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Stephen Harper: The making of a prime minister

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He is a lion in autumn, weaker than in his prime, but still a force of nature. He faces his fifth, and perhaps final, test as national leader. But in a way, the result won't matter. Whether Stephen Harper wins or loses the general election of October 19 is moot. He has already reshaped Canada. And Canada will not easily be changed back.

He has made the federal government smaller, less intrusive, less ambitious. He has made Canada a less Atlantic and a more Pacific nation.

He has brought peace to a fractious federation. Under his leadership, Canada speaks with a very different voice in the world. He has also given us a very different politics – more intensely partisan, more ideological, more polarizing. This, too, is unlikely to change, now that people are used to it.

And then there is Harper himself. Slow to trust and quick to take offence, brooding and resentful at times, secretive beyond reason, perhaps the most introverted person ever to seek high office in this country, he has nonetheless defeated a plethora of challengers to give Canada its first ever truly conservative government, with profound consequences for the country. He has brought the West for the first time fully into the life of the nation, while making his Conservatives the only conservative party in the developed world broadly supported by immigrants. And he has lasted a decade in office, no mean feat in this democracy or any other.

But despite those many years in the public eye, who he is, and why he does what he does, remains elusive– even though such an understanding is crucial for voters who may be unsure of how to cast their ballot. How did Steve Harper become Stephen Harper?

THE YOUNG HARPER

If, as essayist and editor B.K. Sandwell claimed, “Toronto has no social classes / only the Masseys and the masses,” the Masseys and their friends went to “Trins.” Bishop John Strachan founded the college in 1851 in bitter opposition to the Upper Canadian government, which had decided that King's College, which Strachan had also founded, should be secular rather than Anglican. From that day onward, Trinity has fostered a reputation for exclusivity and exclusion. Small, cloistered, its architecture and mores a self-conscious imitation of Oxford or Cambridge, the college educated the sons and daughters of the elite, many of whom had already submitted their children to the academic excellence and social terrors of private boarding schools.

“We are the salt of the earth, so give ear to us,” the men and women of college loved to proclaim in their fake Oxbridge accents:

No new ideas shall ever come near to us!

Orthodox! Catholic!

Crammed with divinity!

Damn the dissenters, Hurrah for old Trinity!

Students wore black academic gowns. At the men’s residence, jacket and tie were required for dinner. The food was appalling, but you could leave your coffee cup pretty much anywhere you liked, and someone would silently pick it up and return it to Strachan Hall.

The rituals of the college were bizarre, but proudly held. They included “pouring out,” in which second-year students would forcibly eject from the dining hall any man of college who annoyed his neighbours at the table; “deportations,” in which second-year students would kidnap first-year students and leave them stranded, sometimes naked, in a park, at Centre Island, or even in another town; and Episkopon, in which the ghost of Bishop Strachan visited the men and women of the college to chastise them for their erring ways, through skits and songs composed by a committee that sought to push the boundaries of sexual – especially homophobic – humour.

Initiation was hell. Days of drinking and hazing culminated in the Cake Fight, in which the students of first year would seek to push through a phalanx of second-year students guarding the gate at Henderson Tower.

Though the tower protected the sophomores, the freshmen were drenched in an indescribably foul concoction from the roof above that dedicated students had been preparing all summer. It typically included beer, urine, scraps from the kitchen, yeast, and anything else that could be found and then left to ferment in the heat. Only after surviving this misery were freshmen and [fresh]women entitled to don their gowns.

Trinity also offered an excellent education, and the camaraderie of a small college filled with exceptional students. Rather than eating cafeteria-style, the students were served dinner, which brought the entire college together each night (the men at Trinity; the women at their own residence, St. Hilda’s), and the discussions and debates this fostered could be the best part of a student’s education. But a shy freshman arriving from a suburban, middle-class background, educated at public schools, already suspicious of the Tory descendants of the Family Compact with their snobbish disdain for anyone Not Like Us, could be traumatized by such an environment.

Steve Harper lasted two weeks.

Or maybe three. No one can remember exactly; this isn’t a part of his life that Harper prefers to talk about. But he was clearly not happy at Trinity. He was put off by the huge, impersonal classes

of the University of Toronto. He didn't like the professors who warned the students that the person sitting beside them would be gone by Christmas. He didn't like the pretensions of many of the students. He didn't like any of it.

