

## Incremental Conservatism: Mr. Harper Goes to Ottawa

By: [Tom Flanagan](#) on June 19, 2009 |



Criticism from the right of Prime Minister Stephen Harper has recently come into vogue. Economists from the Fraser Institute have condemned aspects of Conservative tax policy. The Canadian Taxpayers Federation called the 2006 budget "Liberal Lite." Gerry Nicholl, who used to work for Mr. Harper at the National Citizens Coalition, has become a frequent critic in the *Globe and Mail* and other media. And, going beyond media criticism, people associated with the Free Dominion website held an organizational meeting in May 2007 to found a new version of the Reform Party. Are things really so bad, that after only 18 months in power, conservatives are ready to go back to the days of division on the right?

Let's look at some of the reasons why Mr. Harper has not been able to satisfy the expectations of all his erstwhile supporters. The basic point to grasp is how severe are the limitations on the power of this Conservative government. In the 2006 election, the Conservatives won 36% of the popular vote and 125 of 308 seats, giving them the most fragile minority position since Arthur Meighen tried to govern in 1925 (for four days) with 116 of 245 seats. By winning enough seats to beat the Liberals, the Conservatives earned the chance to form a government and get control of the executive branch, but that does not imply control of the House of Commons. The government is unable to pass legislation without the support of at least one other party; and, although it gets to name the chairmen of Commons committees, members from the three opposition parties make up a majority on all those committees—a fact which those parties have exploited to obstruct and harass the government at every turn.

In governmental institutions outside the House of Commons, the situation is even more difficult. At the time of writing, there are 63 Liberals in the Senate, compared to only 23 Conservatives, and the Conservative platform endorsement of an elected Senate prevents Mr. Harper from adjusting that imbalance by appointing new Conservative senators. The Senate has not actually rejected any Conservative legislation, but it held up the *Accountability Act* for eight months so the Liberals could use their leadership convention for fundraising purposes, and it has delayed for an entire year the Conservative bill to establish eight-year terms for senators.

The Governor-General, Michaëlle Jean, is a politically inexperienced CBC broadcaster chosen by Mr. Harper's predecessor, Paul Martin; her French-born husband is, or at least used to be, sympathetic to Quebec separatism. Could Mr. Harper count on fair treatment from this Governor-General in a constitutional crisis? Suppose he was defeated in the House and asked for a dissolution of Parliament and a new election? Would she comply with his request, or would she accept his resignation and then invite the Liberal leader to form a government? It's probably more prudent not to put that question to the test.

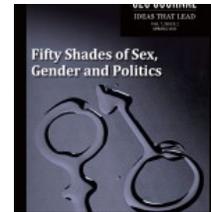
With thirteen years of appointments by Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, the courts are heavily stacked with Liberal appointments. For example, one review of the Saskatchewan situation found that 16 out of 20 judges appointed to the bench by Mr. Chrétien and Mr. Martin had made personal contributions to the Liberal Party (not counting donations by spouses or law firms). With that kind of

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### Call for Submission

roster sitting on the bench, constitutionally adventurous Conservative legislation is likely to get a rough ride.

And then there's the federal civil service, philosophically inclined towards interventionist government and heavily sprinkled with capital-L Liberals after thirteen years in which Liberal political staffers had preferment in applying for public-service jobs. The situation can be improved with a judicious mix of retirements, transfers, and new appointments, but it's not something that can be immediately transformed. The same is true of Crown corporations and regulatory commissions, most of whose members were appointed by Liberal governments for fixed terms and can only gradually be replaced. The Conservative government's conflict with the Canadian Wheat Board illustrates the difficulties arising from the inertia inherent in the appointment process.

In spite of all these obstacles, the Harper government, in its first 18 months, has managed to do many things that conservatives should applaud. Below is a partial list:

Broad-based tax relief through reduction of the GST from 7% to 6%. Some might have preferred a cut to the personal income tax, but I'll take my stand with Milton Friedman: "I never met a tax cut I didn't like."

Stopping the movement toward a national system of publicly operated child-care centres. Paul Martin's Liberals were on the verge of creating a new version of public education—unionized, expensive, inefficient—but Mr. Harper stopped it dead with his \$1200/year Child Care Allowance.

Making the federal income tax less hostile to families—something that conservatives had demanded for years. A complicated package of changes to the tax code is involved, including increases to the spousal and per-child tax credits, changes to pension rules, and specific credits and deductions for work and educational activities. Maybe in an ideal world it would be better to have enacted fewer but broader measures, but the net impact of what the government has done is clearly pro-family.

Re-arming the Canadian Forces. Paul Martin had announced a change in that direction, but Mr. Harper is moving farther and faster than the Liberals ever would have.

