

## The Harper Autumn Challenge: Maintaining Communication Control

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### 1. Spring – Establishing the Brand

Prime Minister Harper arrived in office in February determined to brand his new Conservative government as decisive, focused, and trustworthy. This branding exercise was largely successful as the spring sitting of Parliament moved forward aggressively on four of the government's five priorities: the *Accountability Act* has passed the House and is now in the Senate; the GST was cut by one per cent as of July 1<sup>st</sup>; Justice Minister Vic Toews tabled seven separate crime bills; and the direct Child Care Allowance for pre-school children was effected by the spring budget. Wisely not declaring the intent to do so, the Harper government acted as if it had a majority in the House of Commons, secure in the knowledge that each Opposition party had its own reasons for avoiding an election.

The Prime Minister also demonstrated a shrewd tactical grasp, periodically setting political traps aimed largely at weakening, and exploiting strains within, the Liberal Party of Canada. For example, he initiated a parliamentary debate and vote on Canada's mission in Afghanistan which showed division in Liberal ranks and which secured the support of two Liberal leadership candidates for extending the mission, potentially easing political damage on a hot issue should he face one of those two potential leaders in a general election. In another shot aimed at the Liberals, Mr. Harper appointed a member of the Liberal caucus as his Special Advisor on the Middle East and Afghanistan, causing consternation and discord in Liberal ranks.

Looking ahead, Prime Minister Harper has laid the groundwork for further jabs at the Liberals on two issues he hopes will define his government with the electorate – the *Accountability Act* and Senate reform. Both involve taking on the Liberal-controlled Senate this fall. These two issues are explored below.

The deliberately narrow scope of government activity last spring allowed the Harper government to succeed in making a strong first impression with Canadians as a practical, decisive government that is oriented toward tangible deliverables,

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particularly to its target electoral audiences – lower-to-middle income Canadians, families with children, middle-class seniors and small business owners.

## 2. Summer – The World Intervenes

During the summer months, a number of large political issues thrust themselves into the realm of political discourse beyond the control of the government. Without the forums of Question Period and parliamentary committees to frame the agenda, the government found itself increasingly responding to external issues that were not of its own choosing.

These included, among others continuing Canadian Forces casualties in Afghanistan, the eruption of war between Israel and Hezbollah, criticism (although in the minority) of the final Softwood Lumber agreement with the US, criticism in some quarters of the Prime Minister’s absence from the international AIDS conference hosted in Toronto, a debate between the mayor of Vancouver and the federal government over safe injection sites, new US border restrictions, US President Bush criticizing Canada for being a terrorist haven, and an archipelago of Conservative Party complaints over election nomination disqualifications.

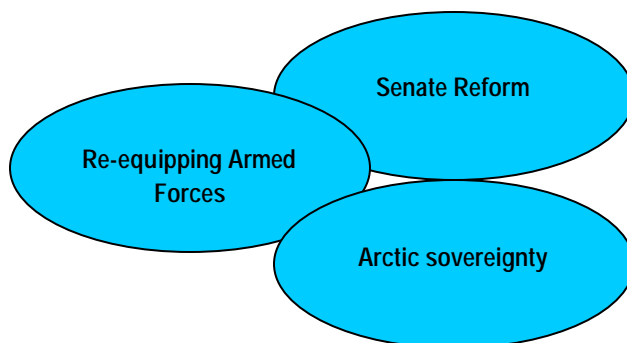
### Summer Destabilizers



In other words, because the government did not have the parliamentary tools to help it set the agenda, it spent a good part of the summer responding to others’ agendas and to circumstances which arose.

Moreover, the number of destabilizing issues to which the government had to respond far outweighed the number of major proactive agenda-setting initiatives – or “channel-changers” – rolled out by the government over the summer months.

### **Proactive Major Summer Initiatives**



As Parliament resumes on September 18<sup>th</sup>, the government will immediately be held to account more visibly on the major political issues that arose during the summer. For instance, the House of Commons will be voting on the softwood lumber agreement (a confidence vote, although we know the Opposition parties will not trigger an election), and several Opposition parties are calling for a renewed debate on Canada’s role in Afghanistan. The other “destabilizer” issues of the summer will likely be raised in both Question Period and in parliamentary committees.

