

Is this how Harper ushers in a new era?

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's first day in office was marred by two deplorable decisions. The first was to put an unelected Conservative official in cabinet by appointing him to the Senate.

The choice of Tory campaign co-chairman Michael Fortier as Public Works Minister is precisely the sort of move that Mr. Harper used to denounce when he was Opposition leader. Mr. Harper argued then that the link between political parties and the public purse was an invitation to corruption. It was the blurring of the line between ruling party and government that led to the sponsorship scandal, after all.

Yet here we have a top official of the ruling party placed in charge of a ministry responsible for disbursing public money -- the very ministry, in fact, that was mixed up with sponsorship. Because Mr. Fortier lacks a seat in the House of Commons, the Opposition will not be able to question him directly on how he conducts himself. How are we to square this with Mr. Harper's vow to clean up government, which only yesterday he called his government's top priority?

The Fortier appointment clashes with another key Tory promise: to make the Senate an elected body. This has been at the centre of the Harper agenda since his days with the Reform and Alliance parties. Not long ago, Mr. Harper was pledging that he would no longer appoint senators who are not elected. So it is strange indeed that, in his very first act as prime minister, he should put a supporter in the cabinet by using his power of appointment -- a power he says prime ministers should not have.

In the past, prime ministers have reached into the Senate for cabinet ministers when they were shut out of one region or another. The Conservatives were not shut out in Quebec. They took a surprising 10 seats. Why, then, was it necessary to put an unelected minister in the cabinet? Mr. Harper's officials say he needed someone from the Montreal area, where the Tories failed to elect anyone. But Mr. Harper could have put one of his other Quebec MPs in charge of representing Montreal's interests. In other words -- what a concept -- he could simply have accepted the people's verdict and worked with the MPs they actually chose to elect.

Mr. Harper's second, even more dubious decision was to persuade David Emerson to leave the Liberal Party and join the Conservatives as Minister for International Trade. That showed a shocking disrespect for the voters of Vancouver Kingsway. Only two weeks ago they elected Mr. Emerson as a Liberal. Now they wake up to find Mr. Emerson posing for a cabinet photograph with Mr. Harper. How are voters supposed to believe in the democratic process if their choice is treated with such contempt?

The Tories came a poor third in Vancouver Kingsway, with just 18 per cent of the vote. Many voters backed Mr. Emerson specifically to keep the Tories out of power. Indeed, Mr. Emerson urged them to do just that. He even appealed to NDP supporters, asking them to block the Tories by voting for him.

On Nov. 28, according to the next day's Vancouver Sun, he said that the Conservative Party was made up of "heartless" and "angry" individuals who were hostile to Liberal social programs and to immigrants. "They're uncomfortable with ethnic minorities," said Mr. Emerson, whose riding contains many immigrants. "They try to dance around it and create partisan attempts to win those votes, but I think everybody sees through that." Now he is bumping elbows with those heartless people at the cabinet table.

It was one thing for Belinda Stronach to jump from the Tories to the Liberals. She at least had a reason on top of simple ambition. She was not getting along with Mr. Harper and was finding it hard to support the Conservative stand on same-sex marriage and other social issues. Mr. Emerson, by contrast, was a hand-picked ally of prime minister Paul Martin. He was getting along fine with his party and campaigned fiercely for it.

Even after the Liberal defeat, he told election-night supporters he would fight on for the Liberals -- and against the Tories. "And when we don't like public policy, when we think social justice is not being pursued, when we think the economic foundation that we put in place is jeopardized, you'd better believe we are going to make one heck of a lot of noise . . ." Now, presumably, he will be fighting for his new party just as loudly.

Mr. Harper says he thinks Mr. Emerson can contribute more in cabinet than he could on the Opposition benches. Mr. Emerson was always on the conservative wing of the Liberal Party anyway, the new Prime Minister told reporters. But if that was Mr. Emerson's real mindset, perhaps he should have run as a Tory in the first place. The very least he should have done was surrender his seat and contest it again as a Conservative, asking voters to approve his change of mind.

Mr. Emerson has shown very poor judgment. Mr. Harper has shown worse. He ran for prime minister as a man of principle, a man who would rise above grubby political tricks, a man who would return accountability and honesty to government. He has a perverse way of showing it.