

Parliament is Now in Session: The Harper Government Agenda

1. Speech from the Throne – Overview

The April 4th Speech from the Throne presents a minority government's outline of an achievable and definable policy agenda. But what lies behind this policy agenda is very much a political agenda. Prime Minister Harper has segmented the Canadian political marketplace and his Throne Speech clearly targets those voters whose support he believes will be necessary in order for him to win a majority in the next federal election. Every measure set out in the Throne Speech is, and every action taken by his government will be, focused on that end-game.

2. The Political Context

The Speech from the Throne reflects the political and operational culture of the new Conservative Government.

On January 23rd a Conservative government was elected with a relatively weak minority – 124 Conservative seats versus 184 seats for the Opposition. Almost immediately, the new government demonstrated a streamlined and action-oriented organization. Streamlined and action-oriented also describes the Throne Speech.

On February 6th a much smaller Cabinet was sworn in with a streamlined decision-making process: 27 ministers replaced 39, and 6 cabinet committees replaced 9. To further expedite decision-making, Prime Minister Harper built-in additional unconventional efficiencies, such as naming his finance minister as the chair of Cabinet's Economic Affairs Committee.

Economic- and business-oriented MPs such as Jim Flaherty and Maxime Bernier were appointed to key economic portfolios in order to foster a business-literate culture in Cabinet. Furthermore, former provincial cabinet ministers were appointed to federal portfolios in which they have experience: Vic Toews, Jim Flaherty and Tony Clement are prime examples. Such an assignment of responsibilities points to an unwillingness to squander time on unnecessary

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learning curves, and to make decisions based on a business case, rather than miring Cabinet in prolonged internal public policy debates – a luxury of majority Parliaments.

Overall, the objective is to form a majority government in two years time or less. The challenge for Prime Minister Harper is to repeat the 1958 election result of John Diefenbaker, rather than the 1980 election result of Joe Clark. To do this, the Prime Minister must maintain his Prairie and smaller-town Ontario electoral base, build significantly on his beachhead of 10 seats in Québec, and win in the major metropolitan centres of Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver.

3. Policy Objectives

In an expected departure from custom, this Throne Speech was not a wide-ranging discussion of broad public policy objectives over a long legislative timeframe. Unlike most Throne Speeches, it did not give a nod to every industry, region, and interest group. It was clear and focused, delivering primarily what was expected – a tight mandate fixed on the government’s so-called “Five Priorities”.

The Five Priorities

1. An Accountability Act designed to enhance transparency in the relationship between government and stakeholders.
2. An initial GST cut of one per cent.
3. A health care wait times guarantee.
4. A new direct child care allowance for all parents with young children and incentives to create daycare spaces.
5. A toughening of criminal justice with a focus on violent offences.

In this sense, the Throne Speech did not contain surprises. We have all heard the government repeat its Five Priorities many times. However, it is important to keep in mind not just the content of this very narrow agenda, but also the motivation – not just the “what” but the “why”. A limited policy agenda comprised of these particular Five Priorities was strategically chosen for one basic reason – quick action and electoral marketability.

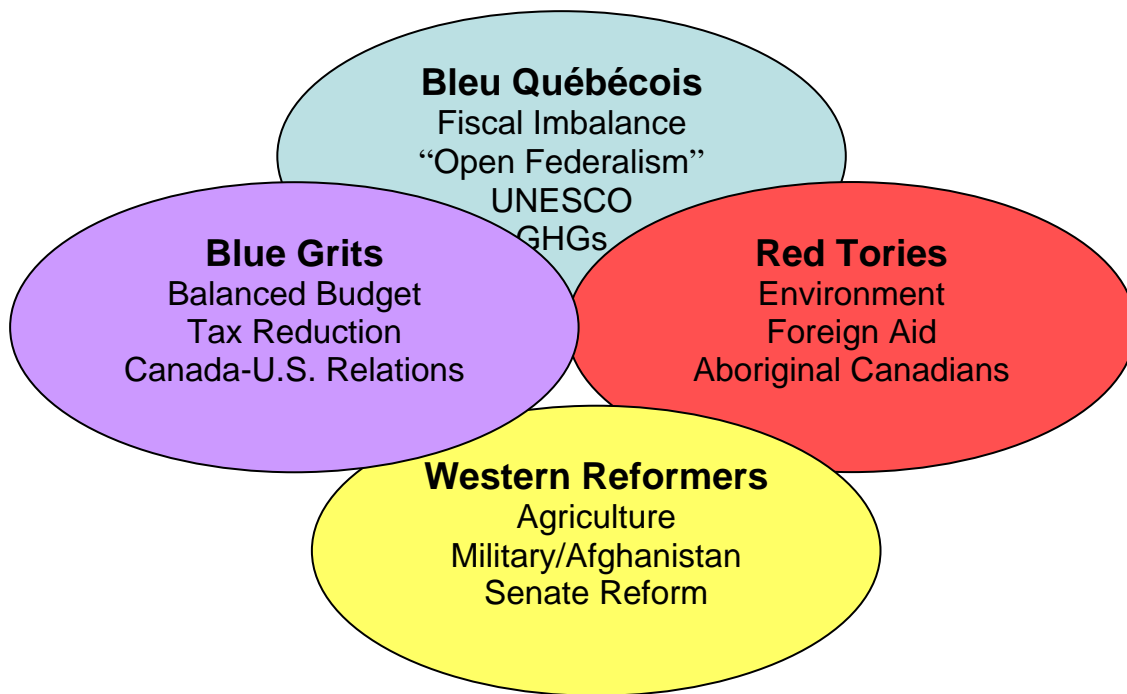
With a small minority, the timing of the next election is uncertain. By selecting a focus that is limited in scope for its first session, the government is attempting to guarantee that it will not go to the polls in the next election without a check-list of tangible accomplishment that is readily identifiable to the electorate.

