

Is he a changed man?

The packaging of the Conservative leader is certainly different this time and some positions appear to have softened. But, in essence, he's the same old Stephen Harper

Jan. 7, 2006. 09:53 AM

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Has Stephen Harper really changed?

The Conservatives don't like to put it that way. They would prefer to say that Liberal attempts to demonize their leader are no longer working and that, finally, Canadians are beginning to see the real Harper.



PAUL CHIASSON/CP
Stephen Harper and his wife Laureen Teskey, at a Toronto bar, watch Canada's win over the Russian juniors on Thursday.

Nonetheless, the overarching theme of the increasingly successful Conservative election campaign is one of reassurance.

In both style and substance, Harper is trying to tell voters particularly in Ontario that the man who once called for a "firewall" around Alberta to protect it from the depredations of the rest of Canada has mellowed.

"He's presenting a friendlier face to our fellow citizens in Ontario," says University of Calgary political scientist Barry Cooper, a long-time Harper ally and sometime confidante.

"I think he hasn't changed his mind exactly, but packaged things so the rhetoric seems more friendly. The packaging has changed so it's not as scary."

In effect, Harper's message is: I'm moderate; I'm normal; I'm just like you.

Even the Conservative leader's notorious lack of charisma has been turned to advantage. The Harper of Conservative television ads is hardly exciting. Indeed, he is still very much a stiff.

But the aim is to present him as the kind of stiff to whom Ontarians can relate dull but decent, patriotic without being extravagant, conservative yet pragmatic, a leader in the grand middle-of-the-road tradition.

If the polls are correct, the strategy is working. An EKOS survey in today's *Star* shows Harper's Conservatives leading the Liberals nationally by a healthy five percentage points.

In Ontario, the two parties are now virtually neck and neck.

Yet whether the reality beneath this new packaging has changed is more difficult to sort out.

In some areas, it seems that Harper has shifted ground. Last spring, he stunned his long-time comrades on the political right when he strode into a meeting of the anti-medicare Fraser Institute and announced he could not, under any circumstances, support two-tier health care.

"Everyone was shocked," recalls Cooper, who is also connected with the right-of-centre think tank. "(Even now) I hear people asking 'What's happened to Stephen?'"

Early last month, Harper went a step farther. He pledged fealty not only to universal public health insurance but to the iconic Canada Health Act, the federal statute governing medicare.

"Any (reform) plan must comply with the principles of the Canada Health Act," Harper said. "Anything less is the violation of a sacrosanct commitment that all governments have made to Canadians. We must treat all patients equally for essential health-care services, regardless of ability to pay anything less is un-Canadian. We must maintain a single-payer publicly funded health system anything less is untenable. There will be no private, parallel system."

But in other, key areas he seems to be the same old Harper. His call for Quebec to take on a greater role in certain kinds of international relations is consistent with Harper's long-held view that Ottawa should do less overall, and that in areas of provincial constitutional jurisdiction such as health and education it should butt out entirely.

Exactly how this emphasis on provincial autonomy in matters of health care squares with Harper's new allegiance to a national medicare program is not explained. The answer here may hinge on who is permitted to define which health services are "essential."

Even long-time associates of the Conservative leader are unsure of how new the new Harper is.

"Whether he's changed or is just being politically shrewd, who knows?" says Cooper.

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Barry Cooper, University of Calgary

"Is the tone of moderation real?" asks University of Calgary historian David Bercuson. "I think there was a sharp epiphany after the last election. The people around Harper realized the only way to win power was to transform themselves and their message."

Nonetheless, Bercuson says, Harper appears not to have shifted ground on the three core principles he brought with him from the old Reform and Alliance parties: reduce the scope of the federal government so that it concentrates on issues such as defence; give more money and authority to the provinces; put more emphasis on individual initiative and less on social programs.

Yet, in the new, soothingly revamped Conservative election platform, these core principles are not always obvious.

In 2004, Harper talked of giving provinces a veto over Supreme Court judges. He promised massive, across-the-board income tax cuts and vowed to move to a so-called flat-tax system, in which the poor would pay proportionally as much as the rich.

For child care, he offered a tax cut that would have most benefited well-to-do families and given nothing to the poorest.

None of these proposals was truly radical. In fact, the 2004 Conservative platform was heralded as a bid by Harper to move toward the political centre.

Yet, there was still an edge to the Conservative program that alarmed many voters, particularly in Ontario. Even if they agreed with individual elements, in combination the package was unsettling too decentralist, too market-oriented, too mean.

This time around, Harper has been more careful.

The across-the-board tax cut promise is still official Conservative policy. But so far in this campaign, Harper has chosen not to mention it. Rather, he has reverted to the time-honoured Canadian tradition of piecing off specific groups with specific goodies.

For so-called hockey moms, there is a tax break to partially offset the cost of enrolling children in organized sporting activities.

For urban transit users, there's another tax cut and for seniors a third.

University students unable to afford textbooks would get a tax break. So would fishermen selling their boats to relatives.

Indeed, Harper's only general tax cut pledge to reduce the GST by two percentage points is designed more for political than economic effect.

