

Harper ineffective in same-sex debate

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When he set out to fight the same-sex marriage bill, Conservative leader Stephen Harper gambled that he could do so without his party coming across as homophobic.

By the end of the battle in the House of Commons, that perception had become the least of his problems.

While the parliamentary debate has largely been reasoned, it has also exposed disquieting gaps in the logic of the Leader of the Official Opposition.

Harper may have a reputation as a straight shooter, but he did not live up to it over the course of this battle.

Instead, he has contradicted himself at every turn, exhibiting some startling views about the role of the country's political and judicial institutions along the way.

When the highest courts of three provinces originally gave same-sex marriage their blessing, Harper dismissed the rulings as the work of biased liberal judges.

When it was pointed out that the author of the Ontario landmark decision had once served in a Conservative cabinet at Queen's Park, Harper mused that he must have been a closet liberal.

He also said the courts had no business using the Charter of Rights to interfere with debates that primarily belong in the political arena.

But at the very time Harper was making that argument, a Charter challenge to the federal election law bearing his name had already wound its way up to the Supreme Court.

Throughout the last election, Harper insisted that Parliament should have the final say on same-sex marriage.

But he has steadfastly refused to be pinned down about whether the notwithstanding clause of the Constitution should ever be used to shelter the definition of marriage from the courts.

He won't even say if he, as prime minister, would invoke it.

Before, Harper pushed hard for a vote on same-sex marriage in the Commons. But when he realized that the post-election make-up of the House was favourable to same-sex marriage, he changed his tune.

Parliament, it seemed, would only be deemed to have had its final say once it concurred with his views.

At the end of last year, he promised a Conservative government would scrap any same-sex-marriage law passed before its arrival in power.

To back up his latest twist in logic, Harper argued that Prime Minister Paul Martin had tilted the balance by coercing his cabinet into supporting Bill C-38.

This spring, the Conservative leader used delaying tactics to push off the final vote on the legislation.

After the three other parties outwitted his strategists, he questioned the legitimacy of the future law, on the basis that it could not have passed without the support of the Bloc Québécois.

But just last month Harper was playing in the same sandbox as Gilles Duceppe, amicably plotting the swift demise of the minority government to their mutual advantage.

If a law passed with the support of the Bloc can be depicted as lacking legitimacy, should the act of co-operating with sovereignists to bring down a federalist government be called a coup?

Like the NDP, the Bloc has long supported same-sex marriage.

In so doing, it reflects the Quebec consensus on the matter.

Whenever the Quebec National Assembly has spoken on the issue, it has done so with one positive voice.

In the last election, more than 80 per cent of Quebec voters supported parties that did not oppose same-sex marriage.

It could be that it is Quebecers, in general, rather than sovereignists, in particular, that Harper has a problem with. As it happens, the feeling is increasingly reciprocal these days.

There are times when one earns respect for arguing the losing side of an issue with logic, class and passion.

Not in this case.

Harper emerges from the same-sex marriage debate looking less ready for political prime time than when he entered it.