4. Beyond The “Five Priorities”

A number of broad policy areas outside the Five Priorities was touched upon in the Throne Speech. Every non-Five Priority reference was included for one of two reasons: to maintain the Conservative’s electoral base, or to open new electoral opportunities in the “new frontier” – Québec and the three major cities.

In the March 2006 edition of *Policy Options*, Jamie Watt of Navigator proposed a model analyzing the composition of Conservative party support, making a case for four distinct voter groupings that coalesced in the Conservative Party’s January 23rd victory. TACTIX has adapted this model in the diagram below to demonstrate how Throne Speech items were targeted specifically to each constituent member of the Conservative coalition.

The Conservative Coalition



Adapted from: Navigator Focus Groups, January 2006

Policy items and language included specifically to appeal to the “new frontier” include:

- Discussion of “jurisdictional squabbles” (Québec).
- Fiscal imbalance (Québec and the major cities).
- “Open federalism” (Québec).
- A “strong vibrant Québec in a united Canada” (Québec).
- “Special cultural responsibilities” / UNESCO representation (Québec).
- Opportunities for new immigrants (major cities).
- Apology for the Chinese Head Tax (major cities, especially Vancouver).

With Québec-centred language featured so prominently in this Throne Speech, there is little doubt about the Conservative’s strategic plans for the next election. Furthermore, the prominence of such language in the government’s first Throne Speech acknowledges that an election may occur before a second “pre-election” Throne Speech can be delivered. Thus, a Québec-friendly agenda is laid out immediately, alongside the Five Priority policy objectives.

It is also worth noting, from a tactical perspective, that no specific industrial sector was mentioned other than Agriculture – a sector which is identified closely with the Conservative’s Prairie voter base. This inclusion was deliberate and calculated. It was aimed at a core party base and designed to offset any possible Prairie displeasure with the strong overtures to Québec.

5. Parliamentary Dynamics

On April 3rd, one day before the Throne Speech, Liberal M.P. Peter Milliken was re-elected as Speaker of the House of Commons. The absence of governing-party candidates for the Speaker’s title was not an accident. In fact, Mr. Milliken’s re-election is the final stage of a three-move strategy to ensure a parliamentary dynamic that is more amenable to the government’s legislative agenda.

The first stage of this strategy was securing the defection of David Emerson from the Liberal caucus to the Conservative caucus immediately after the election. This increased the Conservative’s voting strength in the House from 124 to 125.

Stage two was the surprise appointment of former Conservative dissident leader Chuck Strahl to Cabinet. This was likely an attempt to preclude former Deputy Speaker Strahl from seeking the Speaker’s job. By preserving Mr. Strahl as a voting member on the Conservative benches (the Speaker does not vote except to break a tie), the government avoided a reduction in its voting strength from 125 to 124.

It bears remembering that on election-day, the seat breakdown in the House of Commons was as follows: 124 Conservatives, 103 Liberals, 51 Bloc Québécois, 29 New Democrats, and 1 independent. In a 308-seat House, this initial seat distribution meant that the governing Conservatives had only two possible Opposition allies to pass legislation – the Liberals or the Bloc Québécois. The numbers were not present for the NDP to also hold the balance of power.

