

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots. Most dots are grey, but several are red, highlighting specific countries or regions. The map is centered behind the title.

# A Conservative Revolution?

The State of Canadian Politics in 2010

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- The election of Prime Minister Harper in 2006, a conservative ideologue, was unusual for a moderate country like Canada. However, there has been no political revolution in the past five years. Canadians have embraced a change of government more than a change of direction.
- With a weak mandate and a minority government, voters put the Conservatives on probation in 2006; in the election of 2008; Harper's Conservatives were denied a majority again. The Prime Minister's alleged "secret agenda" would have to wait for a governing majority.
- Instead of pushing an overly radical agenda, the Conservatives have abandoned their commitments to a balanced budget, their hard-line stance on China and free market ideology. But they have lowered taxes, increased government accountability, strengthened the military and shown little interest in peacekeeping – once an icon of Canadian foreign policy.
- Mr. Harper's "modus operandi" – a one-man government characterized by obsessive secrecy and occasional overreaching – may explain his failure to win a majority. Canadians seem to have an emotional circuit breaker that prevents them from giving Conservatives a strong mandate.
- In many, mainly small ways, Mr. Harper has changed the political landscape in Canada and made it more conservative. The government's future is uncertain, however. After the next election, there is speculation of a progressive coalition between the Liberals and the New Democratic Party.

When Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservative Party were first elected on January 23, 2006, it marked a watershed in politics in Canada. Their victory ended 13 years of rule by the Liberal Party and brought to power a prime minister from western Canada, historically a seat of discontent. It also gave rise to a leader committed to a more conservative Canada – a country of less government, lighter regulation, lower taxes, freer markets and tougher justice. The Conservatives, it was thought, would embrace institutional reform (an elected Senate) and stronger regions (more power for the provinces). Abroad, it would champion a stronger military, closer relations with the United States and a foreign policy rooted in human rights. Indeed, in Stephen Harper, the dour, detached economist from Calgary who had begun his political career as an apparatchik in the upstart Reform Party, Canada had done something unusual: it had elected an ideologue.

## No Conservative Revolution

The real question, though, was how *ideological* Mr. Harper could be in a country as unideological as Canada. How much to the right of the political spectrum could he go in a place as historically moderate as Canada – a nation of radical centrists who famously cross the road to get to the middle? Could the Conservatives deliver the kind of change that Mr. Harper, in his heart of hearts, was said to want? Not really. Almost five years later, the Conservatives have not re-invented Canada. There has been no political revolution in the peaceable kingdom. But there has been change, mainly on the margins. To the disappointment of their true believers, the Conservatives have abandoned their commitment to a balanced budget and a hard line on China. At the same time, though, they have cut taxes and increased accountability in government. It is important to remember that the Conservatives came to power having won just 124 of 308 seats in the House of Commons, with only 36 per cent of the popular vote. This was not a strong mandate. Even if Mr. Harper had wanted to govern boldly, the realities of a hung Parliament would thwart him. In a minority government, in which no party has a majority, passing legislation means negotiation, consultation and accommodation. You can't always get what you want, as the Rolling Stones say.

Furthermore, consider how the Conservatives were elected. The Liberals had been in power since 1993 under the folksy, wily Jean Chrétien, who won consecutive majorities in 1993, 1997 and 2000. Mr. Chrétien was succeeded in office by Paul Martin, his long-serving finance minister (who eliminated the deficit in the 1990s but, like Britain's Gordon Brown, was unsuccessful in the top job). Despite his intellectual gifts and his overwhelming election as party leader, Mr. Martin spent a short, unhappy two years as prime minister. Called "Mr. Dithers," he was indecisive and inconsistent. In 2006, buoyed by an expanding economy and rising commodity prices, Canadians embraced a change of government more than a change of direction. While they had voted for the Conservatives, they were not really conservative. While they had rejected the Liberals, they remained generally liberal. So, in giving Stephen Harper a narrow mandate – rather than a large majority as they had other parties in other elections – voters were far more cautious. They would put the Conservatives on probation; they would try them out. Rather than a blank cheque, they would offer the new prime minister a short leash. This was a classically Canadian arrangement, crafted by a people as careful as their pin-striped, buttoned-down bankers. If Mr. Harper's government performed well, the voters implied, they'd consider giving him a majority next time. But the next time came and went on October 14, 2008, and the Conservatives were denied a majority again. Indeed, in terms of popularity, they are no closer to a majority now than then.

