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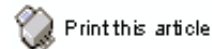
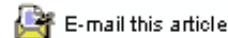
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He makes Harper think uncharitable thoughts

By JEFFREY SIMPSON
Tuesday, May 7, 2002 – Print Edition,
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CALGARY -- Ask Canadian Alliance Leader Stephen Harper about his NDP opponent Very Rev. Bill Phipps and prick a tiny sore spot.

Mr. Harper mutters that he might sue for what he says is a fabricated quote ("What's in it for me?") Rev. Phipps attributed to him in a Globe and Mail article. He dismisses the NDP as irrelevant in Calgary Southwest. He complains Rev. Phipps pulled a "stunt" outside Alliance headquarters. Rev. Phipps's demand for a debate is just free publicity for a candidate whose campaign is going nowhere.

Mr. Harper said he "despises" Rev. Phipps, a rather vicious word for the former moderator of the United Church of Canada. It's not entirely clear why the leader of the Canadian Alliance holds such strongly negative views about Rev. Phipps. Canadians already have a Prime Minister with a wide nasty streak; they can only hope their would-be prime minister doesn't have one, too.

Bill Phipps, after all, is as much a threat to Stephen Harper in next Monday's by-election as a backbencher's dissidence would be to Jean Chrétien's continued leadership. The NDP is weak in Canada, marginal in Alberta, and barely alive in Calgary Southwest.

Rev. Phipps should do better than his NDP predecessors, if only because the Liberals and Conservatives are not running candidates. Surely a few of those non-Alliance voters will move to the NDP, if only to spite the Alliance.

Democracy demands that Rev. Phipps be given his due for a kamikaze political campaign, even if Mr. Harper doesn't think so. Rev. Phipps is an interesting man who has done many striking things in his life. When he loses next Monday, he will return to ministering at the Scarboro United Church in Calgary.

Rev. Phipps has been a minister like few others. Years ago, while studying in a Chicago seminary, he worked under the legendary social activist Saul Alinsky. Rev. Phipps was born into a Tory family in Toronto and was educated at University of Toronto Schools, Ontario's top academic high

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school. He later earned a law degree before turning to the ministry.

No one could imagine Mr. Harper delivering a sermon or speech titled The Joy of Paying Taxes. Rev. Phipps did so shortly after arriving 18 years ago in Alberta. Today, he says: "When I pay my taxes, I do so joyfully because they help pay for the common good." Virtuous, even noble, this sentiment may be, but it carries the political appeal of k.d. lang among cattle producers in a province proudly without a sales tax.

Saul Alinsky, among others, taught Rev. Phipps social activism; working in a cancer ward for children in Chicago deepened his compassion. "The church should be called to minister on the streets and for the common good, so that like the political process, it is with the people in their pain and trauma," he says.

Rev. Phipps, deep in Alliance country, enjoys a fraction of the public voice he had as moderator of the United Church from 1997 to 2000. He was far, far to the left of many church members, just as today he would fit most comfortably on the gadfly side of the New Democratic Party. A moderator who doubted Christ's resurrection and complete divinity was bound to raise hackles. And not everyone at Sunday service agreed with his assertion that "among other things, biblical faith is about economic relationships."

For Rev. Phipps, however, the church is about "social justice," whether siding with the Lubicon Cree in their long fight against governments, apologizing profusely for residential school abuse, criticizing the "ideology of the so-called free market," or searching for an alternative to current economic arrangements through what he calls the "moral economy."

His years as moderator left Rev. Phipps with friends across Canada. He also has many friends in Toronto, where he presided over Trinity St. Paul's United Church. Those networks led to fundraising events in Toronto and Ottawa that raised nearly \$18,000.

The Liberals and Conservatives decided Mr. Harper should receive a pass to Ottawa in deference to his standing as Alliance leader. The NDP has always resisted free passes. Hence Rev. Phipps's campaign.

Rev. Phipps is running with the support of his congregation. Parishioners gave him a standing ovation the Sunday morning he announced his intentions. The voters of Calgary Southwest are unlikely to be so charitable.

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