However, securing Minister Emerson, appointing Minister Strahl, and declining to run any Conservatives on the Speaker’s ballot has resulted in the possibility of Conservative-NDP collaboration to pass legislation. In a session featuring “accountability” and with democratic reform proposals signalled in the Throne Speech – objectives for which the NDP would likely be the natural political ally – this is shrewd tactical manoeuvring on the part of Mr. Harper.

Although the dynamic in the House has been adjusted favourably for the government, the Liberal-dominated Senate may prove to be a different story. Liberal Senators can be expected to serve as a primary tool in the Official Opposition’s role of opposing government legislation.

The Liberals will have to be judicious, however, in their use of the Senate as a vehicle to oppose the Harper government. Many voters will want to give the Conservatives a fair chance to demonstrate their competence in government. An unduly obstreperous Liberal-led Senate could lead those voters to want to punish the Liberals for using an unelected body to thwart the will of their elected representatives.

As a practical matter, it is expected that Liberal dominance in the Senate will translate into some delays in the government’s bid to put ‘check marks’ beside each of its Five Priorities. Although Mr. Harper would be most pleased to complete his checklist by the June summer recess, this is unlikely to happen.

6. What This Means for the Private Sector

Unlike the *modus operandi* of many multiple-term governments, the direction and activities of the Harper government – at least in its first Session – will be directed almost exclusively by the Prime Minister’s Office. This tight discipline and resolve to deliver quickly on the government’s electoral marketing objectives will make it more difficult than it normally is to distract the government from its priorities by advocating non-priority policy objectives, regardless of their merits.

This being the case, the non-Five Priorities policy items receiving honourable mention in the Speech from the Throne, identified in the box below, provide an invaluable opportunity for private sector stakeholders to seize upon the very fact of their mention.

Policy Items Receiving Honourable Mention

- Respond to concerns about the fiscal imbalance.
- Reduce pollution.
- Greenhouse gas reduction.
- *Bank Act* review (which will include other financial services legislation).
- *Anti-Terrorism Act* review.
- *Canadian Environmental Protection Act* review.
- Farm income stabilization and disaster relief programs.
- Give the Public Service the leadership and tools to excel.
- Promote a more competitive, more productive economy.
- Innovative approaches to health care delivery consistent with the *CHA*.
- Apologize for the Chinese Head Tax.
- Support a stronger military.
- Make more effective use of Canadian aid dollars.
- Examine the electoral system and democratic institutions.
- Focus on Canada-U.S. relations and policies facilitating trade.
- Cultural autonomy measures for Québec.

Wherever possible, private sector stakeholders will be well-advised to establish a link between their policy objectives and any of these secondary objectives as grounds for obtaining the government's ear.

It is critical to note that among the Public Service, the Speech from the Throne is very thoroughly analyzed by senior officials for language that may constitute a mandate to proceed or halt particular initiatives.

It will also be advisable for the private sector to cultivate the language of the new government in their advocacy of public policy objectives. Themes such as federal-provincial cooperation, and recognition of the fiscal imbalance will serve as practical "hooks" for approaching the government with policy objectives that were not mentioned in the Throne Speech.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind the overall electoral needs of the government – more seats in Québec, and a penetration of the three metropolises of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. All else remaining equal, any policy measures that speak directly to the electoral fortunes of these regions will find a more receptive ear in government than policies which do not.

7. Conclusion

As expected, the Speech from the Throne offered a focused – or to use the speech’s own language, a “clear and concise” – agenda of definable and achievable policy objectives geared toward electoral marketing in the next election. The government has concluded that definable success in a small number of tangible and attractive policy achievements will serve the Conservative Party better at the polls than a broad yet incomplete roadmap of public policy endeavour.

Some of the Five Priorities are unlikely to get an easy ride in Parliament, particularly the child care policy, the apparent replacement of Liberal income tax cuts with the GST reduction and, if it is included in the criminal justice crackdown, the elimination of the long-gun registry. But the new numbers in the House which allow the government to partner with any one of the three Opposition parties to pass legislation provides ‘wiggle room’ for bi-lateral bargaining.

The secondary, or non-Five Priorities policy items contained in the Throne Speech were included strategically to either help weld the existing Conservative coalition or to appeal directly to voters in the very specific geographical areas in which the party needs to grow – Québec and the big cities.

The focused scope of this Throne Speech points to the likelihood of a short first Parliamentary Session, with a likely second broader Throne Speech in the fall of 2006, once the Five Priorities have been achieved.

Finally, the government included sufficient language in the Speech from the Throne to complicate potential opposition from the other parties – the NDP may be hard-pressed to vote against a Throne Speech identifying democratic reform and greater environmental protection as significant secondary objectives, and it will be difficult for the Bloc Québécois to vote against a Throne Speech containing such accommodating language to the Province of Québec.