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## The Harper Government: True Blue Conservative or Liberal Lite

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## **THE HARPER GOVERNMENT: TRUE BLUE CONSERVATIVE OR LIBERAL LITE<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Has the Canadian ideological landscape changed dramatically since the first Conservative election in 2006? Recently, two distinguished commentators, Darrel Bricker (pollster for Ipsos) and John Ibbitson from *The Globe and Mail*, wrote a book with an evocative title: *The Big Shift* (2013). For them, the 2011 election revealed a great change in the ideological and political nature of Canada. After a Liberal Canada, these authors claim we are witnessing the dawn of a new conservative era, where the western Canadian provinces have become more important in the political economy. Yet, the precise nature of this political or ideological change is not clear. In the first part of this paper we examine the political ideas of Harper's conservatives, and we focus on their conception of the government's, or state's role. In the second part of the paper, we propose to examine these issues in the context of national identity. Finally, in the third part, we will consider the Conservative government against a larger backdrop, that is, the so-called "Anglosphere" countries, in order to better discern the particularities of the Canadian government's brand of conservatism. Finally, we conclude that it is too early to assert that Canada turned to the right.

### **Résumé**

A le paysage idéologique canadienne a considérablement changé depuis la première élection des conservateurs en 2006? Récemment, deux éminents commentateurs, Darrel Bricker (sondeur Ipsos) et John Ibbitson, du *The Globe and Mail*, a écrit un livre avec un titre évocateur: *The Big Shift* (2013). Pour eux, l'élection de 2011 a révélé un grand changement dans la nature idéologique et politique du Canada. Après un Canada libéral, Ces auteurs affirment que nous sommes à l'aube d'une nouvelle

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<sup>1</sup> I'm very grateful to Natalie Boisvert for her help to transform my French thoughts into real English.

ère conservatrice, où les provinces de l'Ouest sont devenues plus importants dans l'économie politique. Pourtant, la nature précise de ce changement politique ou idéologique est pas claire. Dans la première partie de ce papier, nous examinons les idées politiques de conservateurs de Harper, et l'accent mis sur leur conception du État ou au rôle de l'État. Dans la deuxième partie du document, nous proposons que l'examen de ces questions dans le contexte de l'identité nationale. Enfin, dans la troisième partie, l'examinera le gouvernement conservateur dans un contexte plus large, qui est, les pays dits "Anglosphère", afin que mieux discerner les particularités de la marque de conservatisme du gouvernement canadien. Enfin, en concluent qu'il est trop tôt cet actif Que le Canada se tourne vers la droite.

Has the Canadian ideological landscape changed dramatically since the first Conservative election in 2006? In 2013, two distinguished commentators, Darrel Bricker (pollster for Ipsos) and John Ibbitson from *The Globe and Mail*, wrote a book with an evocative title: *The Big Shift* (2013). For them, the 2011 election revealed a great change in the ideological and political nature of Canada. "The 41st Canadian General Election is a fracture in time. Looking back, analysts will consider the years that came before it as part of one era, and the years that came after as part of another" (Bricker and Ibbitson 27). After a Liberal Canada, these authors claim that we are witnessing the dawn of a new conservative era, where the western Canadian provinces have become more important in the political economy. More than a "fracture in time," other political scientists see in this shift a "fracture" in the Canadian ideological spectrum because, in their view, Harper is not just a conservative but a neo-conservative who made "the country unrecognizable" (Gutstein 246). Yet, the precise nature of this political or ideological change is not clear. In this context, several questions surround the ideological orientation of Stephen Harper's Conservative government. Has he broken with traditional Canadian conservatism in favour of American-style neo-conservatism? To what extent does this Conservative government differ from its Liberal-era predecessors? For many intellectuals, the answer is very clear: the present government is the most conservative government in Canadian political history.

But these questions about the nature of the recent evolution of Canadian conservatism are complex; they present many dimensions and involve a wide range of topics. In this paper, we will examine three of them. In the first part, we examine the political ideas of Harper's Conservatives, and we focus on their conception of the government's, or state's role. In the second part of the paper, we propose to examine these issues in the context of national identity. Finally, in the third part, we will consider the Conservative government against a larger backdrop, that is, the so-called "Anglosphere" countries, in order to see how other British and American conservatives see and evaluate Canadian Conservatives, especially Stephen Harper

himself. Finally, we conclude that it is too early to assert that Canada has significantly turned to the right.

