontario, Quebec and Atlantic Canada. He deliberately avoided calling himself and the Reform Party “conservative” or locating either on the right of the ideological spectrum. In the style of classical populism, he wanted a trans-ideological coalition, based on the “common sense of the common people” and organized against ruling elites in Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal.

Experience quickly showed that the populist model worked well in the West and to some extent in parts of rural Ontario, but had almost no appeal in Quebec and Atlantic Canada. That is not surprising retrospectively, and we should have foreseen it. Populism in Canada has multiple historical sources—evangelical Protestantism, the Clear Grit tradition of political reform, the populism of the American Midwest, Anglo-Saxon Progressivism—all of which are stronger in the West and rural Ontario than elsewhere in Canada, and quite alien to the Catholic traditions of Quebec and Atlantic Canada, or of the immigrant communities of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.

In other words, the original conception of Reform was just too narrow for Canada. But by the time Manning and the rest of us realized this, the party was so deeply entrenched in the West, where it was an ideal match to the political culture, that it could not morph into something more acceptable in other parts of the country. Manning did his best with various campaigns to “broaden the circle” and create a “United Alternative.” He succeeded in founding the Canadian Alliance, which was a significant step forward; but it was not enough of a break with Reform to bring over most of the federal Progressive Conservatives—or maybe they just were not ready.

Parallel to Manning’s conception of Reform as a neo-populist revival, there was another conception of Reform, held by Stephen Harper (and me), as a Canadian version of Reaganism and Thatcherism—that is, a Conservative Party positioned further to the right and standing more consistently for small government, lower taxes, deregulation, privatization and free markets in general. That view coincided with Manning’s in starting from a western base, but diverged somewhat in predicting where additional supporters would be found. Rather than target resource-producing areas in the periphery of Canada, we thought Reform would grow in the traditional bastions of the Progressive Conservative Party—small-town Canada and the outer suburbs of major metropolitan areas, the same type of terrain on which conservative parties thrive in all countries.

Harper’s Thatcherite/Reaganite conservatism was not tied to a specific part of Canada in the same way as Manning’s populism, but it suffered from another sort of miscalculation. It underestimated the loyalty of Progressive Conservatives to their traditional party. Millions of voters who agreed with Reform’s policies could not give up their loyalty to the PC brand. I met many of these Tories in my Reform days. They were just as right-wing as I was, but Reform was

not their brand. It was as simple as that. And, although I was frustrated by their loyalty, I had to be impressed by it. They were the kind of people who are indispensable to any political party.

Harper realized this about the same time as Manning started working toward expanding the Reform Party. Harper laid out his new view at the Winds of Change conference held in Calgary in May 1996 to discuss possible cooperation between Reform and the PCs. What Harper said then 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, after the Progressive Conservatives had been reduced to two seats, and two new parties—Reform and the Bloc Québécois—had taken over their seats in the House of Commons.

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 disaster of 1993 was not a random event: it represented the splintering of Brian Mulroney’s grand coalition along ancient fault lines. Conservatives, according to Harper, 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 that afternoon and said, “Stephen sounded like a prime minister today.”

Afterward, when I helped Harper write up his theory 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 about 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’s leadership 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 theory of the three sisters. The new Conservative Party did better than the sum of the Alliance and PCs, but, unable to win any seats in Quebec, it could not yet beat

the Liberals. Harper continued to work hard at wooing Quebec and, with a little help from Sheila Fraser, John Gomery and a few Montreal PR firms, made a breakthrough on January 23, 2006, when the Conservatives won ten seats in that province. Those new seats, plus 16 additional seats in Ontario, propelled the Conservatives into a minority government and made Harper prime minister.

Along the way, Harper has had to soften his conservative philosophy considerably to take account of the Canadian situation. In Britain and the United States, there are left and right factions within the Conservative and Republican parties (“wets” and “dries” in Britain, eastern establishment liberals and sun-belt conservatives in the United States). They are always jockeying for position: sometimes one is in control, sometimes the other. They fight with each other, and they complain and posture, but they long ago learned the importance of coexistence and taking turns. The situation is more complicated in Canada because there are three major factions, not two. In addition to the western populists, who tend to be more conservative in practice, and the traditional Tories of Ontario and the Atlantic provinces, are the *bleus* of Quebec—more nationalist than conservative, and using the Conservative Party as a vehicle of provincial autonomy. Doctrinaire Thatcherism is too rigid to hold this tripartite coalition together. Harper figured this out ten years ago, and the rest of us are catching up with him.

Believe me, the contemporary mood among western conservatives and populists is for reconciliation with other strands of conservatism. I spent a recent weekend at the Calgary Congress, organized by Link Byfield’s Citizens Centre for Freedom and Democracy. Four hundred of exactly the same sort of people who were the most

loyal supporters of the Reform Party debated the “renewal of the federation.” Preston Manning spoke about the need to build alliances. Every proposal was subjected to the same line of scrutiny—how will people in other parts of the country react to it? The atmosphere was political in the best

sense of the term—not just venting frustration, but putting forward policies in an attempt to find coalition partners.

With influential Tories like Senator Segal re-examining their earlier beliefs and western activists turning away from hard-edged positions that work regionally but not nationally, prospects seem bright for turning the new Conservative Party of Canada into a long-lasting coalition. Various types of conservatives can live together if they emphasize not what divides them but what unites them. For now, while the coalition is successful and Conservatives control the government, everyone seems to have learned their lesson. The test will come when the tide runs out on the Conservatives, as it inevitably will, and they are voted out of office. At that point, any party undergoes a round of mutual recrimination. If we can survive that, we will indeed have learned the lessons of the past. □

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