

▼ CANADIAN POLITICS

Is Harper receiving a free ride?

Liberals are feeling great anger from public



William Neville

Demonize, verb, transitive: to quote a person's unwise or ill-considered words back to him; to expose such a person as foolish, dogmatic or duplicitous.

— Canadian usage, circa 2004.

THIS column has several times observed, most recently last week, that governments tend to defeat themselves, particularly if there is a credible alternative to turn to. This election campaign could be demonstrating the wisdom of the first part of that proposition, but it is seriously testing the second part about the necessity of a credible alternative.

In the pre-election period and right into the first week of the campaign, the Liberals sought to challenge the credibility of the Conservatives by suggesting that their track record, and that of their leader, Stephen Harper, reflected extreme views outside the mainstream of Canadian public opinion and values. To make that point, indeed, they established a website — StephenHarperSaid.ca — which recalled some of Harper's observations over the last few years.

Firewall

Some of these are widely known — his comments about the culture of Atlantic Canada, his notion of building a firewall around Alberta, his ardent enthusiasm for sending Canadian armed forces to Iraq, his dismissal of Canada as “second-tier socialistic country,” and his description of Liberal-held ridings in Western Canada as “dominated by people who are recent Asian immigrants or recent migrants from Ontario” (both, apparently, lesser breeds without the law, as Kipling would have put it.)

One comment that has not been highlighted appears in a piece in the *National Post* after the last election in which he wrote: “The rest of the country has responded by telling us (Reform/Alliance supporters) in no uncertain terms that we do not share their ‘Canadian values.’ Fine. Let us build a society on Alberta values.” This latter is a jewel of pouty petulance and one can almost imagine Harper stamping his foot as he wrote it.

Yet his response to having his words recalled, and that of the Conservative/Alliance, has been to assert that their values are — after all — Canadian and to accuse the Liberals of demonizing Harper. This response suggests that the word “demonize” has taken on a new meaning, a definition of which, above, is



JONATHAN HAYWARD/CANADIAN PRESS ARCHIVES

Conservative Leader Stephen Harper adjusts his headphones as he prepares for a radio interview this week in Toronto.

humbly offered for possible inclusion in the next *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*.

The clear implication of the Conservatives' responses is that the quoted words unfairly distort Harper's meaning or that they are irrelevant.

The problem with this stance is that, willy-nilly, the truth keeps popping out. Last week, in Atlantic Canada, he did not repeat his earlier offending words but neither did he recant them. Rather, he reiterated the point in less inflammatory language but the message was unchanged and the optics remain as they were: an ideologically-driven party leader, from a province whose values are shaped by the enormous wealth generated by oil, telling the rest of the country to shape up to Alberta's values and standards which, historically, have long reflected the influence of American migration and American investment.

That superior understanding of what is good for less-enlightened people was also on display in Winnipeg over the Provencher Bridge last week. And last weekend he said, in effect, that the best way to avoid a firewall being thrown up around Alberta would be through a broad decentralization of power to all the provinces, the case for which, he says, is even stronger now than it was three years ago. Obviously, he is just the man to do it.

In some other policy areas, Harper's approach has tended — and, no doubt, been intended — to be more reassuring but, here too, the Reform/Alliance persona keeps popping out. Last week the Conservatives' official languages critic, Scott Reid, argued in favour of reducing services for minority language groups. Harper promptly removed Reid, saying that Reid's views were personal and did not reflect Conservative policy — which was odd because the Conservatives have not yet enunciated a policy.

Confusing

To remedy that defect, Harper proceeded to invent one on the spot which proved both confused and confusing. That was followed this week by the comments of the party's health critic, Rob Merrifield, calling for third-party counselling for women who are contemplating terminating their pregnancies: the third party, clearly, would be someone other than the woman and her doctor. Again, Harper dismissed this as Merrifield's personal views. The point in both cases, however, is that these highly contentious private opinions (and many others previously enunciated by Reform and Alliance MPs) are not likely to go unexpressed within any prospective Conservative government.

Finally, we have the comments of John Reynolds, former acting leader of the Alliance, speculating that a minority Conservative government could find areas for co-operation with the Bloc Quebecois if, between them, they had a majority in the next parliament. Indeed, they could, was the not-so-guarded reaction of Bloc leaders.