### **Harper and the Conservatives: Political Ideas and Conception of State**

At first glance, Stephen Harper may seem little more than a technocrat when it comes to politics. But such an impression is a false one. If Harper is not necessarily an intellectual politician like Michael Ignatieff or Pierre Trudeau, he has appropriated a constellation of ideas that already had some currency around the world, especially those that nourished the conservative revolutions sweeping across the United States and Great Britain in the early eighties. In this regard, we must mention the influence of Friedrich Hayek on Harper's political ideas, as other have also done (Martin 124; Gutstein 13-14). For our purposes, we should establish that, for Hayek, society is a "spontaneous order". Briefly stated, this defines society as a very complex system resulting from the individual decisions of millions people, and this complexity explains why the government cannot regulate economic and social change, nor practice that which Hayek called "planism" in his famous *Road of Serfdom*. Hayek firmly believed that no government could possibly have a comprehensive and accurate view of its own economy. Arguing against Keynesian ideas, he defended free market economics as the only way to prevent unintended consequences of Government actions or, in the worst case, political tyranny (Wapshott).

Harper shares Hayek's rejection of "planism," the idea that society is too complex to be planned by a central government (Boily, Boisvert, and Kermaal). When Harper was the architect of economic policy for Preston Manning's Reform Party, a political entity that had a strong populist dimension, he represented, as we can say, the Hayek-influenced wing of the political movement. According to former *Gazette* journalist William Johnson, we can see Hayek's influence on Harper when he defined the Zero in Three plan, a central plank of the Reform Party's 1993 political platform (Johnson 190-191). The Hayekian and anti-Keynesian dimension of Harper's thought is made plain in the plan, which proposed to end the deficit and to have a balanced budget in the short span of three years. It is also significant that Hayek's influence is also very important for Tom Flanagan, a political scientist that Harper met at the beginning of the 1990s and who later became an important supporter. In his 2009 book, Flanagan recounts his history with Harper, and opens the first chapter by stating the importance of Hayek's thought for the Prime Minister (Flanagan 12-13). Both Harper and Flanagan wrote articles about the evolution of the Canadian body politic, and Flanagan was part of Harper's team when the latter

ran for the leadership of the Canadian Alliance, serving as his campaign manager from 2001 to 2006.

When Stephen Harper became Prime Minister, his own expectations were very high. “I would like to make some significant changes.” (Harper 5) In the first few weeks following his victory, however, Harper had no time to be a “transformational” leader. The new government did not proceed with major transformational initiatives, but there were noticeable changes (Wells 285). Relatively pragmatic, Harper first’s goal was to implement his priorities. Four of these five priorities were simple to sell at election time and easy to implement, as Harper told journalists in Toronto: “The first four of the five things I’ve talked about are things that (...) we can do fairly quickly. And they will all have longer-term impacts.” (282) If it is an exaggeration to say that these policies have led to long term changes, they have made an impact nonetheless. The Goods and Services Tax (GST) cut, for example, considerably reduced the future fiscal capacity of government.

Our first concern here is to determine whether the Conservative government has indeed reduced the size and role of the State, and if so, to what degree. The measure of a government’s “rightness” is all too often reduced to the amount of government spending (for more details, see Boily, *La droite* 190-194). In this regard, Harper’s Conservatives have not proven to be particularly parsimonious. From a purely macro-economic point of view, total expenditure has not been significantly reduced. On the contrary it has risen, as has the size of the public workforce, which has *increased* (by 13%) under their direction (Farney and Malloy 257). These two authors note that there is little evidence of a government plan to break decisively from the Canadian welfare state. Are we to conclude that the Conservative government is content to follow the path well-beaten by previous Liberal governments, especially in terms of public programs? Are the Conservatives nothing more than Liberals Lite, as some conservative pundits in the West like to claim? We must remember that for supporters of the former Reform Party, the now-Conservative Harper did not always appear to be an effective defender of Western interests, a complaint frequently read in the *Western Standard* magazine (see Doll).

