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John Ibbitson: How Harper created a more conservative Canada [Add to ...](#)

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Nine years after Stephen Harper was sworn in as prime minister, we are a more conservative land. And even if the sudden departure this week of John Baird, arguably Mr. Harper's most faithful servant, clouds the Conservative Party's prospects when the nation goes to the polls in October, we are going to stay that way.

Our 22nd prime minister is the most conservative leader Canada has ever known. The federal government hasn't been this small, relative to the size of the economy, since John Diefenbaker was prime minister in the 1950s, before the welfare state was born. Businesses pay far less tax than those in the United States. At the national level, we have shrugged a surrender in the fight over global warming. Our courts have become more like instruments of punishment and less like avenues of rehabilitation. We show a different, more belligerent face to the world.

Opponents rage against this new Canada, say it is the antithesis of who we really are, point to polls that suggest conservative values are not Canadian values. But the critics are wrong because Stephen Harper's Canada is the Canada we have become.

We are a country that reflects the rise in population, power and influence of the West, which has mostly voted Conservative at the federal level for half a century. We are a country of five million immigrants who have arrived over the past two decades from China and India and the Philippines and



Painting of Prime Minister Stephen Harper. (Luc Normandin for The Globe and Mail)

other Asian and Pacific nations, bringing with them more conservative economic and social values.

That is why the two men seeking to replace Stephen Harper as prime minister have embraced his agenda. Thomas Mulcair of the New Democrats and the Liberals' Justin Trudeau criticize Mr. Harper harshly, but for the most part they do so at the margins. Mr. Mulcair speaks of growing up in a family where "we worked hard, played by the rules and lived within our means"—a most conservative mythology. Of the literally dozens of tax cuts and tax credits imposed by the Conservatives, Mr. Trudeau would reverse just one.

Both men know that, if they are to shatter the Conservative coalition of immigrant and Western voters, they must cater to the values and concerns of that coalition.

Whatever happens in the election, the Harper legacy will be with Canada for a very long time. So let's take stock and consider the State of the Union under this most presidential of prime ministers.

Country Hoedown government

Any conservative government worthy of the name tries to shrink the state by starving it. Mr. Harper cut the goods and services tax by two percentage points, reduced corporate taxes to 15 per cent (the lowest in the G7), slashed the spending of every federal department between 5 and 10 per cent and, according to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, slimmed the size of the public service by 8 per cent. If Harperism were a diet, the federal government would be positively svelte.

It didn't start off like this. In the minority-government years, spending went up to placate the opposition parties. Then came the \$60-billion stimulus package to fight the recession.

Budget surpluses or deficits during Harper's tenure

By the numbers

18.4

Federal program expenses as per cent of Gross Domestic Product in 1983-84

13.2

Federal program expenses as per cent of GDP in 2013-14

13.5

Total federal tax revenue as a per cent of GDP in 2006-07 (Harper's first year)

11.7

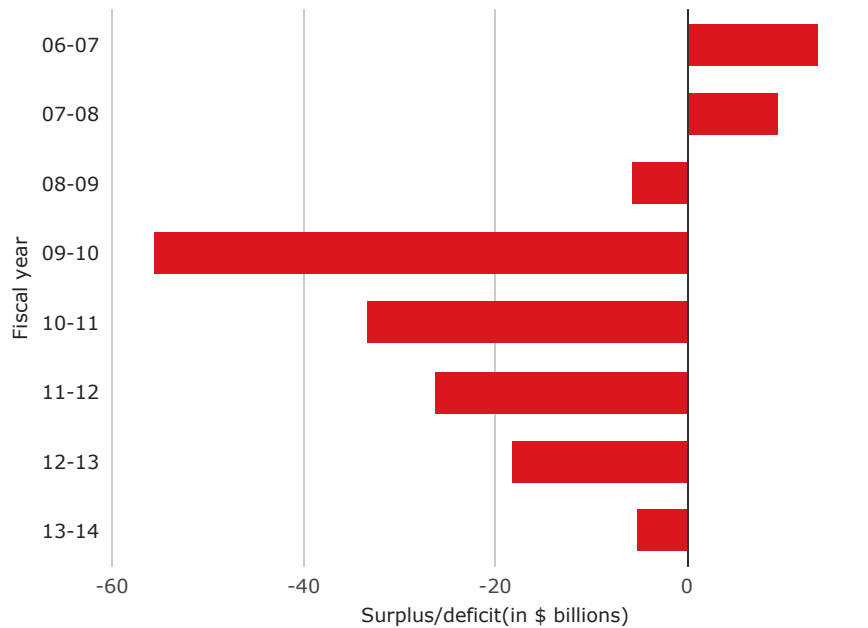
Total federal tax revenue as a per



Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau.
(Reuters)



NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair.
(Canadian Press)



SOURCE: Finance Canada

Only when they won a majority in 2011 did the Conservatives show their true colours. In 2014, federal direct program spending declined for the fourth straight year. That hasn't happened since 1961, when such records were first kept. Federal revenues as a percentage of the gross domestic product have declined to 14 per cent, what they were in 1958 when people gathered round the television on Friday night to watch Gordie Tapp on Country Hoedown. And notwithstanding the hit to federal revenues from falling oil prices, Finance Minister Joe Oliver has vowed to balance the budget this year, and he will.

Any progressive government worthy of the name would seek to reverse such an agenda. Restoring the cut to the GST alone would provide \$14-billion a year in additional revenue, a staggering sum, to spend on a national child-care program, a top NDP priority, or the renewal of national infrastructure, as the Liberals promise. But the Liberals would leave every tax cut, personal and corporate, in place, save a small boutique measure introduced last fall to help parents when only one spouse is working. The NDP would increase corporate taxes modestly while lowering rates still further on small business. The guts of the Conservative agenda of tax and spending cuts will remain.



Royal Canadian Air Force ground crew perform post flight checks on a CF-18 fighter jet in Kuwait after a sortie over Iraq on Nov. 3, 2014. (Canadian Forces)

A hardened face to the world

Remember when we were the nice guys? When Canadian troops wore blue helmets and kept warring factions apart? When we supported Israel but also stood up for the Palestinians – and the Russians could talk to us, even though we were allies of America.

That's all long gone. Under Stephen Harper, Canada is now Israel's closest ally, and – much closer than the United States, due to the animosity between President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Mr. Harper declared that Russia under Vladimir Putin didn't belong in the G8 long before it was expelled for misbehaving in Ukraine.

In the past nine years, we have had boots on the ground or fighters in the air in Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq. Canada has berated the United Nations (which denied us a spot on the Security Council) and boycotted the Commonwealth (over Sri Lanka's treatment of its Tamil minority). Under this Prime Minister, Canada has almost always been at war.

And the opposition has almost always backed him – there was no daylight between the three leaders on Israel and Ukraine. True, the NDP and Liberals have not endorsed the latest mission to Iraq, but may be experiencing remorse. This

week, Mr. Trudeau declared that the Liberals would support the new anti-terrorism legislation that will greatly increase the powers of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. (The NDP remains on the fence.)

Despite the name-calling by opposition critics, Conservative foreign policy is largely bipartisan. This Boy Scout of nations has become a brawler, maybe even a bit of a bully, and the Liberals and NDP seem fine with that.



Prime Minister Stephen Harper speaks in the House of Commons. (Reuters)

Democracy not what it was

The decline of democracy appears to be a depressingly bipartisan affair as well.

All newly elected prime ministers promise to lead more open and accountable governments. And they do, for a while. Then the centralizing sets in. Jean Chrétien was worse than Brian Mulroney. Mr. Harper is worse than Mr. Chrétien. And his successor will probably be worse than he is.

The Conservatives came to office promising to correct the abuses of the Liberals' sponsorship scandal and other boondoggles. And they did. The Accountability Act of 2006 tightened the oversight of departmental spending, created a blizzard of new agencies to supervise lobbying, ethics and conflict of interest as well, and imposed strict new limits on political donations.

This has all been forgotten, swept away by Mr. Harper's ham-handed, hard-fisted approach to governing. The Tories have muzzled the bureaucracy, while prohibiting scientists from reporting their findings and ambassadors from speaking on behalf of Canada without permission.

Reporters wait months for answers to freedom of information requests, with the results a sea of redactions. The heads of supposedly autonomous agencies who questioned government thinking have been fired or not had their contracts renewed

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) also discourages (read: prohibits) independent thought by Conservative MPs. Committee chairs were given briefing binders on how to obstruct their own committees if opposition members seemed to be getting their way.

