



Interim Opposition Leader Rona Ambrose has successfully changed the tone of Conservative Party messaging—“a sunnier way of communicating,” as Yaroslav Baran writes. iPolitics photo

After the Fall: Lessons Learned and Renewing the Conservative Brand

Yaroslav Baran

In the weeks since they were swept from government, the federal Conservatives have already begun to formulate a post-Harper identity based on an interim leader who presents a stark contrast from Harper in both optics and tone, and on an energetic opposition to the Trudeau Liberals in the brief end-of-year sitting in the House. Veteran Conservative strategist Yaroslav Baran outlines how the party should expand on those fronts while also absorbing the invaluable lessons of defeat.

It is a fact of history that the Liberal Party has governed Canada for most of our country’s history since 1867. There has been much discussion in recent years, however, reflecting on whether the Liberals’ “natural governing party” status is obsolete, and whether the 21st century would reveal new trends.

Indeed, it has been posited that the old paradigm of an Upper-Canada/Lower-Canada “Laurentian Consensus” is an outdated model that does not reflect the emergence of strong new economies in the West and the dramatic reversal of

fortune—and political clout—of the old have-not provinces of Newfoundland and Labrador and Saskatchewan. Moreover, it has been argued that a smarter political integration of new Canadians would reveal that many immigrant communities' personal and collective values are in fact more in line with contemporary conservatism than with latter-Twentieth-Century liberalism. Former Conservative Leader Stephen Harper, in fact, made it his legacy goal to entrench his party as the new natural governing force for this century.

Yet, just as the evidence started to support the theory of a structural political realignment on a level stronger than speculation or wishful thinking, the 2015 election came along and seemed to suddenly revert the federal political power structure to pre-Harper and pre-Conservative-merger norms. A majority Liberal government emerged with a power base in Ontario and Quebec, a clean sweep of the Atlantic, and a record win in B.C. The election saw the Conservatives split the Western urban vote with the Liberals and the rural B.C. vote with the NDP—a shocking jolt on both fronts.

The consensus thus far has been that the Achilles heel of the Harper government was a lethal combination of arrogance and a consistently angry tone. That the decision-making at the centre was hijacked by a group ever-intent on pandering to some mythical “base” which sought nothing more from government than simplistic populist messaging, more and more tax cuts, absolute institutional iconoclasm, and a steady diet of mandatory minimum sentences—whether or not the offences in question have even been committed in the last hundred years.

Something happened. Somewhere along the way, a government that had been elected on themes of respect, anti-corruption, transparency and ethics, evolved into a caricature that started to repel many of its former adherents—to say nothing of the undecided or swing voters who determine which party takes the

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sceptre. Add to that a campaign team built more on personal fealty than merit, and you end up with a recipe for disaster.

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The Conservative Party must now embark on an exercise in renewal—it must refine the articulation of its values, find its voice, and engage in repairs. The party is not, however, in a state of crisis, as many have argued—it holds Official Opposition status, has a robust caucus of 99 MPs, and finished a mere 7.5 percent behind the Liberals, who formed a strong majority government. This is a strong base from which to rebuild. It would be an overstatement to suggest that the Conservatives were trounced in the campaign, or left broken and in despair. They are well ahead of the position in which the Liberals found themselves in 2011.

That said, these important periods of reflection and renewal must be taken seriously, and they must be done right. Just as they can lead to

a renewed road to governance, they can also be tragic lost opportunities if parties fail to sufficiently take stock of circumstances and learn from mistakes. So what does the Conservative Party need to do?

The first important tenet is that there are no quick fixes in politics. The Liberals spent a long period in the wilderness, arguably longer than they needed to because many in the party thought the issues were limited to finding an ideal public spokesperson. Only after experimenting with several quick-fix leaders did the Liberal Party realize it had significant structural problems that actually needed to be addressed: an outdated fundraising model generating anaemic results, lack of a national Voter ID system, and a need to refresh policy to bring it more in line with the interests of a new generation of party faithful. Similarly, the Conservatives must look beyond merely identifying a new leader as chief marketer. The party must reflect on what it has done wrong, and on what it has done right—and improve both.

