

Counterpoint: Harper has not shifted Canadians' opinions

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What has Stephen Harper done to Canada?

To some, that's a rueful, rhetorical question. To them it's obvious: this government has changed the country drastically and for the worse.

But to most Canadians—not only Harper's supporters but also those curious about the real meaning and legacy of this government—the question is less straightforward.

John Ibbitson has thoughtfully reflected on just what Stephen Harper has done to Canada. He concludes that the prime minister has moved the country in a much more conservative direction—and it's unlikely to move back.

“Moving the country” is a metaphor for different things, including making laws, allocating government resources, manipulating symbols, and shaping opinion. Stephen Harper has left his mark in some of these areas; it would be surprising for anyone to hold power for nearly a decade without doing so.

Generally speaking, however, the values and attitudes of ordinary Canadians have not shifted strongly during his time in office. Stephen Harper has been a savvy and focused leader but he leads a country that remains, in important ways, at odds with him.

On crime Harper has not moved public opinion. Quite the opposite: he simply heeded public opinion in a way that previous leaders had not. On criminal justice issues, there had been a pattern of elites (both Liberal and Progressive Conservative) pursuing evidence-based policy while the public still favoured old-fashioned punishment. When parliament abolished the death penalty in 1976, over three-quarters of Canadians still supported it. Stephen Harper saw this gap between how the public saw criminal justice and how elites were handling it. He didn't have to persuade Canadians that a “tougher” approach was preferable. He just had to show that he was the man to deliver it.

Similarly, on domestic security issues, Stephen Harper has not had to shift public opinion to pursue a more aggressive agenda of surveillance and preventive detention. Like many others, Canadians are alarmed by the threat of terrorism and are willing to give their government a lot of latitude in keeping them safe. This attitude may trouble civil libertarians, but it is not new. At another moment of national anxiety about security, a Liberal prime minister, asked how far he would go to fight the threat, replied “Just watch me.” Canadians did not revolt; they cheered.

With his tough-on-crime agenda and aggressive measures on domestic security, Stephen Harper has not moved public sentiment. He hasn't needed to.

Foreign policy is another showcase issue for the Conservative government. As Ibbitson notes, this government has presented a “hardened face to the world”: military action in Iraq,

Afghanistan, and Libya; greater hostility to multilateralism; venerating heroic battles (Vimy); pointedly refusing to champion peacekeeping; sometimes taking loud stances in conflicts abroad (Israel, Sri Lanka, Ukraine) and crowing about these 'principled' positions at home.

Although these gestures may help to swing some specific ridings, Canadians at large are not much moved by them. The proportion of Canadians who are happy with Canada's place in the world has changed little since Harper took office. Most Canadians seem to hold permissive rather than directive opinions on foreign policy (they "permit" politicians to act against their own preferences and don't punish them if they do). Stephen Harper has changed Canada's behaviour internationally, and Canadians have let him. But Canadians still value their Pearsonian, liberal-internationalist history as much as they do their forbears' valour at Vimy.

On to the size and role of government. It's true that there has been no groundswell of opposition to Harper's tax cuts. But nor has the prime minister trumpeted his efforts to reduce the size of government. Harper works subtly (including through omnibus bills) because Canadians do not want their entitlements dismantled. When asked whether they'd rather see more government, less, or what we have now, the public is split more or less evenly among the three positions. Older voters are more likely to be satisfied with the status quo—and the government has been careful not to ruffle greying feathers.

As Ibbitson points out, the government has actually increased transfers to the provinces for health and education. Liberal/NDP warnings that Harper would dismantle health care or otherwise slash the welfare state have not happened. The Conservative response to the financial crisis was a massive, heavily advertised stimulus.

When it comes to public attitudes about the size and role of government, it's worth remembering that despite a small-government party at the federal level political outcomes elsewhere hardly suggest that Canadians have lost all faith in public investments or public services: the election of Kathleen Wynne in Ontario, the collapse of Wildrose in Alberta, a Liberal wave on the east coast, centrists in power in Quebec, plus a raft of high-profile progressive mayors.

Is Stephen Harper the most fiscally conservative leader on the federal scene? Yes. But Canadians' relatively stable belief in the efficacy of government and their attachment to major programs like health care and education haven't given him much leeway.

The environment may be the single issue on which Stephen Harper and the Canadian public differ most. Indeed, for a politician who is otherwise canny and careful, the government's hostility to the environment is so extreme as to appear almost reckless. While Canadians may look like hypocrites, talking a green game while profiting from the oil sands, they are not comfortable with this hypocrisy. Six in ten Canadians outside BC (59%) support a BC-style carbon tax in their own province—up from 42% in 2008. On the environment, Canadians are growing more impatient, not more complacent.

The Conservatives' environmental obstinacy seems an obvious opening for opposition parties to exploit—but the Liberals were burned badly by Stephane Dion's Green Shift, and the NDP fear pushback from their supporters in resource rich regions.

If the environment is where Stephen Harper most lags behind Canadian public opinion, there is another area in which he is likely more progressive than the public at large (and certainly more than parts of his base): immigration. Is there another political leader in the west who's the most right-leaning candidate in national politics and who would increase already high levels of immigration, embrace multiculturalism, and eschew any hint of xenophobia? Critics may object to aspects of the Harper government's immigration program (Temporary Foreign Workers, refugees) but it's hard to argue that Stephen Harper embodies racist right-wing nationalism anything like what one sees in Europe or even in the U.S. Republican Party. On immigration and multiculturalism, Harper is pure Canada, an apt successor to Liberal Pierre Trudeau and Progressive Conservative Brian Mulroney.

As evidence for the idea that the Harper agenda has won, Ibbitson notes that the opposition parties tend to make tepid or marginal objections to the government's actions and policies. This has been true for nearly a decade and it's true today: the three federal parties to the left of the Conservatives are struggling to connect with a sufficiently large proportion of the majority of voters who oppose the Harper agenda: the roughly six in ten Canadians who want action on the environment, think government can and should be active and effective, and would like a change in tone. Nevertheless, that majority is there, undiminished in size and not greatly altered in their attitudes.

But while the playing field has not changed, Stephen Harper remains for now an extremely adept player and hard to beat. Whatever he has done to Canada, he may well have the chance to do more of it.

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