Multiple criminal-justice initiatives to reinforce the concepts of personal responsibility and punishment for wrongdoing. Several of these have been held up by the opposition parties in committee; but whether or not they pass, it is clear that Mr. Harper has changed the terms of public discussion on justice issues. We are no longer debating how to be more lenient with criminals but how to get them off the streets.

An amnesty for long-gun owners. The gun registry can't be fully dismantled without changes to legislation requiring a majority in the House of Commons, but the government is doing what it can through orders-in-council and regulation.

Breaking up the Wheat Board's monopoly by introducing dual marketing for malting barley. The legal situation is similar to that of the gun registry; thorough-going reform will require a majority in the Commons, but the government is doing what it can.

Cancellation of the Court Challenges Program, under which public money had been used to support litigation against federal and provincial legislation. Most of the triumphs of the left in fields such as abortion and gay rights had been financed by the Court Challenges Program.

Movement towards deregulation of the communications industry. Generations of Liberal legislation have created a complex regulatory regime that cannot be erased in a day or a year, but Minister Maxime Bernier is moving in the right direction.

Paying down the federal debt by \$13.2 billion in September 2006, with a further \$9.2 billion repayment projected in Budget 2007.

Pulling the plug on the Kelowna Accord, which would have pumped an additional billion dollars into Aboriginal programming, with no clear standards of accountability. Instead, Minister Jim Prentice has introduced a \$300 million dollar program to guarantee mortgages and thus promote individually owned housing on Indian reserves. Introducing a regime for controlling greenhouse gas emissions that ignores the completely unrealistic Kyoto targets and which Canadian business leaders and provincial governments have said they can live with. Many conservatives might have preferred to see no program at all, but that option ceased to be realistic after leaders of conservative parties in the provinces (e.g., Gordon Campbell in British Columbia and Ed Stelmach in Alberta) and in other countries (e.g., John Howard in Australia and George W. Bush in the United States) came out in favour of emissions controls, though not necessarily of the Kyoto targets and timetable.

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Admittedly, these are all small steps. Maybe in some cases the government could go farther and faster; maybe in some cases the initiatives could have been better designed. *But the important thing is that they are all in the right direction, making progress toward longstanding conservative goals* (or, in the case of emissions controls, minimizing the damage of pursuing a politically necessary non-conservative goal). I would propose this as the crucial test for conservatives in deciding whether to support government policy—is it in the right direction? Politics is a game that goes on forever. You don't have to win everything at once. The most important thing is to start to win even small victories, to lay the basis for bigger victories yet to come.

Let me extend this argument a bit by suggesting that we can divide the actions of a Conservative government into four categories:

Those that do not involve any conservative principle. Conservatism is not a totalitarian ideology claiming to have a prescription for everything. I can't see that there is a conservative position on whether the federal government should own or lease office buildings, or who should receive maintenance contracts, or what exactly the equalization formula should be. An enormous amount of government business is basically non-ideological; and on such matters, conservatives, like other people, may read the evidence differently and come to conflicting conclusions.

Incremental steps toward conservative goals. As argued above, conservatives should support such measures without seeking immediate perfection.

Acceptance of a non-conservative status quo in some policy area, e.g., supply management of poultry and dairy products through monopolistic marketing boards. This coercive policy of price and quantity controls created by the Liberals is profoundly anti-market and anti-freedom, but it has been in effect for decades and is popular in rural parts of Ontario and Quebec where the Conservative Party must win in order to have any chance of forming a government. A government cannot change everything at once; and as long as it is making reasonable progress in some areas, it seems irrational to demand that it commit political suicide by grabbing onto supercharged "third rail" issues.

Going the wrong way. It is one thing for a Conservative government to live with a situation that it did not create and cannot feasibly improve at the present time; it is quite another for it to make things worse by embracing socialist or interventionist principles and marching off in the wrong direction. I believe conservative-minded people should be openly critical if that happens. There are many pressures on a Conservative government, and it is possible for it not just to be slowed down, but to be pushed totally off course. When that threatens to happen, conservatives must exert their own pressure.

In short, my vision of incremental conservatism means endorsing even very small steps if they are in the right direction, and accepting inaction in areas that can't feasibly be changed right now, but opposing government initiatives that are clearly going the wrong way. But even when they feel the need to oppose, it would be wise for conservatives to keep a sense of proportion, to remember that the Conservative Party of Canada is their party and that, no matter what mistakes it makes, a Conservative government is likely to deliver more of what they want than a Liberal or NDP government.

Some may think such incremental conservatism seems like pretty thin gruel. What about the incomparable Margaret Thatcher, who reformed British labour law and privatized ailing state industries? Or Ronald Reagan, who brought down the Soviet empire and restored America's prosperity, to say nothing of Americans' confidence in themselves? Or, closer to home, Ralph Klein, who tamed runaway deficits, took on the public-service unions, and got Alberta's government out of the business of owning businesses; and Mike Harris, who balanced Ontario's budget and cut provincial taxes? Why should we settle for baby steps rather than giant strides?