While it should appeal to a populace that detests this particular tax, it runs counter to the conventional wisdom among mainstream economists and conservatives, who argue that governments should tax consumption more heavily than income in order to make people work harder.

Harper has even promised a new universal social program. He would give families \$100 a month for each child under age 6, to use as the parents see fit.

In essence, he is reinventing a version of the old baby bonus program, the one that former Conservative prime minister Brian Mulroney went to so much trouble to kill.

That's certainly a new wrinkle. The old Stephen Harper used to argue that governments shouldn't cut cheques to bribe voters with their own money but should cut taxes instead.

So far in this campaign, Harper has not explicitly promised changes to the way in which Supreme Court justices are picked.

That may reassure voters who fear the Conservatives are out to tamper with judicial independence and the Charter of Rights. But the idea of having MPs ratify Supreme Court appointments is still official party policy.

And while Harper did weigh in with the party's stern law-and-order agenda this week (heavier sentences; parole reform; stricter measures to deport non-citizens convicted of crimes), he was careful to make his announcement near the downtown site of Toronto's Boxing Day shootout.

'Conservatives should pick their battles carefully and make their arguments skilfully'

Conservative Leader Stephen Harper, in a 2002 newsmagazine column

In effect, Harper's message to Toronto voters, who since 1988 have stubbornly refused to elect a single Conservative to Parliament, was this: Sure, I may seem harsh, but in these times, in this context, maybe you need a government that knows how to get tough. And that, too, is classic Harper. Contrary to popular mythology, he has never been a hidebound ideologue.

Rather, he is a shrewd economic neo-conservative (the Europeans would call him a neo-liberal) who is determined to reduce the role of the state but has always understood that, to be successful, a political leader must know when to seize the moment and when to keep his mouth shut.

"Conservatives should pick their battles carefully and make their arguments skilfully," Harper wrote in a 2002 column for the now defunct newsmagazine, *Alberta Report*. "They should focus on policies where there exists a degree of consensus across conservatives of different stripes."

A year later, he made the same point to another forum of social conservatives.

"Rebalancing the conservative agenda will require careful political judgment," he wrote then. "First, the issues must be chosen carefully. ... Second, we must realize that real gains are inevitably incremental."

In some cases, that means abandoning issues that have no realistic chance of political success. Harper has consistently refused to include an explicit anti-abortion plank in his party platforms.

While the Conservative's official policy document does state that a Harper government would "support legislation defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman," it also says that any vote on such a measure in Parliament would be a free one in which MPs would be permitted to follow their consciences.

More to the point, Harper has absolutely ruled out using Parliament's constitutional power to override any Supreme Court decision that upheld same-sex marriages.

In these cases, it appears that Harper has all but abandoned his socially conservative allies. That too is not new. An economic libertarian by inclination, he's never been at ease with the social conservatives of his movement. His efforts to bridge the gap have been singularly awkward.

In one 2003 essay, he tried to develop a unified field theory that could encompass both wings of conservatism. But it is a curious and bitter piece that avoids issues like abortion and focuses instead on what Harper calls the "moral nihilism" of modern liberals and Canada's abject failure to join the U.S.-led war on Iraq.

"The real enemy is no longer socialism," he wrote. "The real challenge is ... the social agenda of the modern Left, its system of moral relativism, moral neutrality and moral equivalency ... (as evidenced by) the response of modern liberals to the war on terror."

In matters economic and constitutional, Harper is more sure-footed. He is a strict constitutionalist who argues that Ottawa has meddled far too long in areas that rightly belong to the provinces particularly health and education.

To deal with this, the Conservative policy declaration, adopted last March at Harper's urging, calls on Ottawa to shift more money and taxing power to the provinces.

This would certainly be popular among many premiers. Ontario's Dalton McGuinty, for instance, argues his province is being short-changed by the arrangements of Confederation.

But it is a dicier proposition for voters as a whole. To a good many Ontarians, the notion of dismantling the federal state seems vaguely sinister, if not treasonous.

This may explain why, up to now at least, Harper has not campaigned on this plank. It may also explain why New Democratic Party Leader Jack Layton did raise this particular element of Conservative policy.

The spectre of Stephen Harper transferring taxing power to a potentially separatist government in Quebec does not necessarily play very well in, say, Hamilton.

Yet, probably Harper's most far-reaching promise in this campaign has also been the least noticed. That is his pledge to appoint to the Senate only those who have been elected in their home provinces.

It's a simple, easy to accomplish pledge that would give Parliament's moribund second chamber the legitimacy to use the very real powers it already possesses (the Senate has virtually the same legislative authority as the Commons).

Given that most pressure for an elected Senate comes from the West, it's ironic that Harper's proposed reforms, on their own, would disproportionately benefit not Alberta and British Columbia (with 12 senators) but the Atlantic provinces (with 30) and Quebec (with 24).

But as Harper has noted, his plan would at the very least "get the ball rolling" for a new round of constitutional talks.

That could lead to a radically restructured Canada which is vintage Stephen Harper.

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