

Harper blows his credibility

Our election of last summer produced two principal results, both of them wholly admirable.

First, we humbled the Liberals a bit and thoroughly scared them. Until being reduced to a minority, the Liberals had grown insufferably smug (hence the sponsorship scandal) because they knew full well that we had no choice but to keep them in power for lack of any credible, national alternative.

Second, we achieved that credible alternative in the form of the new Conservatives with a sizeable number of seats (99) and pretty decent representation across the country, except for being blanked in Quebec.

As a consequence of these two accomplishments we joined the ranks of those countries with two or more party democratic systems, which is to say, just about every country in the world save North Korea and Iraq, at least until its elections in January.

But we've just returned to the ranks of one-party states. The Conservatives are no longer a credible national alternative, at least until after the next election. Soon, a surfeit of Liberal smugness will suffocate us.

The Conservatives have ceased to be a credible alternative until the next election, perhaps four years away, because their leader, Stephen Harper, is no longer a credible national leader.

Harper is a bright backroom type. He looks like a leader. He's cool under fire. But he's not a national leader; he's a sectional one. Essentially, he represents — really only wants to represent — those Canadians who hate the federal government. Really hate it, fear it, despise it.

A number of Canadians *do* share this viewpoint. But only a small minority. Many others may legitimately grumble at it. But they want it



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to perform as a government for *all* Canadians, which is the reason for having a federal system.

Harper's attitude is a combination of intellectual commitment to neo-conservatism, or, perhaps more accurately, to libertarianism, and emotional, Alberta-inspired loathing. There, the National Energy Program is sort of Canada's equivalent of the Black Death, even though it's now almost a quarter-century in the past.

The week, Harper revealed what he really thinks by doing something politicians almost never do. He said out loud what he really thinks.

In an extraordinary speech in Quebec city — his "Belgian waffle" as it's come to be known — Harper said out loud what he really thinks about the federal government. And he thinks it should virtually disappear.

He lobbed two ideas.

(1) Canada should become a transatlantic copy of Belgium, with Quebec — representing all francophones — and some undefined equivalent for English-speaking Canadians each taking over from Ottawa responsibility for broadcasting, culture and a swatch of international affairs.

(2) Recent ideas proposed in Quebec for it to gain "national autonomy" status — with the right to its own constitution — should be considered sympathetically because "Quebecers never wanted to be an overwhelmed province in a cen-

tralized Canada." Canada as a "centralized state?"

But for Belgium, Canada is already almost certainly the most decentralized confederation in the world, entirely aside from whatever additional decentralization will result from Prime Minister Paul Martin's policy of "asymmetrical federalism."

Harper's aides are now frantically trying to paddle their leader backwards. His ideas, they've told reporters, are "at an embryonic stage" and "may not even go anywhere."

Formally, they of course won't go anywhere now.

Conservative MPs are furious that Harper should have lobbed such provocative policy ideas without consulting any of them. It goes without saying that the actual federal-provincial policies that will come out of next year's Conservative convention will be carefully reworded into bland meaninglessness.

What will remain is that Harper is who he is. He's the voice of western regionalists and of Quebec nationalists and of neo-conservatives.

Not only is that a minority of Canadians, it comprises Canadians in conflict, most particularly those westerners and Quebecers who agree that the federal government that governs least, and best of all doesn't govern at all, is best for them.

For most Canadians, that formula adds up to a Canada that is less than the sum of its parts. Or no Canada at all that's worth caring about.

So long as Harper remains as leader, the Conservatives are no longer a credible national alternative.

So, we're back to our future as a one-party state.

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