Part of the answer to that question concerns the security of position that these iconic conservative leaders enjoyed. Margaret Thatcher, Ralph Klein, and Mike Harris all presided over majority governments in a disciplined parliamentary system. Not fearing defeat in the House, they also didn't have to worry about whether the head of state would be reliable in a constitutional crisis. Ralph Klein and Mike Harris, moreover, were operating in unicameral legislatures, so they didn't have to worry about getting legislation through a second chamber. Mrs. Thatcher had to contend with the House of Lords, but that body in her day had an in-built Conservative majority and in any case has only a suspensory, not an absolute, veto over legislation.

Of course, Ronald Reagan, elected in a presidential system, faced quite a different situation. Although the Republicans controlled the Senate in the years 1981-86, the Democrats controlled the House of Representatives the whole time Reagan was president. Thus he could not get legislation passed without making some compromises. But his own personal position was secure, because an American President is elected for a four-year term and cannot be ousted by Congress.

The other part of the answer concerns the popular mandate with which these leaders were elected to office. In all four cases, voters were ready for sweeping change because of preceding years of misgovernment. When Margaret Thatcher was elected, Britain was the "sick man of Europe" and the economy was reeling from runaway strikes and other forms of labour blackmail. Ronald Reagan succeeded Jimmy Carter, under whom the United States had reached a twentieth-century low point—double-digit inflation and unemployment, rationing of gasoline, Soviet expansionism throughout the Third World, and Americans held hostage in Tehran. Ralph Klein was elected when Alberta's budgetary deficit was spiraling out of control and provincially owned corporations were losing money by the billion. Mike Harris succeeded five years of NDP government and "Rae days"—need one say more?

Stephen Harper, in contrast, was not voted into office on any great wave of discontent. Canadians were troubled by Liberal corruption, and they were not impressed by Paul Martin's incoherent style of leadership, but they did not perceive Canada as being in deep trouble. Indeed, after some difficult years in the 1990s, the first decade of the twenty-first century has been a good one for Canada. Unemployment is now at a 30-year low, and the Canadian dollar is at a 30-year high. The stock market is at an all-time high. The federal budget is balanced, with annual surpluses used at least in part to pay down the national debt. Taxes are still too high, from a conservative point of view, but they have been reduced from the historic heights they reached in the 1990s. The separatist Parti Québécois is at its lowest ebb since 1973 (though, of course, it may rebound under new leadership). No one is seriously threatening to break up the country or demanding that the constitution be rewritten. Global warming may threaten the planet, but it actually improves the weather in Canada. Canadians want honest, competent government at this juncture, but they are not demanding sweeping change. We as conservatives can easily produce a list of things that we believe need radical reform, from health care to supply management, but there is no majority support for drastic action. Mr. Harper would be quickly defeated in parliament and in the next election if he undertook a Thatcher-like program to beat back a crisis that Canadian voters are unaware of.

It is also worth noting that the Conservative icons, in spite of the great achievements for which they deserve everlasting recognition, left many things untouched and sometimes even went in un-conservative directions. None of them attempted any serious reforms to government-dominated systems of health care; none of them tackled, except at the margin, social issues such as abortion and affirmative action. Ronald Reagan left Social Security unreformed, in spite of its obvious financial weakness. Margaret Thatcher became an early advocate of controlling greenhouse-gas emissions. Mike Harris weakened rent controls but did not abolish them entirely. Ralph Klein, after his initial period in office, turned Alberta into the most free-spending province in Canada.

As conservatives, we need to develop a mature view of our relationship with the Conservative Party of Canada. We tried the experiment of supporting ideologically pure conservative parties, such as Reform and the Canadian Alliance. It felt great when we read the campaign platforms, but it didn't feel so great when the votes were counted in three national elections and we lost each time. After these losses, members of both the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives voted overwhelmingly to merge, to create a truly national party capable of winning an election and governing Canada. We came close in 2004 and succeeded in 2006, albeit with a narrow margin and a minority government. The Conservative Party has now been in power for just eighteen months. It has made commendable progress toward conservative goals on a number of issues, left some other areas untouched, and perhaps gone in the wrong direction in a couple of respects. That seems like a pretty good record.

To expect perfection from government is a millenarian impulse, not an authentic part of conservatism. Conservatives know, or should know, that all human beings are fallible, that all institutions are flawed, that all expectations are bound to be disappointed sooner or later. As Conservative supporters, we should celebrate the achievements of our Conservative government, understand its inherent limitations and the difficulties it faces, and lend a hand to getting it back on track if it goes off the rails.



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