

HARPER'S TEAM

Behind The Scenes In The Conservative Rise To Power

Tom Flanagan

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Elections leading to change often produce many books, but the 2006 Canadian federal election was exceptional. To date, eight books have been published accounting in some measure for the Conservative party's accession to government, albeit with a minority. Tom Flanagan's book is uncommonly interesting in that he writes as both a central insider and a leading political scientist. Flanagan, on the one hand, references Edmund Burke, Aristotle, Friedrich Hayek, the "median voter theorem," and academic election studies; on the other, he discusses the highs and lows of campaigns, the panoply of events, people and committees, and the mundane (how many buses does a party need to campaign in the prairies?).

Flanagan's account runs from 1991 to 2006, ending with "The ten commandments of Conservative campaigning," where he provides a template for future election victories. He recounts meeting Stephen Harper and their developing relationship in the 1990s, Harper's election as leader of the Canadian Alliance (CA), successor to the Reform Party, the 2003 merger of the CA and the Progressive Conservative (PC) parties, the election of Harper as the new Conservative party's leader and the elections of 2004 and 2006. Flanagan served as manager of Harper's leadership campaigns; was Harper's chief of staff in his first year as CA leader; was the party's 2004 campaign manager; and worked in its 2006 "war room." After the PCs were virtually destroyed in the 1993 election, he was involved in various subsequent "unite the right" endeavours. The eventual coalescing of conservatives broke the Liberal party's 13-year hold on office that had been built on four victorious elections (three majority, one minority) and helped in good measure by the fractured right.

There is much here about how a modern political party works, especially in the frenzied atmosphere of electronically charged campaigns. The organizational depth that is required—and mostly achieved by the Conservatives—to contest an election is clearly revealed by Flanagan's discussion. He works his way through various setbacks and successes with a measured manner and judicious eye. He admits mistakes (his and others), such as the infamous charge that Paul Martin was soft on child pornography; and acknowledges organizational, planning, and resource inadequacies. The reader senses a fair recording of the inevitably subjective and often-undocumented history.

Practitioners' expedient decisions and theorists' abstracted justifications for action often clash in politics. Does one argue for advantage or principle? The precipitating event for the CA-PC merger was the decision of PC leader Peter MacKay to engage in discussions with Harper, even though at the leadership convention, barely concluded, MacKay had signed an express commitment not to do so. Flanagan reports what happened but does not judge MacKay's actions. Do the practitioner and theorist in Flanagan agree? Flanagan writes that despite "a cap on national campaign spending, it is easy and legal to exceed it by transferring expenditures to local campaigns that are not able to spend up to their own limits" (188). Easy indeed, but Elections Canada has questioned this "in-and-out" scheme's legality, to the point of having the RCMP search Conservative party headquarters.

Beyond the intricacies of party organization and the inevitable uncertainties of elections, Flanagan's book speaks to two bases of Canadian polit-

ical life. The first is simply that politics is played differently in Québec than elsewhere. Those with Reform and CA backgrounds saw Québec as just another province, so in 2004 the party's "slogan, platform, and advertising were conceived in English without the Québec situation in mind, and then translated into French" (161). Learning that they erred in not having an indigenous Québec campaign, the party adjusted, which helped produce 10 Québec seats in 2006. Flanagan calls for a specific Québec campaign next time.

The second issue—less dramatic, to be sure, but pivotal in the merger talks—pertains to selection of the party's leader. Some wanted a system based on equality of members and majority rule. Others preferred a system built on the equality of electoral districts (in which each has, say, 100 points to be assigned to candidates on the basis of their showing in the district; victory requires 50 percent plus one of all points). CA members were for the former. The PCs, fearing that they would be swamped by the many CA supporters, were for the latter but would not bend; their view was reluctantly accepted by the CA (in reality, Harper). Flanagan, who wanted a compromise, rightly argues that the party's many "rotten boroughs" (as with the PCs before it) encouraged candidates to capture districts with few members in order to secure points easily.

The "rotten boroughs" spoke to a fundamental problem in the Canadian party system: only the Liberals could claim to be a national entity able to secure significant support in any province—even Alberta—and win seats, if only a few. The PCs rarely produced nationwide victories and their cobbled-together coalitions soon imploded. Brian Mulroney's grand coalition of 1984 fell apart after 1988.

The next election will occur no later than 19 October 2009. The "median voter theorem" has parties gravitating close to the views of the largest bloc of voters similar to the way that competing department stores locate near each other. Harper's Conservatives, having jettisoned much of their Reform-CA heritage, clearly have understood the theorem, which is reflected in Flanagan's "ten commandments." Conservatives must understand the need for unity, not veer to the right; speak to more than Anglophone Protestants; and appreciate that incrementalism is much better than "sweeping visions." Beyond positioning commandments, Flanagan offers sensible advice about how to campaign more effectively.

This is not a hagiographic or triumphal book but a well-considered interpretation of Conservative dreams to replace the Liberals as Canada's "government party." Flanagan knows the party needs more than the sweet fortune

provided by the ill-starred 2006 Liberal campaign and the RCMP's mid-campaign announcement that it was investigating allegations that finance department personnel had revealed the Liberal government's intentions not to tax income trusts.

And it must be more than a personal vehicle. The irony underlying all of this is that "Harper's team" is about winning elections—but not governing. Conservatives, when in office, have failed to build sustaining support beyond the leader's personal appeal. That's their challenge in a country that has been Liberal for a long time.

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