



THE HARPER RECORD

Edited by Teresa Healy



CCPA
CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
CENTRE CANADIEN
de POLITIQUES ALTERNATIVES

www.policyalternatives.ca

Understanding Stephen Harper

The long view

Steve Patten

CANADIANS NEED TO understand the political and ideological temperament of politicians like Stephen Harper — men and women who aspire to political leadership.

While we can gain important insights by reviewing the Harper government's policies and record since the 2006 election, it is also essential that we step back and take a longer view, considering Stephen Harper's two decades of political involvement prior to winning the country's highest political office. What does Harper's long record of engagement in conservative politics tell us about his political character?

This chapter is organized around a series of questions about Stephen Harper's political and ideological character. Is he really, as his supporters claim, "the smartest guy in the room"? To what extent is he a conservative ideologue versus being a political pragmatist? What type of conservatism does he embrace? What does the company he keeps tell us about his political character? I will argue that Stephen Harper is an economic conservative whose early political motivations were deeply ideological. While his keen sense of strategic pragmatism has allowed him to make peace with both conservative populism and the traditionalism of social conservatism, he continues to marginalize red toryism within the Canadian conservative family. He surrounds himself with

like-minded conservatives and retains a long-held desire to transform Canada in his conservative image.

The smartest guy in the room, or the most strategic?

When Stephen Harper first came to the attention of political observers, it was as one of the leading “thinkers” behind the fledgling Reform Party of Canada. His speech on regionalism and fairness in the Canadian federation was hailed as a highlight of the Reform party’s founding convention.¹ As delegates to the convention treated Harper to a standing ovation, Preston Manning claims he “knew the party had found a potential policy chief.”² Over the next four years, Harper and Manning worked closely as co-architects of the Reform party’s policy agenda.

Following the party’s breakthrough 1993 federal election, Harper assumed a prominent role in the Reform caucus, and the parliamentary press gallery quickly learned that the young MP was one of the most likely Reform party sources of intelligent and perceptive comment. Reflecting on those early days, Manning has described Stephen Harper as the party’s “best mind” in terms of policy analysis and strategy development.³

It is certainly true that Harper is a smart man. He is well read and holds an MA in economics from the University of Calgary. All the same, his partisan supporters and the conservative journalists who have penned the most widely read Harper biographies tend to exaggerate the uniqueness of his intellect. When it comes to public policy, Harper is not a particularly insightful or original thinker, and he is certainly not the first Canadian political leader to demonstrate a capacity to remain well-informed, focused, and to think quickly on his feet.

Few political associates or friends understand Stephen Harper better than Tom Flanagan, the well-known University of Calgary political scientist. When the two met back in the early days of the Reform party, Flanagan was impressed by the extent to which Harper “combined a remarkably wide knowledge of politics with a keen strategic mind.”⁴ This observation goes to the heart of Stephen Harper’s smarts. While merely one among many well-informed policy wonks to engage in active politics, he displays a unique astuteness when it comes to the

strategic dimensions of partisan politics. He is able to look beyond the moment and engage in long-term strategic thinking about his political goals and the tactics and immediate actions required to attain his desired outcomes.

Interestingly, Harper's strategic mind and attention to tactics may underpin what some political journalists have identified as his "autocratic tendencies" — his desire to keep cabinet ministers on a short leash and maintain an "exhaustive system of information control."⁵ It seems that his personal sense of ideological and strategic certainty makes it difficult for him to devolve control or trust others who might not share his political agenda or insights.

Of course, the centralization of control is not unusual in the context of Canada's notoriously undemocratic political parties, but Stephen Harper's strategic character does explain his somewhat autocratic nature and desire for hands-on control of the policy-making and political messages that define the public face of his party.

Harper has a sharp mind, but it is a bit of myth-making that has created the impression he is the smartest guy in the room. All the same, those who wish to understand Harper should remember that his every political move is, almost without fail, guided by astute strategic calculations. Stephen Harper understands Canadian politics and the challenges associated with building a coalition in support of his conservative agenda. He should not, in other words, ever be underestimated.

