

## AFTER FOUR YEARS, IT'S CANADA THAT HAS CHANGED HARPER

Out of political necessity, the minority government prime minister has strayed from his fiscal conservative background

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His critics warned Canadians wouldn't recognize their country if Stephen Harper won power, but four years after the 2006 election vaulted him into office, it's the Conservative leader who's changed.



Figure 1 Prime Minister Stephen Harper attends his national caucus meeting on Parliament Hill in Ottawa on Jan. 22, 2010. Fred Chartrand/The Canadian Press

In some cases, political survival dictated the shift by this minority government prime minister, who on Saturday celebrates the fourth anniversary of his election to power. In other instances, economic necessity forced him to reverse himself.

Mr. Harper veered from his fiscal conservative roots, hiking program spending sharply in the early years to finance election promises – and then racking up record deficits to help the economy ride out a global recession.

The 50-year-old prime minister's also developed a far more abiding interest in international affairs after entering office with a largely domestic agenda and little travel experience outside North America.

He's warmed up to the totalitarian Chinese government after years of frosty relations over human rights – a shift former staffers say reflects the need to be on good terms with a key player in efforts to fix the financial crisis.

Mr. Harper quickly embraced Canada's participation in the Afghanistan war against the Taliban – a deployment begun by the former Liberal government – vowing early on to never “cut and run” and hiking military spending to revitalize the Canadian Forces.

But as the fight dragged on – and the number of soldiers killed increased – he made a political calculation to withdraw combat troops in 2011 rather than risk a backlash against the war.

Through it all, however, Mr. Harper has endured, accomplishing more of his agenda than one might have thought a minority government could achieve, including

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delivering four budgets, weathering a global recession and extending the military deployment in Afghanistan by four years.

“They predicted it could not last,” Mr. Harper told Tory MPs on Friday. “They gave us 18 months at the absolute most, but we survived, we persevered, we won re-election and [now] we enter our fifth year of serving Canadians.”

The Tories have cut billions of dollars in taxes and toughened crime laws, but Mr. Harper so far lacks the kind of signature accomplishment associated with previous prime ministers, such as slaying the deficit, signing the Canada-U.S. trade deal or enacting the Charter of Rights.

Survival may in fact be Mr. Harper’s biggest achievement to date, successfully playing off opposition parties against each other and hurt the Liberals with a non-stop campaign that includes bouts of negative advertising.

But in this endless tactical battle, Mr. Harper has strayed from his Reform roots, which called for reforms in accountability. Shortly after taking power, he coaxed Liberal MP David Emerson to defect to the Tories – a practice the Conservatives had previously criticized but Mr. Harper defended as a bid to increase support in the Vancouver area.

And while Mr. Harper’s first legislation after taking office was a bill promising to “make government more accountable,” he’s the target of protests across Canada today for shutting down Parliament, a move critics say was made to avoid to avoid opposition-led hearings into Afghan torture allegations.

University of Calgary political scientist Tom Flanagan, a former Harper adviser, said the prime minister is being hurt by his image as cunning tactician because it may be limiting his ability to win a majority government.

“The [Conservative] base may put up with these tactics ... but for independent voters, I think it’s less attractive.”

University of Alberta political scientist Steve Patten said the Conservatives’ deep tax cuts – which reduce revenue by \$220-billion over five years starting in 2008-09 – may be their biggest legacy so far. That’s because, he said, it could prevent future leaders from expanding government operations unless they are willing to risk arousing voters’ wrath by raising taxes.

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