Truth be told, the question is more complex than a cursory look at budgetary spending would suggest. In fact, knowing whether or not Western democracies are downsizing the State is still a cause for division among political scientists, many of them preferring to speak of “transformation” instead of “downsizing”. One must show reserve when it comes to interpreting gross numbers, for these may hide deep-rooted tendencies that are not always perceptible at first glance, especially since spending decisions often have long-term effects. A good example of this necessity for interpretive prudence is found in the liberal budget delivered by John Manley in 2003. This budget promised the most important rise in spending since the 1980s, in the order of 20% over 3 years, that is to say 25 billion dollars. Nevertheless, this

fairly considerable increase was drafted within a general dynamic of reduction, because spending represented only 12.2% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2003-2004, whereas spending had reached 16.5% of GDP in 1993-1994 and 19.2% in 1983-1984 (Doern 6). In total, the budget's increase in 2003-2004 occurred within a strong current of diminishing state expenditure, lasting almost two decades. In similar fashion, Farney and Malloy point out that, under the Conservatives, the rise in government spending remained stable at 13% of GDP, albeit with a hike caused by the economic stimulus of 2009.

Also noteworthy (as Parliamentary Budget Officer Kevin Page justly points out in his February 2010 report), is that Conservatives reduced taxes to individuals, families and businesses by 220 billion dollars since 2006 (Chase). The trend toward lower taxes started under the Liberal government of the 1990s, but the conservatives exacerbated it. Starting with their first budget, the Conservatives made clear their intention to modify significantly the federal government's range of action. "Seldom, if ever, has a federal budget explicitly declared its determination to retreat from involvement in the lives of its citizens." (Ibbitson A9)

In the meantime, Canadian politics being what they are, moderation quickly imposes its constraints, and Harper had to show restraint on more than one occasion. For example, Stephen Harper and his team went against their economic orientations – to the dismay of a good number of conservatives – by intervening in the fall of 2010 to prevent Potash Corporation's purchase by BHP Billiton company. Indeed, raw conservative logic would dictate non-intervention on the part of the federal government, but when pressured by the Saskatchewan government (Brad Wall), political pragmatism dictated that the conservatives should appear to protect the Canadian economy against a takeover that could have been judged by a considerable portion of the electorate as a bad decision (Boily, *La droite*).

Another case relates to the 2008 financial crisis and the moderating effect it had on the Conservative's tendency to disengage the State. Casting away his Hayekian leanings, Harper embraced Keynesianism, as confirmed by a former advisor who maintained that, for a time, "we were all Keynesians" (Carson). Despite its obvious Keynesian inspiration, however, Harper insisted that his economic stimulus package was really quite moderate, mostly to reassure fiscal conservatives, and those who advocate the withdrawal of government more generally. He maintained that the increased expenditures, though at first glance considerable, were in fact only modest. In an interview, the Prime minister declared: "The way to do it is to exercise sustained discipline, not engage in radical approaches of program cuts or tax increases, but simply to try and do it within a disciplined, constrained spending growth pattern." (Campbell A9) After 2008, the Conservative Government's main goal, especially for former Finance minister Jim Flaherty, has been to balance the books. For the Conservative government, it has become critical to balance the budget in time for the next federal election (2015) because it will reaffirm the

Party's fundamental economic conservatism despite its brief Keynesian turn in 2008-2010.

There are other dimensions to the conception of the state, beyond economics, that should be touched upon. In philosophical terms, one might say that Prime Minister Stephen Harper has a Hobbesian concept of the State (Nadeau). Harper and other conservatives appear to share Hobbes's idea of the State as demonstrating a strong and inflexible will as it defends the collectivity against outside and inside "enemies". Firstly, at the national level, the Conservative Government has a strong agenda with regard to law and order. In this domain, the Government follows quite narrowly the Canadian conservative agenda and that of the former Reform Party (Lee 224). Secondly, at the international level, Harper has taken some strong positions, notably against Russian President Vladimir Putin. As for Israel, the Canadian Conservative Government remains an unwavering ally of the Jewish State (Barry).