Ideologue or pragmatist?

During the lead-up to Stephen Harper's campaign to replace Stockwell Day as leader of the Canadian Alliance, *Globe and Mail* columnist Jeffrey Simpson publicly counselled Harper to take a pass on his run for the leadership. According to Simpson, Harper was "too ideological to succeed in Canadian politics."⁶ Harper's Liberal and New Democratic competitors have worked hard to perpetuate the image of Harper as a conservative ideologue with a hidden agenda to impose policies that would be unpalatable to moderate, middle-of-the-road Canadians. Interestingly, however, committed conservative pundits like Gerry Nicholls, a former colleague of Harper's at the National Citizens Coalition and an

active supporter of Harper's bid for the Alliance leadership, now criticize Harper for abandoning principled conservatism in favour of a "deliberate strategy of diluting conservative principles and moving the [Conservative] party to the left." To what extent, then, is Stephen Harper a conservative ideologue? Is there any validity to the characterization of Harper as more pragmatic than ideological?

There is no shortage of evidence in support of the characterization of Stephen Harper as an uncompromising conservative ideologue. In the early 1980s, Harper studied economics at the University of Calgary. His early connection to conservative politics was shaped by Calgary's political culture in the heyday of the National Energy Program. Harper soaked up the political analysis that motivated conservative Alberta's frustration with the Liberal government in Ottawa. As his biographer, William Johnson, explains, the youthful Stephen Harper "felt there should be clear-cut answers to problems. You should implement the best economic decisions, and then it would work over time."⁸

Harper was a Progressive Conservative, but when Brian Mulroney's PC government was slow to deliver the "fundamental conservative transformation" for which Harper had "high hopes," he became disillusioned.⁹ Convinced that Mulroney was unwilling to make tough decisions and that his party lacked the "conservative philosophical grounding" necessary to differentiate the PCs from the Liberals, Harper and his close friend, John Weissenberger, committed themselves to building a "Blue Tory network" of party members interested in the purer form of conservatism that was then transforming the U.K. and U.S. under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.¹⁰

Some would dismiss this initiative as an example of the youthful dogmatism many young activists display. But even Harper enthusiasts who balk at labelling him an ideologue, like *Maclean's* columnist Paul Wells, will admit that Harper has always wanted to champion stronger conservative ideological commitments in Canadian politics: he "would never lose sight of the long game, which was to transform Canada, if it would let him, into a profoundly different place."¹¹

During his years of active involvement in the Reform party, and despite their close working relationship, Harper often challenged what he considered to be the ideologically vague and deceptive populism of

Preston Manning. Contrary to Manning, Harper argued in favour of positioning Reform as a “party of the Right.”¹² While temporarily out of formal partisan politics from 1997 to 2001, Harper opted for a stint as President of the ideologically uncompromising National Citizens Coalition. This is an organization founded by anti-Medicare crusader Colin Brown, which now promises to defend free enterprise, free speech and accountability to taxpayers under the slogan “More freedom through less government.”¹³

Not unsurprisingly, when Harper decided to run for the leadership of the Canadian Alliance, he called on the party “to be a clear voice for conservatism” that rejected any flirtation with the Red Tory orientation of Joe Clark and the Progressive Conservative party.¹⁴

To that point in time, Harper had always put principles ahead of political victories. Indeed, he and Tom Flanagan were convinced that the Reform party had had considerable success at getting new issues on the Canadian political agenda, while also laying the foundations for a generalized cultural shift toward the ideological right.¹⁵ None of this, he believed, would have been accomplished without ideological conviction on the part of conservatives within the Reform party. By the time he assumed the helm of the Canadian Alliance, however, Harper seems to have become increasingly convinced that the time had come to do all that was necessary to form a government. To the extent that Harper has a pragmatic side, this has been revealed in his efforts to form and lead a majority government.