Robert Harper does not believe that Harper's decision to quit university was sudden; in fact, he believes it was something that had been brewing for more than a year, that Steve didn't know what he wanted to do with his life and wasn't prepared to commit to university until he had answered that question.

But whatever was going through his mind in the months leading up to his decision to quit, the fact remains that in his first encounter with the Upper Canadian elite – the young men and women who would go on to run the businesses, lead the political parties, manage the bureaucracies, and shape the arts and academies of English Central Canada – Stephen Harper decided he wanted none of it, or them. He could have tried to fit in to this new world, which was closed but less impermeable than in the past, but instead he fled from it. His decision to reject that world, and his sense of exclusion from it, would shape his life and his politics. It marked him.

It also produced a deep ambivalence toward academia that would shape the next decade of his life. It would be three years before he returned to university – an eternity for someone that young and that intelligent – and he would drop in and out of school repeatedly during his years as a graduate student. All his life, Stephen Harper has resisted taking orders from other people. Starting with professors.

Or maybe starting with his dad. The news that he was quitting university did not go down well with Joe and Margaret. They couldn't believe their ears. Their eldest son had always worked so hard and done so well. How could he have decided to quit, and so quickly?

Joe had insisted that the boys pay their own university tuition, to instill the notion that a degree was a means to an end, and the end was a good job. In high school, Steve had worked as an office boy in a provincial government office, and as a summer clerk at the local LCBO to help pay for his tuition and books. If he wasn't going to go to university, then he was going to have to earn a living. But doing what? He was 19 and had only a high school education, but he didn't care. The one thing that both Steve and his father agreed on was that he needed to get a job.

Gordon Shaw was overseeing offices for Imperial Oil in both Edmonton and Calgary. He got a call from Joe Harper, who confessed he had a problem with his son. "We can't get along with him at home," Shaw recalls his friend saying. Was there a job for Steve out there? There was – for an office clerk, in the Edmonton office. Shaw extended the offer. Steve took it immediately. At that point in their relationship, it appears, both Joe and Steve needed to put a couple of time zones between them.

At certain crucial times in his life, Stephen Harper has displayed a tendency to prefer flight over fight. If a situation becomes untenable, he simply abandons the situation, rather than trying to change it to his advantage.

Over the years, Harper learned to curb this tendency, but he hadn't yet when he was 19. The same week he quit school, he flew west to a new city, a new life, and a new job – though not much of one.

Steve Harper was on his own.

TEMPER

There are disagreeable aspects to Stephen Harper's personality. He is prone to mood swings. He can fly off the handle. He goes into funks, sometimes for long periods. He is suspicious of others. The public is aware of these traits mostly through what's written and reported in the media. In public, Harper is almost invariably calm, measured, and careful in what he says and how he says it. Yet none of us, watching him, have any difficulty believing that this closed, repressed personality is capable of lashing out from time to time. We all get the vibe. His personality also comes out in the tactics that the Conservative Party uses against its enemies, both perceived and real – which are, in a word, ruthless.

As with most of us, Harper's character flaws are the reverse side of his character strengths: One would not exist without the other. He has been Prime Minister for a decade not despite these qualities but because of them.

The most cited characteristic of Stephen Harper is his legendary temper.

He can descend into rages, sometimes over trivial things, at other times during moments of crisis. A former aide to Harper recalls a time during the 2004 election campaign when things suddenly started to go very badly for the Conservatives, for reasons we'll examine later. Harper was on the campaign bus, in Quebec, leading a conference call with senior campaign staff back at headquarters in Ottawa. "He was very, very angry," the former aide recalls. "It was: 'We are fucking going to do this, and you are fucking going to do that and I want to see this fucking thing done right now.' And then he paused and asked: 'And why does nothing happen around here unless I say 'fuck'?' "

Harper's temper manifests itself in different ways. Some days, he just gets up on the wrong side of the bed. Other times, he flies off the handle when confronted with bad news. That's when the decibel level goes through the roof and the f-bombs start flying. Harper's reaction when he was told in April, 2008, that the RCMP had raided Conservative Party headquarters in connection with the in-and-out affair, carrying out boxes of material past the TV cameras, was wondrous to behold.

But when Harper is really angry at you, he's very calm. He looks you straight in the eye and tells you how you've failed him, and if you are a faithful follower, you simply want to die. The state beyond that is even worse. He simply cuts you out. He doesn't speak to you, doesn't reply to your messages, freezes you out of meetings. At this point, you should be pursuing a new career opportunity.