Today's Conservative Party faces a real fissure of regional alienation—particularly in Atlantic Canada—but also in the most urban metropolitan areas. To regain its prominence, it must find a way to not only market itself to these areas, but to actually incorporate these regions' interests and views—while not becoming Liberal Lite in the process. Such enterprises succeed by reaching out and growing the membership to include a more regionally balanced foundation, and by ensuring that the champions of key demographic interests be included in the policy decision-making triage.

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much at home in tomorrow’s Conservative Party as the financial wizzes of Bay Street, the libertarians of Calgary, or the retired hobby farmers of the Okanagan. The Liberal Party did not win by selecting which strain of liberalism should be dominant under the next tenure—it found a way to accommodate them all.

Second: Parliament matters. I have already heard analyses concluding that the Liberal win in 2015 suggests that Parliament is irrelevant and that a party’s road to power lies entirely in outreach on the street. This could not be further from the truth. In fact, it could be argued that the Liberals benefited from the NDP’s diligent and systematic performance in opposition, gradually and competently eroding a stale Conservative government’s hold on power. It may have been another party doing the heavy lifting in the House, but that diligent hounding of government by opposition was essential to weakening the Conservatives sufficiently to create an opening for another party to take the reins.

The Conservatives must take their Official Opposition role seriously, and put in the work. This means also re-learning the opposition craft. A decade of political staff has come and gone, knowing how

to macro-manage, but spoiled by the support of the vast public service. In opposition, you can’t phone the work downstairs. There is no downstairs. You do your own research, your own writing, and your own analysis. They need to rehire the old pros who know how to file Access to Information requests, write original copy quickly, and think quickly on their feet without a safety net.

Complacency and arrogance are additional political vices that must be guarded against at all costs. In 2006, the Liberals did not truly believe that they could lose to the Tories. They may have been weakened last time around, but by pulling out the old bag of tricks—spending promises, an appeal to values, and an aggressive negative ad campaign, they would surely once again hold the Conservatives at bay. Under the radar, however, the Tories had honed their skills and style. They adopted a far more disciplined and targeted strategy, revolutionized ground game processes, and flipped the lengthy nine-week writ period to their own advantage by setting the narrative. Similarly, the Liberals surprised the Conservatives in 2015 by leap-frogging over the “perfected” Conservative Voter-ID and GOTV machines with a combination of innovation and perseverance. Just because you invented or perfected something, doesn’t mean your opponents won’t learn, emulate and improve on your systems for the next time around. The NDP surpassed Conservative tech fundraising innovation in 2011, and the Liberals surpassed the Tories’ ground game mastery in 2015. Complacency is fatal. Politics is often compared to a shark tank, and we all know a shark can’t sit still—or it drowns.

Another prescription is to take the time to fully analyze and reflect upon the lessons of 2015. The Conservative Party has a convention scheduled for May. The party would be wise to avoid any calls for turning this into a rash leadership convention. It would also be wise to avoid calls to scrap or defer the pan-

Canadian meeting, and to repress the collective catharsis that parties need to go through before they can move on. Keep the convention, allow members an opportunity to think freely, speak freely and be heard; complete the election post-mortem, let members digest it, and only then launch a formal leadership campaign once party members have had an opportunity to reflect on what their party needs.

The final critical point is one of tone. In the two months she has occupied the post, interim leader Rona Ambrose has astounded many—Conservative and non-Conservatives alike—with the success of a sunnier way of communicating. With slight tweaks of tone, banishing the anger and finger pointing, and an overlay of sophistication, she has successfully relayed virtually identical policy, but in a way that exudes reason, compassion and common sense. As one observer put it, “It’s amazing what you can accomplish when you simply decide to stop being a jerk in your delivery.” Every party has its structural handicaps. While the left must work harder on competence, the right has to pay special attention to empathy. This lesson cannot be lost on the next regime.

Just as Wilfrid Laurier predicted in his day that the next century would be Canada’s, Stephen Harper thought the next hundred years, politically, would belong to the Conservatives. It is precisely at such times of transition that parties determine their future track—success or failure, lessons learned or mistakes repeated. With sufficient attention, patience and wisdom, there is no reason we can’t realize both Laurier’s and Harper’s visions in the 21st century. **P**

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