The term pragmatic is used in more than one way in Canadian politics. At its simplest, pragmatism involves worrying more about immediate and tangible occurrences than grand ideas, theories, or ideologies. In other words, a pragmatic approach to public policy-making is rooted in our observable reality and sense of what is both necessary and practical. Pragmatism, however, is also often associated with avoiding the political commitments of the ideological left and right in favour of centrist policies that will be politically popular with mainstream voters — that is, voters who avoid extremes in favour of either centre left or centre right policy prescriptions.

For many pragmatists, hugging the centre is more than a mere political calculation; they believe there is political virtue in the supposedly

non-ideological “centre.” Former Ontario premier Bill Davis was often described as this sort of pragmatist, a fact that frustrated the more conservative members of his cabinets.

Stephen Harper has never shunned clear and strong ideological commitments. Still, he is keenly aware of the importance of doing what is necessary to win. Contrary to what some conservative pundits, such as Gerry Nicholls, have argued, he may not be willing to sell his principles to win, but he is willing to engage in a form of “strategic pragmatism” that involves making concessions designed to ensure political victory in the long term. Moreover, since aspiring to positions of political leadership, Harper has regularly demonstrated a pragmatic willingness to position himself in the middle of the diverse conservative coalition to which his party aims to appeal.¹⁶

Harper recognizes that a winning conservative coalition will include a very diverse group of Canadians. In a 1989 memo to Preston Manning, he argued that the core political cleavage in contemporary Western democracies pits taxpayers and private sector-oriented citizens (the ideological right) against the public sector-oriented political class and “tax recipients of the Welfare State” (the ideological left).¹⁷ The conservative coalition of the right would include the corporate sector and the private sector urban middle class, but also aspects of the urban working class and rural classes that have an interest in lower taxes and are resistant to the social values and “liberal intellectualism of the Welfare State class.”¹⁸

In more traditional political terms, Harper told the group of partisan activists and conservative journalists assembled at the 1996 Winds of Change conference in Calgary — a group brought together by author and journalist David Frum to discuss uniting the partisan right — that to be successful a Canadian Conservative party would need to bring together traditional Blue Tories, grassroots populists, and French-Canadian nationalists.¹⁹ At its heart, then, Stephen Harper’s strategic pragmatism is most evident in his dogged pursuit of strategies to build this coalition, to reach out to Québécois nationalists, old Tories, populists, and private sector-oriented urban sophisticates, as well as that significant demographic that Conservative operatives now call “the Tim Hortons and Canadian Tire crowd.”

To hold this coalition together, Harper has had to position himself in the middle of the party.²⁰ This has meant a unique range of initiatives such as delivering on cuts to the GST and recognizing Québec as a nation, while stressing that this apparent departure from his Reform roots is not inconsistent with his long-term goal of a more decentralized federalism, appealing to his party's Reform wing with a free vote on gay marriage and tough-on-crime legislation, while working to silence those Reform voices that once embarrassed the party in urban Canada.

In the end, then, Stephen Harper practises strategic pragmatism. For both strategic reasons and in the interests of party unity, Harper is now more pragmatic than one would expect of a politician who was initially written off as "too ideological." He is a politician who knows what he wants to accomplish. His record suggests that he is enough of an ideologue that he would rather win one majority and introduce significant policy changes than win three and not leave a clear legacy in terms of the structure and character of governance in Canada. To appreciate the possible consequences of a Harper majority, we must consider the nature of the conservatism to which he personally subscribes.

What type of conservative?

One of the realities of party politics in Canada is that each of our parties tends to represent a range of ideological perspectives. Of course, this range of perspectives is most obvious when a party is out of power; ideological differences are often submerged by the discipline of power. On the partisan right, conflict over which variant of conservatism would be predominant has been central to everything from leadership politics to the rise of splinter parties (Reform) and the efforts to "unite the right" under one party banner between 1998 and 2003.²¹ Over the past quarter century, there have been at least four conservatisms competing for dominance on the partisan right.

