

Stephen Harper did many great things for Canada, but he hung on to power a little too long

The arguments for voting for Conservative Leader Stephen Harper are numerous and persuasive. He has been a competent and diligent prime minister who has avoided fiscal imprudence, brought us well through the 2008 financial crisis and has gone to great and imaginative lengths to keep taxes down and shrink public-sector spending as a share of GDP.

His government has cleaned up a mess in immigration, has been creative with native peoples' questions without signing on to the nationally self-administered blood libel of "cultural genocide" and shown good judgment and restraint in not going into the deep end over unproved ecological alarm. (It was a credit to him that our peppy itinerant Marxist, Naomi Klein denounced Harper last week in the world-renowned Sydney Opera House as a "climate criminal.")

His foreign policy has been robust in joining the coalition against ISIL, in not appeasing Russian aggression and in unambiguously recognizing Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. (The Palestinians could have their state next week if they abandoned their claimed right to inundate Israel with millions of returning Palestinians. The right of Palestinians to return must be to Palestine, not Israel.) He has neither antagonized the United States as former prime ministers John Diefenbaker and Pierre Trudeau did, nor been subservient to it.

He has shed the cozy myth that we are a nation of beloved peacemakers enlightening the rabidly anti-Israel and anti-West

blocs in the United Nations: it is a badge of honour that Canada has not been patronized by those corrupt despotisms that have hijacked much of the UN apparatus. Harper has earned our gratitude by banishing from our foreign policy what the distinguished American (and half-Canadian) secretary of state Dean Acheson accused us of 65 years ago: "arm-flapping moralism."

As I wrote in my history of Canada (Rise to Greatness) last year, Harper ranks now with Louis St. Laurent, Lester Pearson and Brian Mulroney as an important prime minister, just one level below John A. Macdonald, Wilfrid Laurier, William Lyon Mackenzie King and Pierre Trudeau. He had to put two quarrelling parties together to become a challenger for that office, and he led his reunified party to steadily better results in four straight elections up to 2011. (No other democratic leader has done this – not even Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was elected U.S. president four times, but not with increasing pluralities.)

These are remarkable achievements, and it was an honour to have been of some assistance to him in the earlier stages of his progress. It was partly to help reunite the Conservatives and promote an alternative to what had almost been one-party Liberal rule for a century (73 of the 103 previous years) that Ken Whyte and I founded the National Post in 1999, and I tangibly supported Harper as head of the National Citizens' Coalition, the Canadian Alliance and the reunified Conservatives for many years.

On the other side of the ledger as we approach this election, his government has, with a parliamentary majority, become sclerotically rigid, media-inaccessible, authoritarian and peevish. Strong ministers such as John Baird and the late Jim Flaherty have not been properly replaced, and there is no discernible policy goal or imagination: only the relentless pursuit of extended incumbency. It is a humourless and often paranoid regime where all spontaneity in cabinet or in the

governing caucus in Parliament is stifled and punished.

Harper regularly forbids colleagues from being in contact with people of whom he capriciously disapproves. He will not allow Canada, unlike most serious countries, to have a completely non-partisan, individually conscientious, legislative debate about abortion – essentially the issue of when the rights of the unborn start to rival those of the mother – because it is divisive. He will not respond to Quebec's desire to try to complete the constitutional reforms of Pierre Trudeau and Brian Mulroney, because that, too, is not an easily manageable issue. Leaders are not elected to deal only with what is easy.

Harper claimed the Supreme Court made constitutional change impossible when it determined, as any imbecile knew it would, that the House of Commons could not simply abolish the Senate. His response to the questions surrounding the Senate is not to name any new senators – almost a quarter of its seats are now vacant. The real answer is to name distinguished senators, even if they only undertake to serve for a few years.

While the prime minister's foreign policy is principled and rigorous, he has allowed our military capabilities to atrophy to the point that we are the mouse that roars. No one, except Israel, which can take care of itself and is grateful for verbal support, pays any attention to us, especially not Russian President Vladimir Putin. If Putin were to test our Arctic sovereignty, we would only have native people in kayaks to defend it.

Harper has gagged Parliament (and probably misled it in the Mike Duffy affair), and garrotted his own cabinet and caucus, but has sat as silent and inert as a suet pudding while the courts of the country, incited by the jurisdictionally putschist chief justice, Beverley McLachlin, have steadily assumed the rights of the federal and provincial legislatures under the authority of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Pierre Trudeau promoted the charter as an antidote to endless

dispute over the federal-provincial division of powers, not as a matrix for the emasculation of legislators.

