

## Harper shows a tough streak ...

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper revealed a hard, pragmatic edge yesterday, moving with focused clarity and purpose to unveil his first Conservative cabinet. He made tough, unsentimental decisions, sprang a few surprises and served up a seasoned, regionally balanced ministry, albeit one that tilts to the right.

Harper stunned Ottawa and left himself open to accusations of inconsistency, or worse, by naming a high-profile Liberal defector to one key post and his unelected Tory campaign co-chair to another. After promising to "clean up" Ottawa and "improve Canadians' faith in public institutions" after a season of Liberal scandal, Harper appeared to be indulging in the same old games.

While Harper showed leadership and a readiness to brave criticism with these two appointments, they are hard to justify. Harper says he wooed Liberal MP David Emerson to be trade minister specifically to represent Vancouver. Maybe so. But the defection boosts the Tory bench strength in Parliament to 125 seats, improving the fragile minority government's ability to survive. He made the same case for appointing businessman Michael Fortier, who is not an MP, to represent Montreal. Fortier will sit in the Senate and be parachuted into the public works portfolio. Yet Harper saw no compelling need to name a minister from Toronto, the biggest city.

In opposition, Harper castigated Belinda Stronach for crossing the floor, calling it a betrayal of the voters' trust. And he argued senators should be elected, not appointed. Yesterday's appointments leave a whiff of cynicism, even hypocrisy, hanging in the air. On the positive side, Canada's Conservative government will be led by experienced, credible figures, including a strong Ontario contingent of nine ministers. The West, now "in," gets six posts, Quebec five, British Columbia four and the Atlantic region three. And while the City of Toronto has no MP and cabinet has no "cities" portfolio, Mayor David Miller takes comfort from the fact that a high-profile Quebecer, Lawrence Cannon, has been named not only transport and infrastructure minister, but also minister for communities. A former provincial Liberal minister, he has a sound grasp of urban issues. The Greater Toronto Area will be represented by Jim Flaherty in finance and by Bev Oda in heritage. And several others are well-placed to speak for the region: Robert Nicholson in democratic reform, Tony Clement in health and Michael Chong in intergovernmental affairs and sport.

Harper had to make difficult choices to get the mix he wanted, including sacrificing a high-profile Westerner, Diane Ablonczy, even though he did sensibly name six women to secondary portfolios. Another prominent Westerner, Jason Kenney, was also overlooked to make room for others.

While regionally balanced, and relatively youthful, Harper's slimmed-down, 26-member team perhaps not surprisingly tilts to the right on economic policy, justice, public safety, defence, health and immigration.

Flaherty, who helped guide Mike Harris's cost- and service-cutting Common Sense Revolution, now heads the key finance portfolio. Clement, another Harris minister, heads up health. John Baird, a third Harris-era fiscal conservative, will run treasury board. Former Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day will run public safety. Hardliner Vic

Toews is at justice. Monte Solberg heads citizenship and immigration. And Gordon O'Connor, a former general, heads defence.

While relative moderates like Peter MacKay in foreign affairs, Cannon in transport/communities and Sen. Marjory LeBreton as government Senate leader will provide some balance, the smaller size of this cabinet makes its conservative cast all the more apparent. And, given the Tories' long absence from power, it also contains a lot of rookie ministers.

Governing from the centre, which is what most voters seemed to want, will be a challenge for this team. It may not come naturally.

But that is what the Harper minority government must do, to "bring the parties in Parliament together," as he vowed yesterday, over his immediate plans to clean up government, cut the goods and services tax, crack down on crime, establish medical wait-time guarantees and provide parents with money for daycare.

Given his ministerial choices, Harper's promise to forge a consensus around "shared goals and common ideas" will be a real challenge, both inside cabinet and across party lines. Conservative success rides on it.