

# THE REAL STEPHEN HARPER?

Our sphinx-like, dull-as-a-door and unashamedly opportunistic prime minister has been wrong so many times – yet he always bounces back

Gerald Caplan

Special to The Globe and Mail

Published on Friday, Jan. 15, 2010 4:35PM EST

Some years back, for a short period of time, Stephen Harper and I were on one of those painful three-party spin-doctor TV panels together. Mostly he was in Calgary so we only connected on-air, not even seeing each other. Occasionally, though, he'd be in Toronto and we would chat a little before we went on. My recollections are a little blurry, but impressions linger.

Although he wasn't trying to hide his extremist views in those days, he came across on TV as rather bland, not unduly radical or even ideological. Off-camera I recall us chatting amiably enough, if not with any particular substance or purpose. There was nothing about him to make you think he was hell-bent for the top of the greasy pole. In short, as a panelist, a TV personality, a political spokesperson, a leading right-wing conservative figure, and even as a guy, he was simply dull. Bland. Entirely unmemorable.

Baby, look at him now.

John Turner, prime minister of Canada for a day way back, figured out an exquisitely ambiguous response when asked his opinion of his much-detested predecessor. Pierre Trudeau, he would reply, was one of the most remarkable men of his generation.

It occurs to me, somewhat begrudgingly, that the same comment can now be made of Stephen Harper. Whatever else one thinks of him, Harper is without question the most intriguing personality on the Canadian political scene. Sure, that's distinctly modest praise. The competition is not exactly Olympian. Who knows how Harper might have fared against a street-fighter like Chrétien, a smoothie like Mulroney, or



Figure 1 Prime Minister Stephen Harper speaks to reporters after making a quake-relief donation to the Red Cross in Ottawa on Thursday, Jan. 14, 2010. REUTERS

1:

a Trudeau himself? Tommy Douglas, David Lewis or Ed Broadbent would have turned him into a laughingstock.

But for now he stands alone and he runs the country alone. He's sphinx-like, enigmatic, dull as a door, anti-charismatic, unashamedly opportunistic. He's both unliked and unloved. The chattering classes can't figure him out and his opponents can't figure how to beat him. He's his own worst enemy and repeatedly comes close to finishing himself off. But he doesn't. Time after time, often in cliffhangers, he finally prevails.

We underestimated his discipline, his determination, his tactical wiles, his ideological drive, his sheer hunger for power, his readiness to do whatever it took in his world to claw his way to the top and in our world to stay there. Who would guess how much he could get away with as prime minister? Who knew how little thought and knowledge it took to run our complex dominion?.

Here is a government, from its head down, that practices ignorance-based public policy. Huge areas of the human condition go completely unrecognized – AIDS, global warming, Africa, to name only a few. To Africa, they are simply indifferent. Who knows why? To AIDS and climate change, they are actively hostile or in denial. This is a prime minister who humiliated Canada before tens of thousands of social activists and scientists from around the globe by refusing to appear at the giant biannual International AIDS Conference in Toronto in 2006. This is a prime minister who, as we all recall, gave Canada a black eye for his shabby performance at the Copenhagen climate summit the other day. This is a prime minister who is single-handedly reversing Canada's stellar reputation (too often vastly overrated, I'm afraid) around the world. I've just come from Africa, and I promise you this is no exaggeration.

It's also bizarre in Harper's own terms. He's dying to have Canada elected a temporary member of the Security Council when a rotating seat opens later this year. (What Harper's Canada could possibly bring to the Council except deep-rooted ignorance and sophomoric prejudices is beyond understanding.) Yet he has actively alienated countries all over the world by his various vindictive acts – such as cutting off aid to African countries, refusing grants to widely respected Canadian NGOs, copping out on climate change.

This is a prime minister who knows little about many subjects and feels passionately about them all – the Middle East, international development, the entire Canadian criminal justice system. This is a prime minister who looks at a complex, nuanced, interconnected world and sees only simple black and white. This is a prime minister who breaks the most heartfelt of commitments with bland excuses that make you wonder if you've heard properly. This is a prime minister for whom democratic accountability is a pure oxymoron that has no place in his life, only in his campaign promises.

2:

## The Real Stephen Harper?

---

This week's polls suggest that his arbitrary, arguably unconstitutional suspension of Parliament – a drastic ploy in order to bury the issue of torturing Afghan prisoners – has cost him dearly among Canadians. He of course gave himself the Christmas gift of insisting that his fellow citizens didn't give a rat's fanny about either. He's been wrong so many times I can't even count the Globe and Mail editorials fiercely criticizing him. But he bounces back, time after time, and fools us all. How many more times can he get a way with it? Look at his reaction to Haiti. Just watch him.

3: