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Lawrence Martin

The resurgence of the Red Tory brand

Migration to the moderate middle denotes a triumph of the traditional Tory way



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Maybe we should call this government the Better Late Than Never Gang. On important issues, the tendency has been for the Harper Conservatives to initially stick to a dogmatic approach, consistent with their Prairie conservative roots. And then – click! – the light goes on. They disencumber themselves of long-held biases and put an adjective back in their name. They become Progressive Conservatives.

It was expected that the moderate Red Tory brand, diminished since the unification of the right, would remain in the shadows under Stephen Harper's stewardship. But it's not the way the story has played out. The migration to the moderate middle, evident in so many policy areas, denotes a triumph of the traditional Tory way.

China is the most recent example. We recall the hard line the Harperites took on the Middle Kingdom. Even though the Chinese were becoming an economic colossus, they didn't want to have much to do with them. For the Tories' first three years in office, it was like “Ugh, Communists!” But, finally, pressed by trade experts, media critics and global realities, they recalibrated. Now Trade Minister Stockwell Day and Finance Minister Jim Flaherty beat a path to Beijing's door, singing China's praises.

With respect to trade, the Harperites were believers in the march of continentalism. Westerners had long favoured a tight U.S. partnership. The American market would pretty much take care of Canadian needs. No need to go looking beyond the continent. But now – better late than never – the Harper team has been disabused of that notion. Now it's all about market diversification. This week, the PM even trumpeted a free-trade agreement with tiny Panama. Cheaper hats on the way!

On global warming, they took office as major-league skeptics. Like many on the far right, they were close to being climate-change deniers. But, as in the case of China, on-the-job education has served to change their minds. They're still slow on the uptake, hardly ranking with the old green-oriented PCs of Brian Mulroney, but less obstinate.

Holding to old orthodoxies, being slow to react was also evident on the economic file. The Conservatives were late in seeing the recession coming. They stuck doggedly to the vow they would never allow a deficit. But as a potential crisis loomed, they suspended their free-market gospels, became big-spending interventionists and

took on major deficits. Few could have imagined such a leftward lurch.

On culture, the Harper team – witness the PM's dissing of sushi-eating gala goers – leaned toward a low-brow diet that found favour in cowboy country. But now, they've become big-time culture subsidizers. Start a calypso band, you'll get a grant.

On foreign affairs, they were strong advocates of military solutions. But they moved away from support for the Iraq war and, having witnessed little progress in Afghanistan, have been rethinking that enterprise as well. Now, humanitarian work is the way forward. They still hold – witness Guantanamo – to some reactionary ways, but their view of the world has become more nuanced. At the Three Amigos summit this week, Mr. Harper could be seen praising Barack Obama's multilateral approach.

For the old Red Tories, the social conservatism of the party's Reform wing was a major concern. But in respect to that as well as to these other areas of endeavour, the PM has given them little to worry about.

It's a government that has been coming to terms with the Canadian mainstream. Mr. Harper didn't let conservatism on this side of the border be tainted by the George Bush brand, and he didn't let it be overtaken by the Prairie brand.

In so many of Mr. Harper's moderate manoeuvrings, raw political calculations or unexpected events have been the prime motivator. It's not as though he has undergone any dramatic conversion.

But whereas Mr. Bush fell victim to ideologically driven inflexibility, our PM has shown adaptability, a capacity to set aside firm predispositions. You get the impression that the office has matured him, broadening his perspective from that of a regional man to a leader who sees the country and the world in a more enlightened context.

Traditional Red-brand Tories should applaud. They've been validated.

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