

Harper has purged the Conservative party of its Reform ideals

LEE MORRISON

When Stephen Harper started mumbling about calling an early election, I assumed he was merely pulling Stephane Dion's chain, but now he's gone and done it. There went the last vestige of Reform party populism in the shiny new Conservative Party of Canada.

This cynical move not only defies a statute, which became law only 15 months ago, it directly contradicts statements of several members of the government, both in and out of the House. My favourite is from Harper himself: "Fixed election dates stop leaders from trying to manipulate the calendar simply for partisan political advantage." (May 2005).

When Bill C-16 to fix election dates on the third Monday of October every four years was being debated, MP Gerald Keddy lauded Harper for his statesmanship in pushing the legislation: "We have an opportunity to take away one of the primary tools that past prime ministers in the country have used like a club. . . . This is the first prime minister who is willing to give up that huge tool in his tool chest."

took in his tool chest.

During the Conservatives' first two years in office, its trail of policy reversals and broken promises was excused on the grounds that Harper had to be careful not to provoke the opposition into bringing down his minority government. Lost in the fog was the hard fact that goading the disorganized and financially strapped Liberals into scuttling the ship would have required extraordinary provocation.



When Harper finally wanted to go to the polls, he could have, for example, introduced a bill to eliminate the firearms registry. There would have been two possible outcomes. Either:

a) The Liberals would have allowed the bill to pass, and one of Harper's neglected promises would have been honoured, or

b) More probably, the bill would have been defeated, and the Conservatives could have had its election within both the letter or the spirit of the new law.

The rationalization that dissolution was necessary because "Parliament wasn't working" is utter nonsense. Even though the atmosphere

on the Hill has become unusually toxic, the Liberals have consistently rolled over in response to almost every



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bill that the government has brought forward and have even allowed the passage of three budgets. The hang-up on a few bills has been in the Senate, and an election won't change that.

Moreover, as Harper himself has acknowledged, the chance of a majority government being elected at this time is slim. So what, exactly, is the point?

Given the many "meat-and-potatoes" problems facing the country, fixed election dates may seem unimportant to some people, but if we can't trust our government to operate within the inconvenient rule of law, we're in serious trouble.



With his other attempts at political reform blocked in the Senate, fixed election dates could have been Harper's enduring legacy — a change in the system. Instead, he will be remembered as an opportunistic, masterful tactician who, in the course of only three years completely purged the Conservative party of its Reform ideals and restored the Mulroney model of government. The concepts of popular control of the party from the grassroots, open government, MPs representing their constituents and

fiscal responsibility, were replaced, early on, with total control from the PMO and the broadcast seeding of public funds in vote-rich areas.

Defiance of an inconvenient electoral law is the cherry on the sundae. As we used to say in the halcyon days of Reform, "Liberal, Tory, same old story."

A few days ago, I had a call from a nice Conservative party lady asking for a donation to help fight the election. I responded with a polite, but firm "no" and I expect that many old Reformers will do the same.

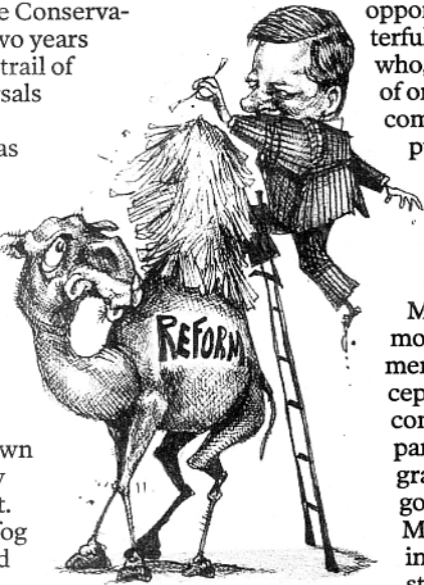
This election will mark the first time in more than 50 years that I won't be supporting a small "c" conservative party. So much for the new way of doing politics in Ottawa.

LEE MORRISON WAS A MEMBER OF THE REFORM PARTY'S EXECUTIVE COUNCIL DURING ITS ORGANIZATIONAL YEARS AND WAS A SASKATCHEWAN REFORM PARTY MP FROM 1993 TO 2000.

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