Turning now to his style of leadership, Stephen Harper clearly favours firmness over compromise. For example, we know that Stephen Harper and the Conservatives think that leaders of the old Progressive Conservative Party (especially Robert Stanfield and Joe Clark) were "not tough enough" (Flanagan 12-13). Harper and his team want to project a different image, unlike that of former leaders, whom they perceive as weak. Many conservative activists, including Harper, believe that intense party discipline is an absolute necessity for electoral victory. Paradoxically, to obtain a parliamentary majority, they must demonstrate enough flexibility and moderation to attract at least some of the voters who have so far been unwilling to support them. This compromise has sometimes been a difficult exercise for Harper's team.

In this regard, the Conservatives have not slowed but rather accelerated a trend of Canadian politics, that of increased centralization of power within the Prime Minister's Office. Indeed, lack of government transparency has become an important problem. Movement toward centralization began in the 1970s (Savoie 129-130), so it is certainly not a creation of the Conservative government, but the Conservatives have done nothing to reverse this trend.

## **Transforming Identity: History and Religious Freedom**

If our analysis looks beyond the conception or the importance of government, it becomes apparent that the Conservatives have, throughout their mandate, brought forward a number of measures bringing non-negligible changes to the overall architecture of the Canadian political system. This is particularly clear with some proposals that were meant to transform the conception of Canadian identity.

The conservatives have in fact begun work of a different nature with respect to defining national identity. In this regard, the changes made to immigration policy, though they are primarily economic, do possess a significant dimension concerning identity (Belkhodja). At the hands of Minister Jason Kenney, architect of immigration and citizenship initiatives, the Conservatives have been quite active in immigration policies. On the one hand, the Conservatives have successfully overcome the image, mostly inherited from the earlier Reform Party, that they were an anti-immigration party (Bradford and Andrew 273). This allowed them to court the ethnic-minority vote. Unlike to the Republican right of the U.S., Canada's Conservatives have established strong links with ethnic minorities. On the other hand, the Conservatives have sought to redefine the image of multiculturalism, insisting on its integrative character and on the necessary embrace of Canadian values by immigrants, thus leaving aside the promotion of diversity that had characterized Liberal policies. As Jason Kenney said in June 2010, "I want the newly arrived to integrate themselves into our proud and democratic Canadian society." (274) In doing so, the Conservatives can leave their mark by insisting on the necessary convergence of Canadians and the newly arrived. This addresses the concerns, oft-repeated in recent years, that Canadian citizenship has become "watered down," so to speak (Cohen, chapter 5). Immigration policy may in fact be the area where the Conservatives have most successfully addressed the concerns of their right-leaning supporters, of any and all stripes. Many have spoken of a "revolution" in matters of immigration, especially with regard to the minister's tightening of lax refugee legislation (Bissett A10).

The Conservatives have also brought forward a number of measures to champion a new, more conservative conception of Canada. Indeed, for several decades now, the Conservatives have denounced the Liberal conception of Canada, which, they say, gives birth to the country in the 1960s. Former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker was among those who, beginning in the 1970s, vigorously criticized Pierre Trudeau's Liberals for casting aside the country's past (24). Such a critique of Canada's amnesia toward its own past, especially its military history, was particularly forceful in conservative circles by the end of the 1990s, when well known historian Jack Granatstein sounded the alarm with his book *Who Killed Canadian History*, lamenting his fellow Canadians' apparent lack of a historical memory (Cohen 51).

It is within this context, that of a re-appropriation of Canada's more distant historical roots – going as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century – that the Conservatives have been most forceful in promoting their conception of national identity. Toward this goal, the Conservatives sought change through what some historians refer to as the "politics of memory" (Frenette). For instance, through measures such as adding the prefix *Royal* to the Navy and Air Force, replacing two paintings by artist Alfred Pellan with a portrait of the Queen in the Foreign Affairs offices, or the heavily



promoted commemoration of the War of 1812, the Conservative government has recalibrated Canada's national story with a more traditional character. As a result, the Conservatives have at once distanced their Canada from that of the Liberals, with its emphasis on the post-1945 era, and by invoking to Great Britain historical and contemporary ties parted ways with the United States.

