

A Shiny New Cabinet, with two scuff marks.

Don Martin, National Post

Published: Tuesday, February 07, 2006

OTTAWA - Cabinet geographical balance: Acceptable, but not ideal.

Gender representation: A tad light on the smarter sex, with just six women to 21 pale males.

Visible minorities: Um, one.

Shock and awe: Meet David Emerson and Michael Fortier.

The shock was having a prime minister-designate actively recruiting Emerson, the Liberal industry minister until Monday morning, for a senior Conservative post even before the election results were declared official.

The awe of it all was having a leader who campaigned on a platform of accountability and a promise to elect all future senators suddenly elevate Fortier, a campaign insider, to the pivotal Public Works post after being appointed to the Senate.

This was the golden opportunity for Stephen Harper to debut a shiny new slimmed-down Cabinet, the expectant fresh-scrubbed face of a future government dedicated to the pursuit of ethical purity and scandal-free conduct.

He could've wowed Canadians with the youth of his untainted ministers and their potential to set the Conservatives on a two-year squeaky-clean trek toward a majority mandate.

But now, David Emerson has accomplished the impossible for an MP of his calibre: He has made the Belinda Stronach defection appear one of honourable principle.

Stronach bolted last May, citing her disgust with the Conservative plan to topple the government by defeating a budget. That and the fact she hated her leader.

But she'd served in the Opposition for a year and could've been jobless within 48 hours had the vote gone against the Liberals. Emerson endured no such risk. He joins the Conservatives having just two weeks ago labelled them as "angry" and "heartless" individuals who are "uncomfortable with ethnic minorities" and guided by an ideology where "the strong survive and the weak die."

Harper insists such flagrant capitulation to political expediency was required to ensure two Conservative metropolitan dead zones had Cabinet representation. Hogwash. James

Moore, one of his brightest young progressive MPs, represents a riding lining the northeastern edge of Vancouver.

Besides, if a civic shutout justifies shopping for a turncoat, what about Edmonton? It lacks a minister to call its own and has to settle for Rona Ambrose, whose riding sits on the edge of the Alberta capital.

As for Michael Fortier, well, it's even more inexplicable given Harper's views on electing the Senate. While Tory shut-out Toronto has its Cabinet representative hailing from Oshawa, a good 60-minute drive from downtown, he feels compelled to give Montreal an unaccountable senior minister despite having Transport Minister Lawrence Cannon in a riding also an hour's drive away.

Sadly, all this gives political cynicism a new lease on life courtesy of a leader dedicated to wiping it out. The giddy morale of Conservative MPs at winning the election has taken a hit as the party faithful watch some of their best and brightest being bumped by opportunists.

It might not have been quite so hard to take had Harper not shown questionable judgment in other Cabinet selections.

Lawyer Vic Toews rates a Cabinet job, but making him the face of law and order in Justice seems odd given his conviction last year for violating Manitoba election laws. Sure it was a minor offence and a misunderstanding, but the fact remains he would've been barred from Cabinet had it been a federal violation.

Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor's former life as a lobbyist for large defence contractors is an awkward juxtaposition given the military buildup (with juicy contracts aplenty) proposed by Harper.

The rest of Cabinet holds promise, although Harper's tight grip on decision-making suggests their main function will be to heed their master's voice.

Chuck Strahl, Jim Prentice, Tony Clement, Monte Solberg and Michael Chong will be the superstars of the future front bench.

But they got their reward the right way, by running as Conservatives, believing in party principles and getting elected under the party banner.

For Harper to unilaterally act to appoint freeloaders under flimsy pretexts, a clean government is launched by dirty politics.