The daily ritual of members' statements before Question Period, which used to consist of praise by a backbench MP for the local hockey team's tournament win, or some such, became scripted partisan attacks on the opposition benches. Cabinet is a rubber stamp, with the all-powerful PMO and Privy Council Office (bureaucrats who advise the Prime Minister) managing all the major files.

Most egregious of all, the Conservatives fell into the disreputable habit of cramming dozens of individual pieces of legislation into massive omnibus bills and then invoking closure to ram them through Parliament, preventing any hope of proper scrutiny.

Finally, the so-called **Fair Elections Act**, although stripped of its worst sections, still limits the power of Elections Canada to investigate fraud.

The opposition parties, having voted in 2011 to find the Harper government in contempt of Parliament, promise better. But even if elected, neither would be likely to deliver.

Justin Trudeau is promising to modernize the Access to Information Act. Mr. Mulcair says an NDP government would bring "greater transparency" to appointments and foster "a co-operative approach in Parliament."

No doubt. But if recent history is any guide, the first embarrassment would bring in its wake new orders to "clear things in advance," and it would be only a matter of time before someone pointed out that things were even worse now than they had been under Mr. Harper.

Besides, renewing democracy would also require a return to responsible opposition. If governments of all stripes resort to omnibus bills and to routinely imposing closure, that's because opposition parties of all stripes do everything in their power to obstruct legislation they dislike. Chicken, meet egg.

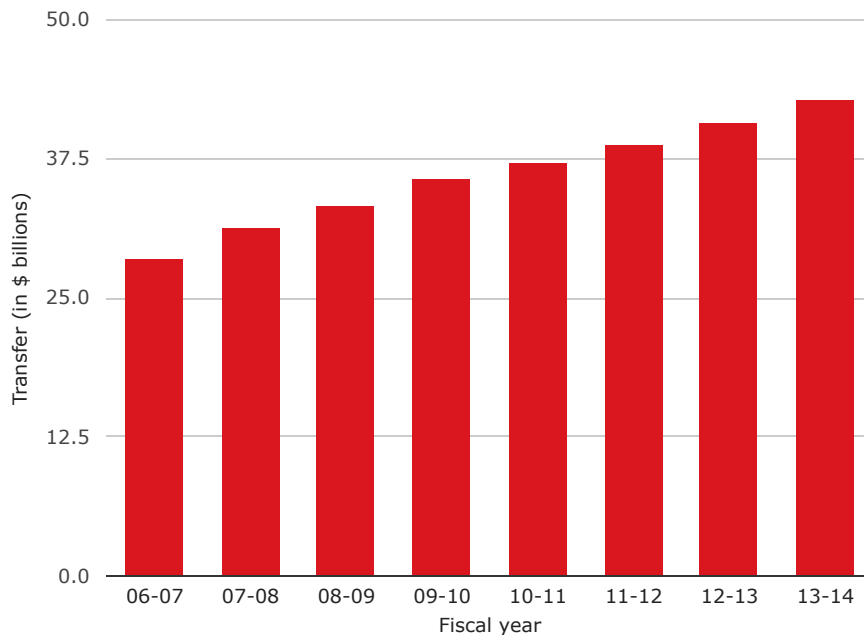
The best federalism is passive

Fifteen years ago, when Mr. Harper co-authored the notorious "firewall letter" lambasting the Chrétien government over its treatment of Alberta, Western separatism was dangerously on the rise, Quebeckers had come within a hair's-

breadth of voting to leave Canada, and Ontario was at war with Ottawa over health care.

But once in office, Mr. Harper calmed the water he himself had helped to roil, by simply leaving the provinces alone. Transfers for health, education, social services and equalization have increased handsomely, but with no new strings attached. Call it passive federalism.

Federal government's Canada Health and Social Transfer to provinces



SOURCE: Finance Canada

Critics complain of a lack of vision. But vision involves interference, and resistance, and negotiations, and recriminations if those negotiations fail. Vision involves opt-out clauses and compensation for opting out and, worst of all, listening to people say “asymmetrical federalism” as though it’s normal to talk like that. Vision drives Quebecers into talk of quitting and Westerners into talk of quitting, too.

Think about it: The Quiet Revolution. The FLQ. René Lévesque. The first referendum. “Let the Eastern bastards freeze in the dark.” The Canada Health Act. Meech Lake. Charlottetown. The second referendum. The Clarity Act. The firewall letter. Funding for Hep-C victims. The 2004 health-care talks.