- *Economic conservatism* is the free enterprise ideology of small government and low taxes that is advocated by ideological libertarians, neo-liberal free traders and the "Blue Tories" who

have always wanted enterprise and economic logic to trump politics.

- *Social conservatism* entails a commitment to traditional social structures and morality. While often associated with evangelical Christian politics, social conservatism is also rooted in the traditionalism of classical conservatives and Blue Tories who are predisposed against the embrace of rapid social change.
- *Conservative populism* takes at least two forms. For some libertarian-minded conservatives, populism is about democratic processes that stress the importance of finding ways to hear the unmediated voices of individual citizens. For others, populism is about standing up against the élite in defence of the common people. What is unique about conservative populism is its definition of the élite as the entrenched welfare state bureaucracy and special interests that speak for privilege-seeking minorities, and the common people as hard-working taxpayers.²²
- *Red Toryism* is the more progressive conservatism that has transformed the old Tory notion of *noblesse oblige* into conservative support for the welfare state, and a willingness to tame the free market by allowing social concerns and politics to trump economic logic. Red Tories tend to be more comfortable than economic conservatives with state programs to assist those in need.

Stephen Harper's core ideological commitments are rooted firmly in the traditions of *economic conservatism*, and they have been for some time. As a youthful supporter of the Progressive Conservative party, Harper hoped Mulroney's landslide 1984 electoral victory would bring the politics of Thatcher and Reagan to Canada.²³ After the election, he went to Ottawa to work for his local PC Member of Parliament, Jim Hawks. It was not long, however, before he was disillusioned by the lack of change Mulroney brought to the character and policies of the federal government.

Unhappy in Ottawa, Harper returned to the University of Calgary, where he met John Weissenberger, an equally disgruntled Progressive

Conservative who would become one of Harper's closest friends. The two students began reading the works of influential neoconservative thinkers and talking about what it would take to build a network of true conservatives committed to transforming the PC party of Canada.²⁴ Their ambition was to be involved in building a right-wing movement capable of challenging the governing ideology of Liberal Canada.

Among the authors Weissenberger and Harper read was Friedrich Hayek who, at the time, was a leading voice within the free market-oriented Austrian school of economics. Echoing the Thatcherite claim that "there is no such thing as society," Hayek argued that what we call society is a "spontaneous order" that emerges out of social and economic interactions between individuals. This deeply libertarian perspective runs counter to both socialist and classical conservative ideas. It is also the perspective that would come to underpin Harper's growing commitment to the importance of protecting individual social and economic freedoms, restricting the size and reach of government, lowering taxes, and providing constitutional protection of property rights.

By the time Harper abandoned the PCs to join Preston Manning in the founding of the Reform party, he clearly identified with the libertarianism of economic conservatism.²⁵ Prior to the March 1987 convention at which the decision was taken to found the new party — the Western Assembly on Canada's Economic and Political Future in Vancouver — Harper and Weissenberger prepared an eleven-point manifesto titled a "Taxpayers Reform Agenda." It focused on changing the character of Canadian politics (ending patronage, regional inequalities, etc.) and committing to strong conservative principles and a "new economy" of smaller government. It championed political reform and economic conservatism and, according to Harper's biographer, "offered not the slightest hint of social or moral conservatism."²⁶

It is a mistake, however, to ignore Harper's relationship to *social conservatism*. It is true that the Conservative party's deeply committed social conservatives "know Harper is not one of them." He has demonstrated that "[l]egislating right moral conduct isn't his game."²⁷ Still, there is an under-appreciated place for "moral traditionalism" in Hayekian conservative thought. Libertarian commitments to individual freedom can be read as hostile to any impediment to change (even when proposed

by social traditionalists); all the same, many followers of conservatives like Hayek view moral and social traditions as the collected wisdom of the past, a wisdom that justifies nothing more than incremental and gradual social change.