This change in direction has been welcomed by the many who, as has been mentioned earlier, called for a new appreciation of Canadian history. Jack Granatstein, for instance, applauded the Prime Minister's increased regard for history: "More positively, the Harper government has taken some substantial interest in commemorations." (Granatstein 80) Although he disagrees with Harper's insistence on the "royal" dimension of Canada, Granatstein praises the prime minister's frequent appeals to history in his speeches, and was particularly impressed with the commemoration of the War of 1812, which, in his opinion, promoted patriotism while showing appropriate restraint in the "We beat the Americans!" department (80-81). Rudyard Griffith, a founding member of the Dominion Institute, shows the same appreciation. For many years, Griffith and the Dominion Institute have challenged "the prevailing social-history" (Gutstein 223), and have called for one that would deliberately move away from what Griffith disparagingly calls the Liberal's "three pillars" of Canadian identity: peacekeeping, healthcare, and the threat of Quebec separatism (Carlson A5). He seems to believe that these changes are the result a concerted effort from the Harper government, reporting conversations with ministers who were admittedly "very conscious" of a new direction taken by their government in terms of national identity. If the government's efforts seem to have been warmly received by a notable portion of the Anglo-Canadian intelligentsia, other historians have strongly denounced this attempt to create a "new" national identity (Frenette). Finally, it is worth mentioning that the emphasis on Canada's British character helps to silence the many critics who claim that Harper's conservatives align too closely with the United States. We shall return to this idea in the third section of the paper.

This perceived alignment with the United States brings forth another difficult challenge faced by the Conservatives under Harper, that is, the perceived affinities between a faction of the party and U.S.-style Christian Evangelical. The Conservatives have all too often been accused of associating themselves too closely with certain religious groups, especially the Evangelical Christians, who, while not the most demographically significant group, are known to be very active politically. In this regard, Marci MacDonald has been perhaps their fiercest critic. Her book, *The Armageddon Factor*, joins a growing chorus warning that Canadian conservatism is drifting toward a form of politics mired in religiosity, similar to that found in the United States (MacDonald).

Nevertheless, and without disputing the importance of social conservatives under Stephen Harper's mantle, the political scientist James Farney has shown that

this type of conservatism, on either side of the border, has not been effective in terms of actually influencing public policy, for instance with regard to same-sex marriage:

‘Social conservatives’ rise to prominence in the face of adverse social trends and policy defeats has been predicated on gaining respectability and visibility within party organizations and then using those organizations to promote their agenda. This they have achieved in Canada and the United States, but their limited ability to change public policy shows the limits of their influence in the bureaucracy and, often, the judiciary. (Farney 133)

In Canada, the ability of social conservatives to influence the direction of public policy is not strong. For example, the debate on abortion, while often invoked, has not been effectively reopened despite persistent efforts from certain corners. At the same time, the Conservative government has found other, less controversial ways to mollify their activist religious supporters, such as the Office of Religious Freedom, inaugurated on February 19th, 2013, two years after it was announced. According to John Baird, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, this office is now a priority for Canadian foreign policy:

Opened on February 19, 2013, the Office has been created to promote freedom of religion or belief as a Canadian foreign policy priority. The Office will be an important vehicle through which Canada can advance fundamental Canadian values, including freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law worldwide. The Office will advance policies and programs that support, promote and defend the right to freedom of religion. Canada is uniquely placed to protect and promote religious freedom worldwide. Ours is a pluralistic country of many cultural heritages and religions. But Canadians and people around the world share a common humanity. As such, it is our common duty to defend the rights of the afflicted and give voice to the voiceless. (Baird)

In fact, the creation of this office (for a relatively modest 5 million dollars) fulfills a triple objective for the Conservative government: first, it orients foreign policy in a direction which is their own, second it promotes multiculturalism and Canadian values and third, it defend religious values abroad. It would appear as if the Conservatives have understood that religious issues are dangerously hot topics in the Canadian political arena, but protecting religious freedom abroad is much harder to criticize, especially if the office appears willing to defend every religion, as it has been suggested so far. Some observers, usually critical of the Conservatives, have actually applauded the government’s initiative in this matter (Den Tandt A19). The creation of this office shows how the Conservatives appropriate select symbols of Canadian identity, in this case the country’s role as an “honest broker” on the international scene, to re-cast these symbols in a Conservative light.

