

HARPER'S 'CHANGE' NOT FOR THE BETTER

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Four years ago today, Stephen Harper's Conservatives defeated Paul Martin's Liberals in a national election. "Our great country has voted for change," Harper crowed in his victory speech, "and Canadians have asked our party to take the lead in delivering that change."

Despite being constrained by a minority Parliament during the whole of his four years in office, Harper has certainly delivered change. But has it been change for the better?

During the 2006 election campaign, Harper made a great fuss about restoring "accountability" to Ottawa, in the wake of the so-called sponsorship scandal. And indeed, one of the first actions of the Conservative government was to introduce an Accountability Act, which closed some of the sponsorship loopholes.

But since then, Harper has made a mockery of the principle of accountability by sacking or underfunding arm's-length watchdogs like the head of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission or the parliamentary budget officer. And when it has suited him, Harper has prorogued Parliament so that his government could not be held accountable by the opposition parties.

On fiscal policy, Harper inherited a healthy surplus from the outgoing Liberal government and squandered it with ill-advised tax cuts that left the treasury vulnerable to an economic downturn. Now the government is running a massive deficit. While the deficit is largely due to the recession, there is a built-in "structural" element that can be laid directly at the feet of Harper and the Conservatives.

On domestic policy, Harper scrapped Liberal initiatives like the daycare funding deal with the provinces and the Kelowna Accord on native concerns. The former was replaced by a direct grant to parents and the latter mainly by hot air. Harper has also pushed for the dismantling of the gun registry and for minimum sentencing laws that serve no real purpose but to crowd our jails.

On foreign policy, Harper has deepened our alignment with the United States, without much to show for it. (Washington is still zapping us with Buy American policies and a hardened border.) He has also jettisoned Canada's traditionally more nuanced approach to the Middle East and adopted an unquestioning pro-Israel stance. Along the way, he virtually ignored China and India. His recent visits to those two emerging giants came far too late.

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On the environment, Harper abrogated the Kyoto accord and, while committing Canada to a 20% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020, he has failed to produce a plan to get us there.

Finally, while Canadian politics has always been confrontational, Harper has brought a nastier and more partisan tone to public debate, with attack ads demeaning his opponents as either feckless (Stéphane Dion) or fey (Michael Ignatieff).

Four years in, it has not been change for the better.

Unfortunately, given the fractured opposition, Harper and the Conservatives are likely to remain in office for the foreseeable future.

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