Another of Harper's less attractive qualities is a perceived lack of loyalty toward others. One-time political adviser Tom Flanagan points out that Harper has betrayed or estranged many in the

conservative movement who were at one time senior to him – Joe Clark, Jim Hawkes, Brian Mulroney, Preston Manning. This, Flanagan believes, is the product of Harper’s need to dominate whatever environment he is in. “I think he has this very strong instinct to be in charge,” he said. “He really wants to be the alpha figure, and he’s achieved that. So part of that is to dispose of anyone who might be considered to be a rival in some sense or another.”

Flanagan also asserts that “there is a huge streak of paranoia in Stephen. And he attracts people who have a paranoid streak. And if you don’t have one to begin with, you develop it, because you’re constantly hearing theories.” At its root, “looking back, there’s a visceral reluctance to trust the motives of other people,” Flanagan concludes. “He often overcomes his initial suspicions and will sign on to other people’s ideas. But the initial response is always one of suspicion.” Flanagan believes Harper is prone to depression. “He can be suspicious, secretive, and vindictive, prone to sudden eruptions of white-hot rage over meaningless trivia,” he wrote in 2014, “at other times falling into week-long depressions in which he is incapable of making decisions.”

Concerning Flanagan’s contention that Harper is prone to paranoia or depression, [one of his oldest friends, John] Weissenberger simply replies: “Bullshit.” Harper does not suffer from depression. Depression is a clinical condition that may be unrelated to external events. When Harper goes into a funk, there’s always a good reason. Those funks can be long and deep, combining introspection with sulking with a sudden loss of self-confidence. But he always comes out of them, and over the years he’s done an increasingly better job of keeping them under control.

CONTROL

In early February, 2006, Derek Burney sat across a desk from Harper, who was reading the mandate letters Burney had prepared for the new cabinet. Each letter was three pages. The first reminded the new minister of the Conservatives’ governing priorities: tax reduction, the child care benefit, the Accountability Act, reducing patient wait times, criminal-justice reform. The second page outlined the minister’s particular responsibilities. The third page contained what Burney called the “mother of God” paragraphs, reminding the minister of his or her duty to act with integrity, to avoid conflicts of interest, to adhere to directives coming from the Prime Minister’s Office, and to be prepared for instant dismissal if the minister committed any act that tarnished the image of the government, the party, or, especially, the Prime Minister. Burney had routinely prepared these documents when he was chief of staff to Brian Mulroney, who paid little attention to them. Now Burney sat silently as Harper went through each letter, line by line. By the time he had finished, the pages were festooned with changes. “I don’t agree with this,” Harper explained to Burney, or, “This isn’t in our election platform.” Burney shrugged. “It’s your government.” Yes it was. This is how Stephen Harper would govern for the next decade.

Some leaders like to micro-manage; others prefer to delegate. Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses. But Harper’s determination to grasp all of the levers, and even the widgets, of the federal government is matched by an equal determination to control the flow – or rather, the trickle – of information coming out of the government. Bureaucrats are prohibited from speaking to reporters. Scientists are prohibited from releasing the results of their research. Ambassadors have been ordered to obtain permission from the Centre before representing Canada in meetings. (The mantra from the PMO, as diplomats bitterly put it, is: Do nothing without instructions. Do

not expect instructions.) Access to Information requests are routinely held up for so long that by the time the information is released, it's no longer of any use, and the pages are mostly blacked out in any case.

Although they are in fact separate issues, this general air of secretiveness gets mixed up with the Conservatives' willingness to demonize opponents. In fact, the Tories don't have opponents; they have enemies. The Leader of the Liberal Party is an enemy. Judges who strike down their legislation are enemies. Union leaders are enemies. Authors and other artists who criticize the Conservatives are enemies. Journalists who cast a more-than-occasional critical eye on the government are enemies. And toward his enemies Stephen Harper bars no holds.

The Conservatives' autocracy, secretiveness, and cruelty, critics accuse, debase politics to a level that threatens the very foundations of Canadian democracy. "Hardly anything in this world hints of Putinism more than Harperism," columnist Ralph Surette of the Halifax Chronicle Herald opined.