In addition, the Harper government will be fulfilling two other election promises this fall: moving to scrap the long gun registry and holding a free vote in the House regarding same sex marriage. Each of these controversial issues has the potential to attract considerable media attention as well as highlight sharp divisions within the country.

### **3. Facing the Fall –Four Pillars of Regaining Momentum**

The natural political objective of the Harper government for the fall sitting of Parliament is to reinforce the government’s brand, build upon the successes of the spring, and to continue to drive the political agenda with its own policy ideas and initiatives. As the fall sitting may be the last full parliamentary stretch before the next general election, it will be important for the government to maintain a high degree of agenda control, make progress on several additional major policy matters, and thus position itself to face the polls as a clean and accomplished government.

The swift delivery of four of the five policy priorities in the spring, however, will make this job more difficult: with most of its own primary objectives already out of the way, how does the government remain in control of political discourse?

Cabinet met the week of September 11<sup>th</sup> to determine the next set of policy objectives on which the government is to focus during the fall session. The government will begin the fall sitting determined to withstand the barrage emanating from the summer destabilizers and pre-position itself for a 2007 election. The government's fall agenda is being framed by the government as "getting things done on the issues that matter to families and taxpayers," with a focus on four pillars it feels can be reasonably accomplished in this sitting:

- A. ***Accountability and Democratic Reform*** – implementing the *Accountability Act* and moving forward with Senate reform
- B. ***Economic Management and Value for Money*** – measures to ensure a strong economy for the long haul including value for money expenditure review
- C. ***Environment and Personal Health*** – rolling out a series of practical measures to clean up the environment, including Canada's first *Clean Air Act*
- D. ***Crime and National Security*** – continuing to introduce legislation to tackle gang, gun and drug crime, with a special focus on firearm offenses, including making it tougher for those convicted of gun crime to obtain bail, and passing mandatory minimum sentences for violent offenses.

### **Accountability and Democratic Reform**

The *Accountability Act* was the government's spring legislative centrepiece. It has passed the Commons and will be a focus of Senate deliberations this fall. The *Act* is framed with the *raison d'être* of correcting a legacy of Liberal corruption. It is this frame that troubles Liberal Senators. The Liberal Senate leadership has already advised the Prime Minister that it will take the time necessary to meet its constitutional obligations, which, not coincidentally, should also be sufficient to lessen the impact of one provision on the ability of Liberals to attend their leadership convention in late November-early December. A showdown looms on the horizon, and this slowdown in "fighting corruption" will be exploited by the government in justifying its second major democratic reform initiative: Senate reform.

Initiating steps to reform the Senate has two political objectives. First, it is popular with the Conservatives' core supporters, particularly in western Canada. And if some degree of Senate reform can be achieved without engaging in loud and tiresome constitutional battles, the government will earn the quiet respect of many other Canadians. Second, it pits the will of an elected Conservative government against that of an unelected Liberal-dominated Senate. This battle ground is most favourable to the Harper government. And while Senate reform may seem somewhat esoteric to many Canadians, finding ways to shine a negative light on the Liberal Party in a pre-election context is what will drive it.

The unprecedented appearance by a Prime Minister at a Senate Committee hearing to discuss Senate reform demonstrates the political importance of this issue. While legislation to introduce 8-year term limits on Senators and to formalize Senate elections may not be passed by Parliament before the next election, the Harper government will have made some political gains simply by making the attempt. The strength of these gains will be determined by the degree to which the Senate attempts to thwart the government's efforts to change it.

### **Economic Management and Value for Money**

It is becoming increasingly likely that the government will introduce an economic and fiscal update in the fall, as has become traditional practice. The update – effectively a mini-budget – would serve as a pre-election document to poise the government for a likely return to the polls in the spring of 2007. Considering its pre-writ timing, it is indeed possible that the economic and fiscal update could be broader in scope with pre-election “goodies” than the main budget was in the spring. For example, the update could include implementation of the capital gains tax deferral which was promised in the Conservatives' election platform, and held over from the spring budget for future implementation. If effected, the capital gains tax deferral could be a very significant pre-election deal sweetener aimed at middle-income voters – particularly if its implementation date were deferred to a date later than the eventual federal election.