At this point, we have highlighted two broad areas where Stephen Harper's government has endeavoured to shift Canadian policies toward the right, but not without significant moderating influences. First, policies clearly intended to reduce the State's power to spend were enacted, yet these were slowed or even thwarted by economic and political realities. Second, decisive steps taken to reframe the national historical narrative seem not to have produced significant results, perhaps because this type of transformation can only happen over a long period of time (Frenette). As we have seen, it is difficult to ascertain to what degree profound transformations (political and identity-related) have actually taken place. To this end, additional insights may be obtained by examining how Stephen Harper's Conservatives are perceived from outside the country.

### **Stephen Harper and the *anglosphère*: some views from the US and the UK**

Evaluating the actions of a Prime Minister or the nature of a political party is always difficult. In the present case, a comparative glance could prove useful, especially if we consider how other Conservatives view the Canadian conservative movement. This is not without some challenges, if only because Canada as a country is not frequently included in comparative studies, such that it can be difficult to determine how this country is viewed from without.

For some conservative commentators in the UK, Stephen Harper is the best among leaders of the right. Michael Taube, a former speechwriter for Prime Minister Stephen Harper and a contributor to the *Washington Times*, writes: "When we think of Canada, I strongly doubt that the first thing to pop into most people's heads would be 'bastion of political conservatism.' Yet in this liberal country, Prime Minister Stephen Harper has carved out an impressive reputation as one of the world's most successful centre-right leaders" (Taube 28). Taube wrote this article for a British conservative journal, *Standpoint*, and we can reasonably assume that the author wrote this very positive article at the behest of the journal's editors. Taube explains that Harper was faced with the challenge of altering how conservative philosophy was perceived. "Harper's quest was therefore to shift conservatism from being perceived as a long-standing negative philosophy into a positive force for change" (29). More generally, the article presents Harper in a very positive light.

This was also the case when British Prime Minister David Cameron visited Canada in 2011. On this occasion, Cameron made an important speech before the Canadian Parliament. This speech bears closer analysis because it shows the political affinities of both leaders. Indeed, the British prime minister painted a very flattering portrait of both Canadian conservatism and the country's role in the

world. Opening with a quote by Brian Lee Crowley, a Canadian conservative, Cameron asserted that “there is a strong argument that the 21st Century could well be the Canadian Century. In the last few years, Canada has got every major decision right.” (Cameron) As a matter of fact, contrary to many other countries hit by the economic downturn of 2008 whose financial sectors were sorely tested, Canada emerged relatively unscathed thanks to its robust banking system and the soundness of its financial institutions. But, according to Cameron, Canada also serves a model to follow for its moral and political probity: “Canada displays moral clarity and political leadership.” Further, Cameron praised Canada for the role it played in both world wars, relating these to present-day conflicts such as the struggle against radical Islam: “We’ve all suffered from Islamist extremism.” Drawing on the examples of Afghanistan and Lybia, Cameron reminded his audience that Canada and the UK are fighting side by side: “In Afghanistan, Canadian and British forces have fought alongside each other in the South in the very toughest part of the country, where few other nations would follow.” From Cameron’s point of view, “Canada is as vital and influential a military partner as it has ever been.”

This commonality of visions is also shared, according to Cameron, when it comes to explaining the root cause of the grievous world recession, that is to say, that the fundamental problem of the world economy is a problem of debt. Cameron asserts that Harper, like him, has a correct view of this problem:

I believe that Prime Minister Harper and I share the same analysis of what is wrong and what needs to be put right. The world is recovering from a once in 70 years financial crisis and is suffering from debts not seen in decades. This is not a traditional, cyclical recession, it’s a debt crisis. When the fundamental problem is the level of debt and the fear of those levels, then the usual economic prescriptions cannot be applied. It is not simply a question of using conventional fiscal and monetary levers to stimulate growth until confidence and normal economic activity returns. When households have borrowed too much, when banks are shrinking their balance sheets and rebuilding their capital and when governments are accumulating huge stocks of debt, the power of those traditional levers is limited. The economic situation is much more dangerous and the solution for most countries cannot be simply to borrow more.

The speech expressed a political kinship between Canadian and British Conservatives, at least in terms of economic and foreign policy, that went far beyond the usual politeness accorded a visiting head of state. “The relationship between Britain and Canada is deep and strong. (...) We are two nations, but under one Queen and united by one set of values. Let us fear no foe as we work together for a safer, better world.”