Let's consider the bill of indictment, starting with the accusation of autocracy. Over the course of the past 10 years, this government has had repeated run-ins with Elections Canada. The biggest was an in-and-out money shuffle, which involved sending funds from the national office to ridings during the 2006 election; the ridings then used the funds for, in effect, national campaign advertising, thus doing an end-run around the spending limits. Elections Canada laid charges against campaign chair Doug Finley and others, but the matter was dropped after the party pleaded guilty and paid a \$230,000 fine. And then there was the robocalls affair, which badly tarnished the government, even if it turned out that voter fraud had been limited to the riding of Guelph. The Tories' response: the 2013 Fair Elections Act, which, among other things, limited the power of Elections Canada to investigate allegations of election fraud and to promote voter turnout.

Twice the Conservatives prorogued Parliament for partisan political reasons: the first time to avoid defeat at the hands of the opposition parties in 2008; the second, to shut down an inconvenient inquiry into Afghan detainees. But there were many other, less egregious offences, such as the secret 200-page handbook issued to committee chairs on how to prevent opposition politicians from dominating parliamentary committees, and how to shut down the committees' business if they succeeded. As for the Harper government being secretive, that puts the matter charitably.

A few examples: Among other efforts to muzzle government scientists working on environmental issues from presenting their research, Environment Canada scientist Mark Tushingham was prohibited from speaking publicly about a novel he had written that centred on climate change. Along with its notorious reluctance to reply to Access to Information requests, the government eliminated the Access to Information database (the Coordination of Access to Information Requests System), which had listed every request for access to information, citing a lack of demand for its contents. Further, the government sought to vet the news releases even of such independent agencies as the Auditor-General. In his most public act of secrecy, Stephen Harper simply refuses to talk to the media more than he absolutely must, and he rarely must. His ministers also avoid the press. And of course, who could forget Nigel Wright's secret cheque to settle the accounts of Senator Mike Duffy?

So what to make of it all?

By any objective comparative standard, Canada remains, today, one of the freest nations on earth. The Economist considers it the freest in the G8. As for freedom of the press, Reporters Without Borders ranks Canada the 18th-freest nation on earth, which sounds mediocre only until you realize that Canada, by this organization's measure, ranks far ahead of Great Britain (33), France (39), or the United States (46).

But have the three Harper governments been autocratic, secretive, and cruel? The answer is yes, sometimes. At other times they have exhibited other traits. At all times, they have reflected the qualities of Stephen Harper and the circumstances he confronts.

From his boyhood in Leaside, Harper learned not to trust those beyond the inner circle of family and close friends. That circle is not much larger today. Relations with those outside the wall can be cordial, but they are rarely based on implicit trust, an emotional resource that Harper invests in only a very few. And his encyclopedic memory includes not only the history of maritime border disputes, or who starred in what film; it also includes every act by every person who has slighted, offended, or betrayed him. Such acts are never forgotten and only rarely forgiven. Stephen Harper holds grudges.

He has never successfully cultivated the social skill of pretending to connect. He has difficulty feigning interest. His associates talk of him sometimes simply turning his back and walking away from them while they are in mid-sentence. He rarely displays much ability or desire to be collegial, or even polite. This tendency toward abruptness gets worse when he is tired or under stress.

Politics involves the exercise of power. There are a great many people who seek to take advantage of that power, or to take it away. Harper's reluctance to trust has served him well in his climb to power and his decade of exercising it as Prime Minister. But because his suspicion of the intentions of others is so overt, those who serve under him inhabit an environment of suspicion, and are, or become, suspicious as well – the culture of paranoia that Tom Flanagan observed when he worked for Stephen Harper. The reservoir of goodwill in the Prime Minister's Office is shallow and quickly drained.

That said, if Harper is suspicious about the world around him, he has reason to be. As Joseph Heller famously said, "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you." Harper sees himself as an outsider because he is an outsider. He is from the West, but most of the country lives near the Great Lakes or St. Lawrence River. He is from the suburbs, but the Laurentian elites generally live downtown. Harper is hostile toward these elites, and they are hostile toward him. He is contemptuous of progressive academics, and they reciprocate. He distrusts the judiciary, and the judiciary has vindicated that distrust by striking down parts of his law-and-order agenda. The gala-goers he derides spit out his name in the foyer at intermission. When Stephen Harper rejected the University of Toronto, when he rejected the life of a Tory political aide in Ottawa, when he embraced the West, he fled from the commanding heights of the Central Canadian academic, cultural, and political landscape. He is the embodiment of alienation. But in Western Canada and even in parts of Central Canada, there are millions who feel equally alienated. They tend to live in

suburbs or in towns or on farms. And they tend to vote for him.

John Ibbitson's *Stephen Harper will be available as an e-book on Tuesday and in bookstores on Aug. 18.*

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