The fall update may also provide the platform for the government to set out its plans for dealing with productivity and competitiveness issues. The May budget did not set out a general economic blueprint for the country – the fall update may include an “economic plan for Canada” as a pre-election “table setter”. Kevin Lynch, Clerk of the Privy Council, the government's top public servant, has long been a strong advocate of improving Canada's productivity record. One of Mr. Lynch's policy preoccupations is to narrow the productivity gap between Canada and the United States, an important issue given NAFTA and Canada's desire to serve as a platform for foreign companies to do business in North America. With a new Deputy Minister of Finance – selected by Mr. Lynch – in place, it is conceivable that this agenda will be given impetus in the fall.

The economic and fiscal update may also be the vehicle for announcing the government's plans for – or at least to offer a progress report on – two initiatives included in the May 2006 budget:

- The President of the Treasury Board was directed to identify savings of \$1 billion in each of the current fiscal year and the next. This initiative is being framed by the government as a “Value for Money Expenditure Review.” The results of this expenditure management review may be included in Supplementary Estimates, but will certainly be manifest this fall – possibly even before the economic and fiscal update.

The expenditure review will reinforce the message that the government will more closely adhere to the division of constitutional responsibilities between the federal government and the provinces. With the previous government having already found many of the “easy” savings, and with the high level of hoped-for savings from procurement reform unlikely to be met, it is reasonable to expect that some program spending will be cut – watch for reductions in certain social programs the government believes are more appropriately provided by provincial and territorial governments.

- The Minister of Industry was asked, in collaboration with the Minister of Finance, to prepare a new science and technology strategy. In support of this strategic consideration of Canada's S&T policy, the Industry Minister commissioned a study by the Council of Canadian Academies. The Council's report entitled “The State of Science & Technology in Canada”, released on September 12, 2006, will likely influence decisions taken by the government regarding S&T. The Council found that “Canada is strong in research, generally well-equipped technologically, but lagging in translation of research strength to innovation strength.” This finding can be used to reinforce a productivity/competitiveness agenda.

### **Environment and Personal Health (a.k.a. the “Green Plan”)**

The environmental “Green Plan” is expected to be the single biggest project of the government, which has endured sustained criticism for effectively withdrawing from the Kyoto Protocol without an alternative climate change plan. The Green Plan has been under intense construction throughout the summer, and the government intends to roll out this fall a pre-election-worthy environmental package focusing primarily on pollution reduction and remediation and secondarily on reducing the growth of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. As with previous initiatives of this government, the plan will be linked with personal tangible benefits – particularly health benefits. Cleaner air and water are tangible objectives to which ordinary voters can relate, rather than macro GHG programs that are couched in terms of global public policy.

The Conservatives invested considerable political capital in criticizing the previous government's environmental policies. The Kyoto goals were clearly unattainable (in 2004, Canadian GHG emissions were almost 35% above the Kyoto target), although Canada would likely be in good company internationally as many other signatory nations are also expected to fall short by the end of the 2008-2012 period. This prompted the new government to approach the environment on a "made in Canada" track, and to emphasize clean air, water and soil over greenhouse gases – most of which are not smog-causing pollutants.

Ironically, the Liberal approach to climate change included policy measures with which conservative governments would tend to be associated, including voluntary measures rather than regulatory instruments imposed on many industries, innovation, and a relatively soft-handed regulatory approach to large final emitters, including a market-oriented approach to carbon trading. It will be interesting to see if the Conservative Green Plan incorporates such measures thrown out with the Liberal plan or if it replaces them with stiffer, more regulatory-oriented ones.

There is a great deal at stake for the Harper government in this. Kyoto is most popular in electoral areas where the Conservatives need to gain seats to form a majority government, namely large urban centres and Quebec. Moreover, it is de-emphasizing climate change at a time when political discourse in the US and other countries around the world seems to be moving toward an acceptance of GHG emissions' harmful effects on the environment. This raises a critical question for the government: will changing the channel to clean air, water and soil – albeit aggressively – work?

The Environment and Personal Health package is expected to be rolled out as a series of separate legislative initiatives throughout the autumn, rather than as a single cohesive "omnibus" bill.

### **Justice and Security**

Introducing further measures to fight crime appeals to core Conservative voters and also is aimed at voters living in large urban centres troubled by gun, drug and gang violence. In addition to the seven Justice bills already introduced by the Justice Minister, a series of other crime fighting bills are expected to be tabled this fall. Legislation making it more difficult for firearm offenders to obtain bail will complement existing legislation on the Order Paper calling for mandatory minimum sentences for firearm offenders, and a bill to limit conditional sentencing.