## Canada in 2010

Where has this left Mr. Harper's Canada in 2010, in the year of the Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver and the G-8 and G-20 meetings in Toronto? Economically, Canada has weathered the recession better than any of the world's leading industrialized countries. The economy is expected to grow modestly this year. Inflation is low and unemployment manageable. While the federal government is running a deficit for the first time since the 1990s, the deficit and the debt are low in relation to the size of the economy. Curiously, the Conservatives were content to do little when the markets were collapsing in the autumn of 2008. Fiscal hawk that he is, Mr. Harper opposed deficit spending. Facing an opposition crying

for stimulus measures, however, he changed his mind, opened the spigots and predicts an annual deficit of

\$49.2 billion this year. It wasn't the first time Mr. Harper would renounce economic orthodoxy in the service of political expediency. He had no choice but to retreat. Without a majority government, he had come to learn, you really can't always get what you want. This was the same instinct when it came to bailing out the automobile industry in 2009. Mr. Harper, a free marketeer, would have probably seen the auto companies fail rather than rescue them. The trouble is they are in vote-rich southern Ontario, the engine of the national economy, and they were thought too big to fail. For the Conservatives, laissez-faire economics might have meant political suicide. Similarly, the Conservatives wanted to hold China accountable for its human rights record. In opposition, Mr. Harper and his colleagues had excoriated the Liberals for cozying up to an authoritarian China and shunning a democratic Taiwan. When the Conservatives took power in 2006, they ignored China, diplomatically. That annoyed Beijing, which scolded the prime minister. A trading nation such as Canada, though, cannot ignore China, without an economic cost. Soon ministers were beating a path to Beijing, as was Mr. Harper. As for human rights, they quietly became less important than exports of oil, iron, lead, lumber and whatever else we sell the world's second largest economy. In other areas, too, the Conservatives have learned their limits. If they had wanted to sell the Canadian Broadcast Corporation, the country's public radio and television network, they knew they would anger a loud constituency. If they wanted to introduce more private health care, they wouldn't dare try that, either. In other words, trying anything too conservative in centrist Canada – selling off state-owned corporations or slashing the federal bureaucracy – would have to wait for a majority. Advancing the sort of socially conservative agenda favoured by many conservatives – outlawing gay marriage, criminalizing abortion, restoring the death penalty – also would need a majority. Indeed, for the entire time that Mr. Harper has held office – and even before – he has been accused of having “a secret agenda,” which he would pursue enthusiastically if he had a free hand in Parliament. Suspecting this, perhaps, Canadians have refused his government a majority. In the 2008 election they gave the Conservatives more seats (143) and more votes (37 per cent), but the party still had only a plurality. Unlike Jean Chrétien, who never relinquished his commanding lead in the polls during his decade or so in office, Mr. Harper's Conservatives have never risen much beyond 37 per

cent in popular opinion surveys (except for a few weeks in early 2009).