And then, peace. Just three first ministers conferences in a decade. Quiet on the health-care front. And best of all, the Bloc Québécois in ruins and the Parti Québécois out of power.

Yes, there have been occasional spats, mostly with Newfoundland and Ontario. But we haven’t seen this level of calm in half a century.

The national debate no longer revolves around Quebec, and Quebecers seem

perfectly happy with that. And the “rest of Canada,” as it was insultingly called, no longer means southern Ontario.

In wealth, in population and in political clout, the four Western provinces now speak with an equally powerful voice, which improves the overall balance of power. Temporary fluctuations in the price of oil are unlikely to reverse this trend.

The other parties insist that Canadians crave a new national vision. But only last month Mr. Trudeau declared that fighting climate change “should be up to various provinces because they’ve already taken the lead on that, and what the federal government needs to do is co-ordinate that and oversee the implementation.”

Mr. Harper couldn’t have said it better.



An inmate in Toronto in 2011. (Peter Power/The Globe and Mail)

Eye for an eye

Perhaps the most contentious conservative shift by the Harper government lies in the realm of justice.

The idea is out there that the Conservatives’ tough-on-crime agenda has been ditched by the courts. That idea is false. The agenda is intact and it has transformed the justice system.

Mandatory minimum sentences for crimes involving guns, drugs and sexual assaults on minors are on the books, although under judicial review. A law that reduced the credit for time already served before sentencing has been softened

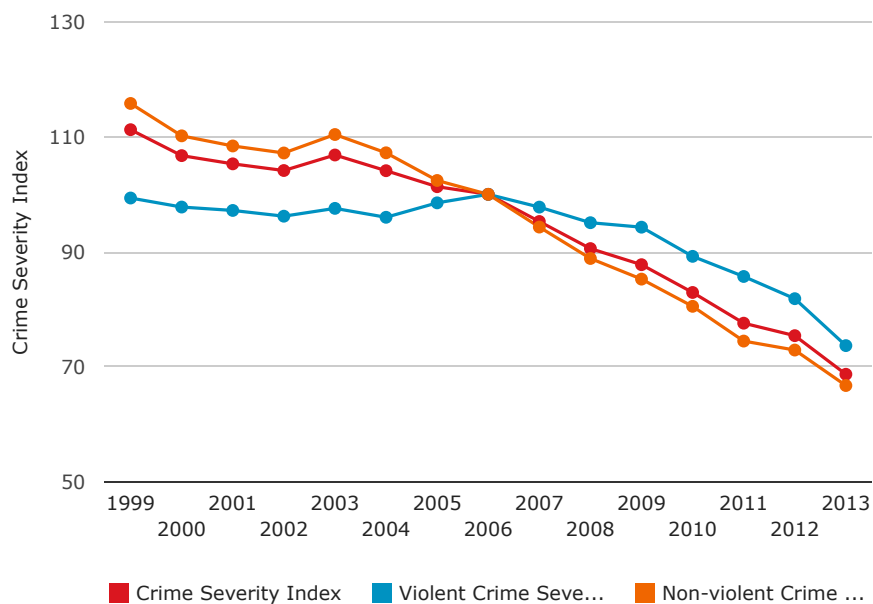
but not scrapped. It's harder to get parole, hard to obtain a pardon and easier for non-citizens to be deported for committing a crime.

And the Conservatives have signalled their intent to introduce legislation that will limit the possibility of parole even further for certain forms of first-degree murder.

The Supreme Court did rule that Internet service providers can no longer routinely hand over information about customers to police without a warrant, as the government wanted, and a lower-court judge has invalidated the move to both double the surcharge that criminals must pay victims and to make that surcharge mandatory. But these are marginal defeats.

The real proof that the Tory crime agenda is in place lies in the numbers. Since 2005, the number of Canadians in custody has increased by 17.5 per cent, even though crime rates have fallen steadily, to levels not seen since 1972. The overall cost of the federal corrections system has almost doubled, from \$1.6-billion in 2006 to just under \$3-billion in 2012.

Crime Severity Index by year



SOURCE: Statistics Canada

The Conservatives claim that keeping offenders in jail and out of mischief longer has contributed to the falling crime rates. Bosh. Lower birth rates have reduced the number of young men available to get into trouble.