Lloyd Mackey is one of the few Harper observers to explore his relationship to evangelical Christianity. Mackey describes the “United-Presbyterian-raised” Harper as a one-time “religious skeptic” who only “came to his faith” well into adulthood.²⁸ He does not portray Harper as a committed social conservative, but as an economic conservative who believes that faith, compassion, and ethical judgment are central to a well-functioning market economy.

Politically, Harper has worked to discredit portrayals of social conservatives as bigots, while people close to him have done the work associated with encouraging these moral traditionalists to “let things happen incrementally when the times are right.”²⁹ Harper’s faith, his approach to the Christian gospel, and his chosen place of worship now link him to evangelical communities in a way that was not the case when he first got involved in politics in the 1980s. He remains, however, far more of an economic than a social conservative.

A lot is made of Stephen Harper’s disdain for the democratic tools and trappings of *conservative populism*. Preston Manning wrote that Harper has long-held reservations about the wisdom and value of grassroots consultation.³⁰ But this populist critique of Harper misses the point. Conservative populism is about much more than providing ordinary people with a voice in politics. Underlying any form of populism is an ideological construction of a political cleavage that pits the common people against the powerful entrenched interests. In this respect, Stephen Harper is at one with conservative populists.³¹

In the mid-1980s, Harper and Weissenberger read Peter Brimelow’s *The Patriot Game: National Dreams and Political Realities*. This book, which so inspired the pair that they purchased 10 copies to share with friends, laid the foundations for Harper’s embrace of conservative populist ideas.³² Brimelow wrote of Canada’s under-performance as an economy and as a nation. He painted the Liberal party of Canada as the villain behind Canada’s decline. Brimelow, like Harper at the time, singled out the special treatment accorded the province of Québec as an import-

ant source of unfairness and under-performance in Canada. In addition, however, Brimelow borrowed from American neoconservatives such as Irving Kristol, to paint a portrait of a “new class” of civil servants, academics, journalists, and cultural industry workers who thrived on public sector interventionism and benefited from the very pathologies that were undermining the Canadian nation.

Stephen Harper embraced much of Brimelow’s analysis in developing his critique of the welfare state. When he made his public political debut in a speech at the Reform party’s founding convention in 1987, Harper articulated his populist critique of the welfare state:

The welfare state has placed unprecedented power in the centralizing hands of the federal bureaucracy, both in terms of its new reaches into Canadian life and its insistence on standardizing all policies and practices on a national scale. The welfare state has witnessed the phenomenon of greedy pressure-group politics reaching unprecedented depths. The vested interests of the welfare state operate in the guts of government decision-making machinery. Thus, their networks have been highly successful in achieving constant growth for their programs and bureaucracies.³³

The one group within Canada’s conservative family with whom Harper has been unwilling to associate are those who continue to embrace *Red Toryism*. From his early days as a disgruntled Progressive Conservative, Stephen Harper has often characterized the Red Tory conservative establishment as his immediate enemy. In the 1980s, he believed it was Mulroney’s embrace of the left-leaning Red Tory tradition that prevented a full-fledged neoconservative revolution in Canada. When he ran for the leadership of the Canadian Alliance, Harper rejected any suggestion of unifying Canada’s two conservative parties so long as Joe Clark remained Progressive Conservative leader.

In sum, then, Stephen Harper is, first and foremost, an economic conservative. But he is an economic conservative who has made peace with social conservatism. He is comfortable with an alliance of economic and social conservatism for two reasons. In part, it is because he is a man of Christian faith with the associated moral values and an underlying streak of traditionalism. But also it is because many social and eco-

conomic conservatives share a populist analysis of how a self-interested progressive liberal élite has for many years undermined the social, economic, and political interests of ordinary hard-working, tax-paying citizens. They share, as Tom Flanagan argues, “a common enemy” in the public sector-oriented political class of liberal intellectual and cultural workers who “wish to re-make society according to its own rationalistic vision.”³⁴

The company he keeps

For over two decades, Stephen Harper has chosen to associate with people who are politically ambitious and deeply ideological. When he first met Preston Manning in 1986, Harper was quick to jump on board the project to launch the Reform Party of Canada. While working for Manning and Reform, Harper met Tom Flanagan, the deeply conservative academic who remains one of his closest political associates. Flanagan has taken a leadership role in several of Harper’s major political campaigns and served for a time in Ottawa as his Chief of Staff.