Furthermore, the regional ministers’ offices across Canada have been organizing roundtables to discuss crime fighting initiatives with key stakeholders (presumably excepting those doing time).

This aggressive targeting of gun crime will be the prime response to the tragic shooting at Dawson College in Montreal, and will have to be carefully sold – particularly in light of Harper ally Premier Jean Charest’s call for the federal government to abandon plans to dismantle the long gun registry.

#### 4. Helping Deliver the Message

Every government must rely on a professional public service to help develop, draft and implement its policies. The federal public service, which takes pride in being a non-partisan, career service, are invaluable in helping the government shape and deliver its messages to Canadians. That is why the make-up of the senior ranks of the federal public service is an important consideration as the government faces the fall sitting.

Since forming his government in January 2006, Prime Minister Harper has announced four major shuffles of Deputy Ministers and Associate Deputy Ministers, involving some 35 senior officials. Some media analysts and Opposition members have referred to this as a purge of the public service and a politicization of a non-partisan bureaucracy. This is an inaccurate portrayal of the significant changes made to the public service since February.

#### The Changing Face of the Senior Federal Public Service

DEPARTMENT	CHANGE IN DM?	NEW DM
Privy Council Office	Yes	Kevin Lynch – Clerk
Agriculture/Agri Food		
Canada Revenue Agency		
Canadian Heritage		
Citizenship and Immigration	Yes	Richard Fadden
Environment Canada	Yes	Michael Horgan
Finance Canada	Yes	Robert Wright
Fisheries and Oceans		
Foreign Affairs		
Health Canada		

Human Resources and Social Development	Yes	Janice Charette
Indian Affairs and Northern Development	Yes	Michael Wernick
Industry Canada	Yes	Richard Dicerni
International Trade	Yes	Marie-Lucie Morin
Justice		
National Defence		
Natural Resources Canada	Yes	Cassie Doyle
Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada	Yes	Suzanne Hurtubise
Public Works and Government Services Canada		
Transport Canada/ Infrastructure and Communities	Yes	Louis Ranger adds Infra&Comm duties
Treasury Board Secretariat		
Veterans Affairs		

Although Deputy Ministers are appointed by the Prime Minister, he is acting upon the recommendations of the Clerk of the Privy Council, Kevin Lynch. While some critics label Mr. Harper as a micro-manager, there is no evidence that any of the deputy ministerial appointments are partisan or politically motivated. All are career public servants who have advanced in the system based upon merit. All but one was selected from amongst the existing federal deputy minister community. The only exception was the appointment of Richard Dicerni as Deputy Minister of Industry Canada. He is a former federal, and latterly provincial, bureaucrat and Ontario Power Generation executive.

Kevin Lynch is clearly putting in place his own protégés in key departments such as Finance, Environment, Human Resources, Industry and Natural Resources. This is normal with leadership changes in large organizations. And it reflects his need to be confident in the leadership within departments that are central to the government's agenda. Mr. Lynch's personal interest is in the micro-economic policy agenda, Canada/US relations and lagging productivity growth in Canada *vis-à-vis* the US. It will be interesting to note the extent to which these issues become manifest in the fall economic and fiscal update and in the spring 2007 budget.

## 6. Conclusion

The fall parliamentary sitting will be more difficult for the government than its experience in the spring. Mr. Harper's fall agenda will not have quite as sharp a focus as the spring's "Five Priorities", and will be implemented in a post-honeymoon period in which the government will be increasingly held to account for externally-driven issues – largely relating to non-domestic policy, such as defence policy, international trade irritants, and foreign affairs policy.

On external policy issues, the Opposition will increasingly attempt to portray Mr. Harper's government as mimicking that of George W. Bush, while the government attempts to steer the topics of public discourse back toward domestic issues. The "Five Priorities" of the spring are being replaced by the four pillars governing government activity this fall: Accountability and Parliamentary Reform, Economic Management and Value for Money Expenditure Review, Environment and Personal Health, and Justice and Security with a focus on gun crime.

This tug-of-war for control of the public discourse agenda will become increasingly important, particularly as the Liberal Party concludes its leadership race and all parties begin to prepare for a likely 2007 election.