

## Second 100 days real test for Harper

From TOstar.com

When he looked back last week over his first 100 days in office, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said he felt pleased with how his new Conservative government had performed.

He pointed with pride during an interview with the *Star* to the progress his fledgling minority government had made in pushing ahead with the five priorities he touted during the election — tax cuts, getting tough on crime, child-care rebates, a government ethics package and tackling health-care wait times.

But the true test for Harper as a prime minister will be how he performs in the next 100 days, now that the honeymoon period that voters normally give a new leader is starting to wane.

After Harper's second 100 days in office, voters will have a much clearer picture of where he intends to take this country, what sort of leader he really is, and whether he can inspire Canadians to tackle the major issues facing this nation.

To date, Harper has had a fairly easy ride. He faces no serious challenge in Parliament at this time because voters are not ready for yet another early election and because the Opposition Liberals have no leader and won't pick a successor to Paul Martin until early December.

By Conservative Party standards, Harper has been a political success. He has avoided the pratfalls of previous minority governments and deserves credit for acting with speed on his top priorities. On that score, he is Mr. Decisive compared to Martin's image as Mr. Dithers.

By other measures, though, Harper is going in directions that worry many progressive voters in Canada.

From his dismantling of the federal gun registry to his dislike for the Kyoto Accord on climate change, from his snubbing of Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty to his ramming through a hurried debate on extending Canadian troops in Afghanistan to 2009, Harper has shown haste before reason, with little apparent consideration for the long-range consequences.

If anything, progressives fear Harper's overall agenda is to decentralize Canada, to make it more Americanized.

The signs are everywhere, they insist, from the trivial to the significant. For example, Harper blatantly ignored the needs of big cities in the federal budget, arguing that municipalities are a provincial responsibility and therefore not his problem.

And stealing a page from the U.S. military by barring media coverage of fallen soldiers returning to Canada from Afghanistan has irritated both Conservative and Liberal supporters.

On his personal style of leadership, Harper has displayed troubling signs of being a bully, whose attitude of "my way or the highway" is aimed not only at the Liberals, for whom he seems to have a visceral hatred, but to Tory cabinet ministers and backbench MPs.

Where do Harper and the Conservatives go from here?

So far, he has been vague, saying only that he wants a "made-in-Canada" policy to deal with climate change and that he wants to boost federalism in Quebec. He also talks of needing to resolve the fiscal imbalance between Ottawa and the provinces, but gives no details.

"We've got some time now and in the summer to get going on the next set of legislative initiatives and that work has begun," Harper recently told the *Star's* Bruce Campion-Smith.

That next set of initiatives will be the true test. Once they are launched, and once Harper has completed his second 100 days in office, voters should ask them one key question: Is Canada fundamentally better off than when Harper and the Tories first came to power?

The answer to that question will help determine whether Harper and the Conservatives form a majority government after the next federal election.