## Mr. Harper's “Modus Operandi”

It is strange, Mr. Harper's relationship with the voters. They see him as diligent, intelligent and competent as a chief executive. But they have little warmth for a humourless, wooden strategist with an obsessive secrecy, a studied aloofness and what critics call a streak of meanness. They see a prime minister who wants few strong ministers in his Cabinet, who expels members of his caucus and tolerates no dissent in the bureaucracy. To observers, this is a one-man government, led by someone who occasionally overreaches – and pays for it. Shortly after his re-election in 2008, for example, Mr. Harper introduced a bill to abolish public election financing, which would have virtually bankrupted the opposition parties. The Liberals, New Democrats and Bloc Québécois reacted angrily, formed a hasty coalition and threatened to bring down Mr. Harper's government on a vote of non-confidence in Parliament. He backed down. In 2010, faced with hard questions on Canada's military mission in Afghanistan, the Prime Minister shut down the House of Commons for months. Hundreds of thousands of angry Canadians petitioned the government on Facebook to return to Parliament. It is this kind of *modus operandi* that may explain Mr. Harper's failure to win a majority. However weak the Liberals – who are led by Michael Ignatieff, a former journalist, professor and public intellectual, who is the party's third leader since 2003 – the polling numbers are uncanny. Whenever the Conservatives appear to be reaching a majority in public opinion their support invariably slips. It is as if Canadians have an emotional circuit-breaker that prevents them from giving the Conservatives that much-coveted mandate.

## A Changed Political Landscape

All of this isn't to say that Mr. Harper has not changed the political landscape in Canada. In many ways, mainly small ways, he surely has. The Conservatives have moved to abolish the long-gun registry, a gun-control measure unpopular in rural Canada. They have been tough on crime – building prisons, while advocating tougher sentences and stiffer penalties. They have appointed some conservative judges and cut funding to gay pride parades, foreign aid lobbies and women's groups. They have changed the way the population

census is taken, so that fewer invasive questions are asked and personal privacy is honoured. In the world, the government has maintained Canada's presence in Afghanistan, but abandoned the so-called soft diplomacy of "the human security agenda" of the Liberals. Wary of the United Nations, it has belatedly campaigned for a rotational seat on the Security Council (which Canada has held every decade since the UN was founded) – for which it paid a bitter price at the elections at the UN General Assembly in October. On climate change, Canada is now a leading skeptic, which drew condemnation at the international conference on climate change in Copenhagen in 2009. In the Middle East, Canada has become one of Israel's strongest supporters. Most notably, the government has sharply increased the defence budget. It has bought new equipment – tanks, transport planes, fighter jets – and invested in enforcing Canada's territorial claim to the Arctic. As for peacekeeping, which was once Canada's international vocation, the government isn't interested. When the United Nations was considering creating a force to send to the Congo and Canada was seen as a participant (it was once the world's leading peacekeeper, supplying 10 per cent of UN peacekeeping forces,) Canada declined. While Canada began withdrawing from peacekeeping missions two decades ago, the Conservatives particularly seem to consider peacekeeping a "Liberal" foreign policy.

As Mr. Harper's Conservatives have tried to safeguard the country's prosperity and security, they have also tried to preserve its unity – the enduring challenge of this fragile federation. They have given Quebec a voice at some international conferences, and Parliament has recognized the province as "a nation" within Canada. Their concessions notwithstanding, the Conservatives hold only ten of Quebec's 75 seats; they'd once hoped to find their elusive majority there. Ironically, though, they have also tried to create a stronger federal presence by proposing a national securities regulator – there are now some ten provincial securities authorities – as well as promoting a greater awareness of the country's history and strengthening its sense of citizenship.

since the 1960s. With four parties in the House of Commons, there is persistent talk that the next election will bring a coalition government between the centrist Liberals and the leftist New Democratic Party, a process that is unusual but not unknown in Canada and that has gained legitimacy from the coalitions recently formed in Britain and Australia. But that may be the only way that Stephen Harper's Conservatives will lose power. Much as Canadians may remain skeptical of the Conservatives, they show no appetite for the Liberals. While the Conservatives may fall short of absolute power, they do hold effective power, allowing them to advance some parts, though not all, of their agenda. And so they continue – slowly, subtly, persistently – to make a moderate Canada a more conservative Canada.

## A New Left Coalition?

Canada has now had minority government (Liberal and Conservative) since 2004, the longest minority period



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