

THE TWO FACES OF STEPHEN HARPER

Taking control works well when dealing with disaster, but not so well with democracy

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Canadians have witnessed in the past few weeks the two faces of Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Both faces reflect one character trait and the conception of governing that flows from that trait.

The trait is as much control as is humanly possible for a prime minister in a democratic, fast-shifting environment.

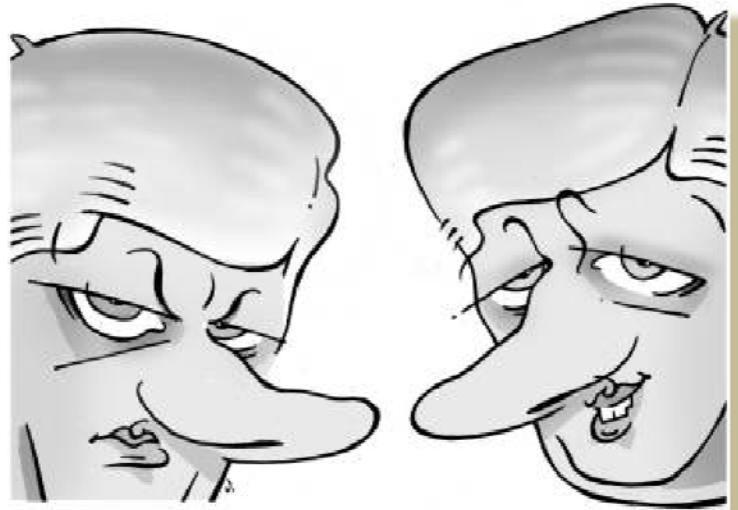


Figure 1 Anthony Jenkins/The Globe and Mail

Faced with the Haitian catastrophe, Mr. Harper directed traffic in an impressive, speedy and efficient fashion. He got right on the file, sent the appropriate ministers and departments into overdrive, and pushed international buttons – as in Canada playing host yesterday to a hastily assembled international conference on Haiti. Those who have been critical of a certain lassitude in Canadian foreign policy should take note and give credit.

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Mr. Harper announced that the government, over and beyond its own aid commitment, would match Canadians' contributions up to \$50-million. When Canadians donated more than the government anticipated, he scrapped the matching limit. The result, thus far, is that Canada has made the largest per capita commitment to Haiti. And the military was dispatched there, despite repeated claims that it had already been "overstretched" by Afghanistan.

On orphans and refugees, his government walked the appropriate line between additional humanitarian efforts (as in expediting the arrival of orphans) while not creating a dangerous precedent by throwing open the country to every Haitian who might want to emigrate.

So when a grim humanitarian crisis arose, in Canada's part of the world, with a sizable Haitian diaspora already here, Mr. Harper produced a pitch-perfect response backed by swift and serious action.

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It's the kind of challenge well-suited to his talents: a problem that needed to be tackled, a government that required internal control and direction, a managerial challenge of the first order.

No vision was required, since the televised images and newspaper reports of the Haitian catastrophe spoke for themselves. The population was already mobilized, which was advantageous for Mr. Harper, whose forte does not lie in galvanizing or mobilizing voters, except his hard-core supporters.

The country wanted action, and he and his government delivered. There was therefore no partisan criticism, no media sniping, no nagging from non-governmental organizations. In a political culture where praise is always in short supply, Mr. Harper deserves much for his efforts over Haiti.

There was also no Parliament, either – which showed the other face of Mr. Harper, the leader who prefers to control as much as possible, especially the surroundings in which he finds himself.

Prorogation was about control of the public agenda. Obviously, no prime minister can control everything that happens or is reported in the media, and he cannot shut up entirely his political opponents. What he can do is use the powers of his office, and the budgets allocated by his government, to limit, where possible, his foes' opportunities to get attention.

Ask Mr. Harper himself about what it means when Parliament is not in session, because he would know, having been in opposition as an ordinary MP and party leader of the Official Opposition. Ask him how much attention while in Opposition his speeches received on the road in Red Deer or Halifax, compared to his appearance in the media spotlight of Parliament?

The answers are obvious, so that prorogation was not designed to give the government time to “recalibrate” – can it not walk and chew gum at the same time? – but rather to deprive the other parties of a chance to do what they do best, make a racket.

There is, too, an important principle at stake in prorogation – a principle that Mr. Harper brushed aside – namely that Parliament, for all its faults, is the people's forum, not the prime minister's.

A prime minister has his forums, of which Parliament is only one. He has cabinet, caucus, and a public platform each and every time he speaks, here and abroad. Parliament, however, is the platform of every point of view from those who have been elected, and the place where, however imperfectly, the government is held to account.

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It is to be seen whether after the Olympics and the March budget Canadians entirely forget whatever unhappiness they might now feel with their principal political institution unjustifiably closed. The Harperian calculation apparently was that all will be forgotten.

Perhaps, just as Haiti will likely fade from the public radar screen, but what will remain are the two faces of the Prime Minister, for they reflect aspects of him.

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