Prime Minister David Cameron is not the only Englishman to have a good impression of his Canadian homologue. For some Britons, Harper, as the most

effective and successful among a new crop of political personalities, embodies the model conservative leader. As Richard Adams wrote, in his blog:

Canada escaped the worst of the crisis, thanks to its sensibly regulated banking sector and its natural resources. As a result, Harper just keeps getting lucky, the prototype of the current crop of charisma-free middle managers that dominate leadership in Anglo-Saxon democracies. Harper's workmates are Britain's David Cameron, New Zealand's John Key and Australia's Julia Gillard – all of whom are the heads of minority governments and all of whom stress managerial competence. But none of the quartet can deliver a speech worth crossing a road to hear.

Harper may not cast a particularly inspiring figure, but, among this new genre of political leaders, he has been one of the most successful; by default, perhaps, but also because of his electoral and economic achievements. The Canadian conservative movement thus becomes, in the eyes of many British conservatives, the model to emulate. Now, could we find the same kind of appreciation among Conservatives in the United States?

The U. S. situation is more complicated than the British case. First, in Canadian political discourse, the claim is often made that Harper's government embodies a variant of neo-conservatism fashioned after its American counterpart (Boily, "Un néoconservatisme"). Many critics seem to believe that Prime Minister Harper, like former American President Ronald Reagan, has "ice water for blood" (Teles 87). After six years of minority government and three of majority, many observers continue to view Harper as a secretive prime minister and a real threat to Canadian democracy (Smith). In this view, Harper's brand of neo-conservatism would in time destroy traditional Canadian conservatism. Surreptitiously, these critics maintain while hiding his true neoconservative colours, Harper hopes eradicate the influence of the venerable Conservative party from the Canadian political landscape. To be sure, accusations of this type have been less frequent in recent years. They have been replaced by other, no less virulent aspersions, mostly aimed at the allegedly authoritarian and anti-democratic character of Conservative Party policies (see the section 1 of this paper). Truth be told, it would appear that Stephen Harper has kept at a fair distance from American influence. For example, as mentioned in the previous section, we could argue that the 1812 commemorative ceremonies also signalled a symbolic disengagement from the United States. One must bear in mind that, at that time, the Conservative government promoted the idea that Canada had formed its own identity, distinct from that of the American "invader," when all Canadians, Anglophones, Francophones, and Natives, built a common front against the enemy.

While it would be wrong to speak of a break or a rupture, there has been a certain degree of withdrawal from the U.S., mostly due to evident disillusionment

with American capabilities. This is especially apparent with the Keystone XL pipeline. For Canadian Conservatives, particularly in Alberta where the oil sands or tar sands are fundamental to economic prosperity, building the Keystone XL pipeline is a top priority. In September 2013, before a New York audience, Prime Minister Harper said: “My view is that you don’t take no for an answer. (...) We haven’t had that [no from the U.S.], but if we were to get that, that won’t be final. This won’t be final until it’s approved and we will keep pushing forward” (Slater). For Harper and the Albertan economic establishment, these proceedings have been stressful, as Obama delayed again and again his decision about the future of Keystone XL. More fundamentally, the relationship between Stephen Harper and Barack Obama is far from the close connection that existed between former Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and President Ronald Reagan, and, if Obama were to nix the Keystone XL pipeline, the Canada-U.S. relationship could cool considerably.

Despite this difficult relationship, some American commentators believe the Republicans can and must take lessons from Harper, especially after the 2008 Canadian federal election: “The triumph of Stephen Harper and his Conservative Party in Canada’s general election offers some hope for conservatives in the United States. Harper is a very bright guy. He is also a relatively young and articulate fellow, like Eric Cantor and Bobby Jindal” (Walker). In other words, Harper’s electoral success provides, so to speak, a ray of hope for Republicans. More generally, Obama’s Republican adversaries view Harper quite positively.