But does anyone really believe that the Liberals or the NDP would, in government, reverse all this? The Conservatives have embraced their tough-on-crime agenda because polls show that immigrant voters from countries with high crime rates and an unreliable justice system worry about the same thing happening here.

Dismantling the Tories' agenda will not impress such voters.

Sun Sea no more

Immigration reform will go down as one of the Conservative government's more important and lasting achievements. A broken refugee system has been fixed and, if the latest reforms work as intended, immigrants should arrive in Canada with a good job waiting for them.

If the broader public ever turned against immigration, then Canada's wide-open-door policy of bringing in 250,000 people a year could be at risk, threatening the success of the multicultural experiment and depriving the labour force of needed workers.

So the Conservatives introduced a plethora of new programs that culminated in "express entry," which went into effect Jan. 1 and selects immigrants based on their ability to find work quickly. At the same time, family unification has been virtually eliminated as a means of entry, because such immigrants are more likely to tax the system than to help support it.

Critics maintain that newcomers should be valued more for their ability to contribute as citizens than just their ability to fill a job vacancy. But the opposition parties have offered no major criticisms of the Tory reforms, which also have the backing of employers and provincial governments. This year, the government has increased the annual intake from 250,000 to 285,000, without a peep of public protest.



Hundreds of passengers crowd the deck of MV Sun Sea after spotting the arrival of HMCS Winnipeg in August, 2010. (Canadian Forces)

In some ways, the Conservatives have the MV Sun Sea to thank for making their refugee reforms possible. The Thai cargo ship was escorted into CFB Esquimalt

on Vancouver Island on Aug. 10, 2010, bearing 492 Tamil Sri Lankans who promptly claimed refugee status, reminding Canadians that the world considered them a soft touch when it came to asylum seekers.

Then-immigration minister Jason Kenney largely fixed the problem by designating a list of “safe” countries that could no longer be used as launch pads to Canada (such traffic has dropped 80 per cent) and by working with other source countries to clamp down on human smuggling.

Although Canada still accepts 12,000 refugees as year, most of them now arrive through private sponsorship or United Nations programs, rather than by just showing up unannounced. There hasn't been another MV Sun Sea in almost five years.

Is that all there is?

So is there no choice? Is it simply a matter of voting in the next election for the Conservative Stephen Harper or the NDP Stephen Harper or the Liberal Stephen Harper? Not completely.

The Conservatives have been laggards on the environment, simply imitating American moves, which have been few. But the Obama administration and China have committed to working together to reduce carbon emissions. Canada under the NDP or Liberals could co-operate with the two giant emitters in creating a limited carbon-reduction scheme and hit the reset button on pipelines, replacing confrontation with consultation and maybe actually getting something built.

And the Liberals or the NDP could succeed where the Conservatives failed on improving the life of First Nations on reserves, by reviving the cause of aboriginal education.

This government brought forward an ambitious First Nations education act that would have created native-led school boards and a native-centred curriculum, while also adhering to provincial standards. But the Tories had already so poisoned the well with other policies – and there was so much infighting on the issue among the chiefs themselves – that the bill was withdrawn.

If Mr. Harper can't convince the chiefs that the best way to combat the scourge of missing and murdered aboriginal women and men is to improve education on reserves, maybe Mr. Mulcair or Mr. Trudeau can.

But the rest of what he has written will stand. The Canadian Wheat Board won't get its monopoly back. The firearms registry is gone for good. Trade agreements with Europe and Korea will not be undone. The Trans-Pacific Partnership talks, the largest trade negotiations in history, will likely be completed in the next month or so, another Conservative legacy that is almost certain to prove permanent.

Counterpoint



"On crime, Harper has not moved public opinion. Quite the opposite: He has heeded it in a way his predecessors did not."

Michael Adams, president of the Environics Institute, responds to John Ibbitson's essay

And what about you? Are you more conservative than you were when Stephen Harper was first elected? Absolutely not, you say? Then would you support increasing the GST by two percentage points? Do you want to relax parole eligibility for sex offenders? Would you get behind some big new national program, even if it infuriated Quebec and Alberta? Do you think the Prime Minister should make nice with Vladimir Putin? If a ship filled with refugee claimants appears, should we just let them in?

And how do you think your neighbours would answer these questions?

Like it or not, Stephen Harper's Canada is everyone's Canada now.

John Ibbitson is writer at large for The Globe and Mail. His biography of Stephen Harper will be published by McClelland and Stewart in September.

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