Harper’s subsequent Chiefs of Staff have been Ian Brodie and Guy Giorno. Brodie received his PhD in Political Science in Flanagan’s department at the University of Calgary. His dissertation supervisor was Ted Morton, now one of the more right-wing members of Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach’s cabinet. Giorno was a senior staff member in the office of the premier of Ontario during the Mike Harris years and was known for his capacity to provide central oversight to the Harris team’s policy agenda (the Common Sense Revolution) as it worked its way through the provincial bureaucracy.

Harper is known for his association with the “Calgary school” of conservative academics. While the ongoing importance of his ties to the university are sometimes exaggerated, it was members of the Calgary school, including Flanagan, Morton, and Rainer Knopff, who joined Harper and conservative policy analyst Ken Boessenkool in the writing of the infamous 2001 Alberta Agenda that encouraged Premier Ralph Klein to embrace policies that would build a political “firewall” capable of stopping an “aggressive and hostile federal [Liberal] government”

from imposing big spending and interventionist policies that don't reflect true Canadian values.³⁵

In recent years, Harper has put considerable trust in the advice and work of less ideologically-driven conservatives like Brian Mulroney and cabinet ministers David Emerson and Jim Prentice. Harper is aware of the strategic advantages associated with welcoming some non-Red Tory elements of the old PC party into his inner circle. But, time and again, he has placed most of his trust in individuals who were among the neoconservative warriors of the 1980s and 1990s, including numerous members of the Mike Harris team that designed and implemented Ontario's Common Sense Revolution.

For example, during the first Canadian Alliance leadership race, Harper supported Tom Long. Like Harper, Long had done battle with Red Tories in the 1980s. As a keynote speaker at the January 2000 convention to launch the Canadian Alliance, Long lashed out at PC leader Joe Clark, saying he is not a true conservative and has "no meaningful record of accomplishments on promoting the things conservatives really care about."³⁶ Members of the Harris team who now work closely with Harper include federal ministers Tony Clement and Jim Flaherty (both former members of Harris cabinets), Conservative House Leader Peter Van Loan (former President of the Ontario PC party), and Harper's new Chief of Staff, Guy Giorno.

This picture of the company Stephen Harper keeps is decidedly incomplete. But it reveals the extent to which Harper has chosen to associate with many of the more ideological and deeply conservative members of Canada's conservative family. He has done battle with the more progressive Red Tories, while simultaneously creating productive working relationships with influential economic and social conservatives.

Conclusion

Stephen Harper is an astute political strategist with a sharp mind and a solid understanding of Canadian politics. He is far too strategically pragmatic to be blindly ideological, but he is deeply committed to economic conservative principles and unwilling to turn from his goal of re-making Canada in his conservative image. While not known as a so-

cial conservative, Harper needs the support of this influential wing of Canadian conservatism, and he knows that political victory requires social and economic conservatives to work together in political contests against more progressive voices. Entrenched as he now is within the Canadian political elite, Harper seldom articulates the views or analyses of Reform-style conservative populism, but this world-view remains a part of his ideological DNA.

Like many strategically minded political leaders, Harper is goal-oriented, and he maintains control of his government's policies and political messages to ensure they align with achieving his goals. He hasn't wandered far from the ideological beliefs that first motivated him to engage in politics. He surrounds himself with conservatives who share his strong ideological beliefs and, when he compromises on policy or the membership of his team, it is typically a strategic move designed to bring him closer to winning a majority government.

To know what Harper would do with his majority, Canadians need to understand his political and ideological character. This chapter has examined Harper's long record of engagement in conservative politics in the hope that it will contribute to developing such an understanding.