Following his May, 2011 electoral victory, the *Wall Street Journal* wrote a very positive paper urging Republicans to take lessons from him: “The lesson of Mr. Harper’s victory is that well-implemented conservative economic policies can attract and keep a political majority. America’s Republicans might want to send a visiting delegation and study up” (Heaven). For more recent examples, we can point to some articles from the Conservative journal *Commentary*, where Jonathan S. Tobin wrote about Harper:

Under Harper’s leadership, Canada has assumed its rightful role as an American partner rather than a resentful smaller neighbor. Canadians tend to pride themselves on not being Americans, and Harper is often chided by his opponents for being too close to the United States as well as being Israel’s most faithful foreign friend. But one hopes that Canadians will recoil from a would-be prime minister who is more concerned with understanding the enemies of the West than in fighting them. (Tobin)

Another author, Michael Medved, wrote in November 2013 that the recipe for electoral success with the [American] Jewish electorate is to follow the Canadian Conservative model (Medved). The most recent example of this positive reaction to Harper comes from Chris Christie, Republican Governor of New Jersey, and

potential contender for the Presidential election (2016). During a trip to Ottawa (December 5, 2014), Christie said “I’ve admired him from afar and he’s even more impressive up close than he is from afar. (...) He’s done a very good job not only in Canada but abroad” (Associated Press). Of course, Christie’s trip was about much more than praise for Harper. For Christie, a visit to Canada and Alberta was a significant strategic move, because establishing a good relationship with the Tar Sands province poses a direct challenge to his Democratic adversaries.

We can say, therefore, that even though Canada is only a small blip on the American or British radar screen, we do find certain moments where Canadian Conservatives received good press for their success on the Canadian political scene.

### **Conclusion: The Conservative Turn: Has Canada Gone Right?**

Much discussion has taken place on whether or not Canada has shifted “right,” notably with the recent book mentioned in the introduction (*The Big Shift*, 2013). For the moment, it is too early to answer categorically this question of a turning point to the right. Instead of claiming that Canada has shifted to the right, it is perhaps more appropriate to speak of the re-built and reunified conservative base that successfully rode its new-found coherence to the seat of power. Viewed in this way, Canada has shifted not so much to the right, but toward a newly-attractive Conservative party. We find, particularly among Stephen Harper’s Conservatives, a determination to stand out, or rather to set themselves apart from the Liberals and also from the Left, as well as to overcome what Harper and Tom Flanagan called, in the middle of the 1990s, “the conservative political disarray” (Flanagan and Harper 168). Given the rise of “Reform” regionalism and the fragmented state of the conservative movement following the defeat of Kim Campbell in 1993 (an electoral tsunami to 2 MPs down from 156), the fact that Harper successfully reunited the conservative camp is, in itself, quite a feat. This in itself must be counted as a significant achievement for the right-leaning politics in Canada. From this point of view, it is a political success, because the Conservatives could once again compete electorally with the Liberals, whose fabled dominance has been trending downward for three consecutive elections in the 2000s (Leduc 541-542).

Three years after the May 2011 general federal election, Harper’s Conservative coalition remains relatively solid and many electors appear at least to have embraced “Harperism”. In the meantime, it is too early to accept the *Big Shift* thesis, because since May 2013 trust in Government has been considerably weakened by a scandal involving the Senate. One pollster wrote: “What we know empirically is that 2013 was a very bad year for Stephen Harper and the Conservatives (...).” (Hannay) In addition, the arrival of a new leader for the Liberal Party, Justin

Trudeau, son of former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, has also diminished support for the Conservatives, who now poll consistently below the Liberals.

More significantly, we can argue that despite the Conservatives' economic and political accomplishments (section one) and their attempt to change national identity or history (section two), Canada is still a far cry from a Conservative Country. On the contrary, some polls suggest that Canadians remain resolutely "centrists." Such is the conclusion, for example, of a poll from the Manning Center, a think-tank with the mission to "Build Canada's Conservative Movement." Each year, the Manning Center publishes an annual poll or barometer indicating the political orientation of the Canadian population. The poll's most recent results confirm that Canadians are politically "centrists." More precisely, 52% describe themselves as centrist against 14% who align with the Left and 13% with the Right (*2014 Manning* 1). Should this poll be correct, it is a strong indication that Canada is not yet a new right country. In this context, we cannot quite assert that Canada has veered to the right, or at any rate, not as much as Harper and the Conservatives should hope. At the very least, we must wait until after the 2015 elections for a more accurate answer.

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