Instead of counter-legislating, or invalidating *ultra vires* decisions (of which there have been many) by invoking the notwithstanding clause, Harper assailed the chief justice's personal integrity, almost the only relevant area where she is invulnerable. He has appointed most of the incumbent Supreme Court justices, and a great many judges on junior federal courts, and has only himself to blame for this jurisdictional chaos. The supreme democratic authority of Parliament is being squandered by a control-addicted prime minister and by the falsely righteous depredations and tinkerings of an unchallenged and usurpatory bench.

The entire reactionary agenda is obnoxious to traditional Canadian respect for rights and due process. The omnibus crime bill imposed arbitrary and draconian sentences (Parliament's one counter-attack on the rapacious judiciary). It built more prisons in response to a declining crime rate, reduced rehabilitative activity and inmate access to families, and is in sum an unrelievedly retrograde, total-immersion plunge into primitivism. Native people will be the chief occupants of the new prisons, which should be repurposed at once as assisted housing. The bill is a disgrace and should be repealed, even by this government if it is re-elected.

Bill C-51 in defence of national security from terrorism has unexceptionable objectives, but dispenses with due process and cannot fail to be abused in a way profoundly offensive to Canadian traditions of respect for individual rights and the rule of law. The leaders of the NDP and the Green party, Thomas Mulcair and Elizabeth May, were magnificent in their opposition, and even Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau's call for greater oversight was reassuring.

The gratuitously self-awarded right to expel dual citizens convicted of terrorist acts from Canadian citizenship, is

another worrisome step toward un-Canadian, if not totalitarian, measures. We can punish our own citizens without expelling them. Trudeau's objections to this mob-pleaser were also impressive.

Finally, to make a major election issue out of a woman wearing a face-covering niqab at a citizenship swearing-in ceremony after privately identifying herself is a shabby act of desperation. (Public security requires that everyone be identifiable when in public, but in particular ceremonies, exceptions can be made for religious reasons as long as the individuals privately prove their identity to officials.) There is no reason for the government to do any of this except pandering to knuckle-dragging authoritarians, in no danger of straying toward the Liberals or NDP. It all incites worried curiosity about what cloven-footed, horned and furry-headed motivational beasts may lurk within Harper's mind.



THE CANADIAN PRESS/ Patrick DoyleZunera Ishaq talks to reporters outside the Federal Court of Appeal in Ottawa on Tuesday, September 15, 2015. A new court ruling means Ishaq, who chooses to cover her face, now has a chance to become a Canadian and vote in the Oct. 19 federal election.

It was, until fairly recently, a good government, but it has not renewed its personnel or its program and has become frightening in its disregard for democratic institutions and the rights of the citizens to whom it must answer and is sworn to serve.

Mulcair has fought an admirable campaign as leader of the opposition. He is not an extremist. But the NDP favours abstention from military action against ISIL, recourse to the eco-lunacy of Kyoto and cap-and-trade, unsustainable increases in public spending and taxes, the effective abolition of the English language in the federal workplace in Quebec, repeal of

the Clarity Act and a direct pitch to Quebec's defeated separatists (though Mulcair's stance on the niqab has been admirable). The NDP can only do limited damage in a provincial government; if elected federally, well-intentioned to the end, it would take this country over Niagara Falls.

Justin Trudeau took the headship of a shattered Liberal party that was widely assumed to be beyond recovery. He has been flexible on public finance, principled on the issue of expulsion from citizenship, wants to fund the armed forces and has stepped with self-possession into a daunting role opposite more experienced adversaries at the head of bigger parliamentary parties. He remains a largely unknown quantity, but he has a very alluring personality, a quick intelligence and an apparently reasonable combination of principle and openness. (He also has his lapses, as in his tasteless and nasty attack on popular former Toronto mayor and recovering cancer patient Rob Ford.)

I wrote here earlier this year that the Conservatives' best chance of re-election was for Harper to follow the example of King, Pearson and Pierre Trudeau, and hand over the leadership of his government to his partisans' choice as a successor; and I wrote that the Conservatives would make a serious mistake if they assumed that Justin Trudeau would make an air-headed ass of himself in an election campaign. Trudeau and Mulcair are right, given Harper's now almost sociopathic personality, to say that they will support each other rather than a Harper minority.

Needlessly, Harper is now likely to follow the route of greater statesmen who didn't know when to leave: Winston Churchill, Konrad Adenauer, Charles de Gaulle, Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl. He was a good prime minister, but it is time to see him off. Trudeau, with a minority, will grow or go. I believe the former, but he has earned his chance. We really cannot have another four years of government by a sadistic Victorian schoolmaster.

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