

CONSERVATIVE AGENDA

Harper's goal to create autonomous regions out of the provinces is a step back to colonial times

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Some say Prime Minister Stephen Harper has a hidden agenda. In fact, he has a very clear agenda. Harper is an ideologue who thinks in top-down terms. When he speaks to fellow believers, his audience consists of confirmed neo-cons who envision a promised land of unfettered capitalism with as little government interference as possible. This is the key group for Harper and his Conservative party.

But there is a second audience he and his associates speak to – the general public, the voters. Harper and his associates recognize that to reach their goal it is necessary to play to the parochial interests of groups such as Bloc Québécois supporters in the hope of winning their votes.

This creates a dichotomy for the Harperites, leading to their double-talk. This month we have had a good example of this phenomenon.

Referring to "Quebec's historical demands," Labour Minister Jean-Pierre Blackburn raised the possibility of winning 30 to 40 seats in the province, up from the current 11.

"The recognition of the Quebec nation within Canada allows us to think that we can put some meat around it, and that a majority government is more able to do a number of things, while being respectful of all of the provinces," Blackburn said in an interview. On the topic of constitutional change, he added: "When you're a minority, you never know what can happen, so it's not obvious to do that type of thing in the actual context."

The media jumped all over the story so Harper introduced the double-talk. He told a news conference: "I don't sense among the Canadian population, or the population of Quebec for that matter, any desire to engage in constitutional discussions in the near future. And the government has no plans to do that."

Blackburn had made a mistake. He should not have used the words "constitutional change."

Harper's inner group is aware of the need to act incrementally so as not to scare the wider public. But they have made it clear: All they need is a majority government to reach their objective.

Here are the facts:

On Oct. 15, 1995, Reform party leader Preston Manning and unity critic Stephen Harper presented Reform's "New Confederation" proposal, a package of 20 measures to modernize and decentralize Canada.

"We propose measures which will assert the autonomy of all provinces and the power of the people well into the future," Harper said.

Each of the 20 changes could be accomplished without comprehensive federal-provincial negotiations of the sort that led to the failed Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords. Reform's proposals simply required a federal government willing to act. "Canadians want change, not more constitutional wrangling," Harper said.

Earlier, speaking to a meeting of the National Citizens Coalition on May 24, 1994, Harper said: "Whether Canada ends up with one national government, or two governments or 10 governments, the Canadian people will require less government no matter what the constitutional status or arrangements of any future country may be."

In 1997, Harper and his confidant Tom Flanagan, writing in their *Next City* magazine, suggested that coalition-building was the only practical way for the right to seize national power. They said an alliance with the Bloc Québécois "would not be out of place. The Bloc are nationalist for much the same reason Albertans are populists – they care about their local identity ... and they see the federal government as a threat to their way of life."

In 2001, Harper proposed "a firewall around Alberta."

In October 2004, Harper made his "Belgian waffle" speech in Quebec City, suggesting that Canada should become a North American version of Belgium, which has autonomous regions. He was sympathetic to this "national autonomy" concept because "Québécois never wanted to be an overwhelmed province in a centralized Canada." Subsequent to Harper's speech, the Belgians had an election that left them so divided they were unable to form a government for more than eight months.

As keynote speaker at the Conservative policy convention in Montreal in March 2005, Harper said: "I also know very well the pride and solidarity of Quebecers. I know they will never let the autonomy and the dignity of Quebec be undermined. But they also want to be partners in the future of Canada. And they will be – once again – with the new Conservative Party of Canada."

Harper made that comment after referring to the Bloc eight times. Each time he set out what the Bloc had proposed for a sovereign Quebec but had not achieved.

"The policy of the Bloc is the strategy of the empty chair," Harper stressed. Then he delivered the punch line: "We, the Conservatives, are the only real vehicle of change here in Quebec and throughout Canada. The Bloc will never make a single positive change. In Quebec, as everywhere in Canada, the only vehicle of change is the Conservative Party of Canada."

With little mainstream news comment, Harper – the day after his keynote speech – slipped a new section into the Conservative policy paper passed in Montreal. It is a shocker! For the first time in Canadian history, a national political party embraced a provincial rights agenda. The section – Part D – binds the party "to ensure that the use of the federal spending power in provincial jurisdictions is limited, authorizes the provinces to use the opting out formula with full compensation if they want to opt out of a new or modified federal program, in areas of shared or exclusive jurisdiction. Consider reforming Canadian federalism, taking into account: (a) the need to consolidate Quebec's position within the Canadian federation; (b) the need to alleviate the alienation felt by the citizens of the West."

In his closing speech at the convention on March 19, Harper said: "I would like to say to Quebecers, our party is going to respect the autonomy of their government, the pride they have in their society and also their needs within Canada, our huge country. The Bloc Québécois for 15 years have not done everything that Quebecers deserve. And I think now Quebecers can express their solidarity within the Conservative Party of Canada."

Almost 50 years earlier, campaigning on a "One Canada" platform in March 1957, John Diefenbaker told a Montreal audience that the Progressive Conservative party "will bring about a united Canada. Our first aim is 'One Canada' in which there will be equalization of opportunity for all parts of Canada. We will maintain the Constitution and provincial rights thereunder, which we consider as a sacred trust which shall be maintained in fact as in law."

He cited the words of Sir George-Étienne Cartier: "First of all, let us be Canadians."

Given a choice, without double-talk, Canadians will support a One Canada vision rather than Harper's suggestion that we make Canada the Belgium of North America, with up to 10 autonomous nations.

Does Harper not realize that prior to Confederation, the colonies of British North America were autonomous and that Lord Durham in his famous report reaffirmed their colonial status while Britain retained control over foreign affairs and the military?

It is strange that Harper's mission today is to make all our provinces autonomous with Ottawa mainly looking after foreign affairs and defence as Britain did in colonial days.

Do you call that progress or just ludicrous?

Sinclair Stevens served in the cabinets of Progressive Conservative prime ministers Joe Clark and Brian Mulroney.