Gilles Duceppe observed that his party's only real interest is Quebec, and that if a Harper government pursued general transfers of power to the provinces, that would benefit Quebec and the Bloc could support it. Another Bloc spokesman, on radio on Tuesday, observed that anything that weakened Canada strengthened the case for Quebec sovereignty and Harper's decentralizing policy was, therefore, supportable.

In short, the Bloc believes that a number of Harper's policies would ultimately promote the Bloc's agenda. The identification of important common ground between Duceppe and Harper does invite consideration of whether Harper is really being demonized or whether, because of the great public anger at the Liberals on the issue of integrity, he is actually getting a free ride.

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Letters to the Editor

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The program was working

What a shame the city of Winnipeg is scrapping the Family Violence Intervention Team!

This innovative prevention program, partnering police with social workers to intervene in high-risk cases of domestic violence, arose in 2001 in the wake of the 911 inquiry.

According to a recent RESOLVE report, the program has met its goals of supporting victims of domestic violence, linking them to services in the community, lessening the likelihood of further violence and reducing the need to use the already overburdened Family Violence Court and police services.

Front-line workers in shelters such as Osborne House know that the program was working. They know it has helped victims end abusive relationships, access services, feel safer and become empowered to make positive changes in their lives.

Without the help of the team, they would not have done so.

Domestic violence takes a huge toll on families, with enormous social and financial implications to our social, educational and health-care systems. The city was doing something good here. In fact, the RESOLVE report recommended expanding the program to cover more areas of the city.

The city has funded the program but clearly it should be cost-shared with the province of Manitoba.

The mandate for family violence services falls within provincial jurisdiction.

We urge both levels of government to sit down together and hammer out a plan to keep this worthwhile program operating.

JUDY WERIER
Board of Directors
Osborne House

American eagle in quagmire

Free Press editorials are consistent and persistent in their pro-Iraq war stance. Your latest editorial of June 1, *Al-Qaida's threat*, condemned Spain for withdrawing its troops from Iraq “as al-Qaida demanded”.

This is not cricket! Firstly, the current Spanish prime minister was just keeping his election promise.

Secondly, 85 per cent of Spaniards were opposed to going to war against Iraq.

War on terrorism, yes; war on Iraq was religiously, morally and legally unjustified, completely unnecessary, and moreover, entirely counter-productive.

The Bushite American eagle landed in Iraq, indeed, with its talons ensnared in a quagmire, its beak covered in blood, and its wings soaked in oil!

Can it, will it, and should it ever extricate itself?

ENG-SEE CHEAM
Winnipeg

Civics classes would bring out voters

The current federal election campaign seems to have pointed up a concern that youthful Canadians are less likely to vote than are older Canadians. What can be done to get them to the polls?

One might approach this concern directly by efforts to persuade young people to go and vote. Or, more substantially, one might work toward exposing young people to the ongoing issues and needs in their communities and how these are resolved or met.

The best way I can think of for realizing the latter objective is to re-establish civics in the high school curriculum. Civics as a subject could embrace the principles of citizenship, its rights and responsibilities. Subject matter could include local, national

and international issues.

It could include many or most community projects already undertaken by students. The principle of civics could give perspective and focus to these studies in the community.

Surely a longer-term result of a sound civics exposure would be a higher vote turnout.

LES WEST
Winnipeg

How is getting facts an obstacle?

Conservative health critic Rob Merrifield suggests that women seeking abortions should get third-party counselling. It is interesting that pro-abor-

tionists are so outraged at what they see as a potential obstacle to abortion access.

How exactly is getting all the information and all the facts an obstacle? What are pro-abortionists worried about: that women will find out about the reality of the dangers of abortion? Or the reality of the growing human being inside them? Or that the women will be offered the alternative of continuing the pregnancy and giving the child up for adoption to one of the hundreds of people looking to provide a loving home to a so-called “unwanted” baby?

True “choice” can only occur when people are presented with all the facts and information; then they can truly make an informed decision.

LISA JOHNSTON
Winnipeg

Doonesbury

BY GARRY TRUDEAU

