



THE HARPER RECORD

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Chill Effect

Stephen Harper's cold war on freedom of speech

Trish Hennessy

THERE IS THIS quintessential Stephen Harper moment, mercilessly frozen in time by virtue of film, where early in his mandate as Prime Minister of Canada he takes the advice of his communications staff and allows television cameras to follow him to his son's first day of school.

This is the day Canadians are going to see the human side of the man who has just squeaked into minority government.

Harper's son looks understandably nervous, stiff with the pressure of outside eyes. It is one of those pained childhood moments where you look to your parents and think: *Make it go away or make it better*. He looks up at his dad, who is now bending toward him, hand outstretched to deliver his son a brief, formal, cool...um...handshake.

Now, there are many options for fathers who send their children off to school in this age of involved parenting. They could have held hands the rest of the way. Or dad could have said goodbye with a reassuring hug and a kiss. But Stephen Harper, ever the consummate professional, chose the classic business handshake.

Stephen Harper's public persona is not that of a warm and affable man. He is considered a cool-headed strategist willing to do what it takes to hang onto the reins of power and, while Canadians don't expect their Prime Minister to go around bear-hugging, there is such a thing as the

Harper chill effect and it runs deeper than whether he is warm and fuzzy with his own children in public photo opportunities.

The Harper chill effect has been evident from the very beginning, and it has been consistent throughout his first two years in office. During this brief period, Harper has used the court system to help silence foes, critics, and generally anyone with whom the Prime Minister might have a disagreement. It turns out this includes Elections Canada and Canadians seeking equality justice, as well as his political opposition, the Liberal party.

He has picked public fights with dissenting bureaucrats and shut down normal bureaucratic flows of public information. He treats the national press corps like a special interest group that has to be managed, controlled, and contained. He has muzzled his own cabinet, elevating this practice to new heights, and he swiftly implemented funding cuts to groups which ensure ordinary Canadians have a public voice and access to legal representation within the court system.

All this has been enacted with only minority government power at Harper's disposal. Left unchecked, the Harper chill effect threatens to profoundly undermine the core institutions that ensure the health of Canada's democracy. It also gives a glimpse into changes Canadians might expect should Harper secure a majority government.

As this chapter will demonstrate, the chill effect is rooted in two unshakable realities: 1) The Prime Minister holds a deep, personal distrust of traditional Canadian institutions, not the least of which is the mainstream media; and 2) Harper's personal style is more authoritarian than it is democratic — a style that runs against the grain of modern Canadian political leadership but is intertwined with what it means to be an extreme Conservative in this day and age.

As an extreme conservative, Harper is often described as a hard-right ideologue, but, tellingly, cognitive scientist George Lakoff says that underneath the ideologue lies a set of hard core values. Lakoff says extreme conservatives (in the United States, at least) ascribe to a moral worldview that is akin to "father knows best"¹ where authority, discipline and merit are cherished values that play themselves out in the day-to-day of extreme conservative politics.

Lakoff devotes an entire book relating his theory to the political style of U.S. President George W. Bush, who frequently adopts the strict father model, applying tough love or meting out justice. This chapter illustrates how the theory applies to Stephen Harper as well, and is evident in the Harper chill effect.

Loosening the promise of equality

Early into its mandate, in September 2006, the Harper government announced cuts to 66 federal programs totalling \$1 billion² — cuts reminiscent of the mid-1990s, when federal Finance Minister Paul Martin claimed he had to pull out all the stops to keep Canada from hitting the “debt wall.”³ But these were no ordinary cost-cutting measures, and in September 2006 Canada could not pretend to be facing a debt wall. In fact, the coffers were flush with cash and Canada was boasting one of the lowest debt-to-GDP ratios in the industrialized world. There was a \$13.2 billion fiscal surplus and no clear and present danger to public programs.

What was significant about these cuts was not so much the amounts, but “what” got cut: groups that give voice to Canadians. Some of the core cuts were delivered to the Court Challenges Program and to the Status of Women Canada, which were both originally established explicitly as part of the federal government’s role to protect minority rights and to ensure all Canadians have access to fundamental justice. In fact, the government of Canada’s own website⁴ describes the Court Challenges program as a non-profit organization “which was set up in 1994 to provide financial assistance for important court cases that advance language and equality rights guaranteed under Canada’s Constitution.” It has been a key tool for women and historically disadvantaged groups to seek redress.

According to lawyer Alison Brewin, court challenges under this program led to the recognition of pregnancy discrimination, ended the practice of using what a woman wears as an argument for implied consent in sexual assault trials, and banned discrimination based on sexual orientation. “The Court Challenges Program is there to provide an important piece of democracy in our system,” Brewin said. “Access to our

courts is essential for historically disadvantaged minorities to address the sometimes discriminatory impact of majority rule.”⁵

Given the nature of the cuts, there was push-back from Canadians. The Harper government responded by restoring the money it had taken from the Status of Women Canada, adding a bit more, but, tellingly, it removed the term “advocacy” from Status of Women’s mandate, refusing to fund equality-seeking research and analysis.

Why the drastic cuts to programs designed to ensure equal voice and fairness to all Canadians — rights embedded within our own constitution? At heart, Harper hates the kind of government Canadians have grown up with. He would prefer to dismantle Canada’s modern Keynesian welfare state and he eschews the notion that government has a supportive, nurturing, social role to play on behalf of its citizens. In the extreme conservative world, people earn what they get on merit, and they are individually responsible for making (or breaking) it. Harper’s vision of government, the extreme conservative vision, is one of retribution, order, and civil obedience. It is more authoritarian in nature, less democratic and more divisive: The kind that says you’re either with me or you’re against me.

Harper also isn’t keen on open political debate. His government finds public debate a threat to its goal of majority government. Canadians have seen this kind of ideological fervour at the provincial level under the Ontario Mike Harris government, the Alberta Ralph Klein government, but never before on the national stage. On this stage, the Harper government kneels at the altar of small government, a euphemistic term that implies fewer public programs and far greater reliance on the private sector to determine the Canadian agenda. It evokes a more American way of running government. Funding cuts that limit the services government provides — services that might help Canadians challenge the limits of an extreme conservative government — are fundamental to Harper as he diligently builds a foundation for majority rule.

According to the *Georgia Straight*, independent MP Garth Turner, who began his term as a Conservative member of Harper’s caucus, alleges the Prime Minister “threatened” MPs to remain silent and not oppose him on the funding cuts. Turner recalls a meeting where Harper, in “strict father” mode, briefed his caucus on the budget cuts to the

Court Challenges Programs and to Status of Women Canada. “He said, ‘We have determined a series of cuts, expenditure cuts, which will be announced. They have been determined. They are our position. And... anyone [who] has got any problem with that — who says anything about it — is going to have a short political career.’ He said that in caucus,” Turner told the *Straight*. “It was a threat.”⁶ Muzzling his caucus and cabinet members is but one of many strategies Harper has employed in his mission to centralize communications and maintain firm control over his government’s plan to change government as we know it.

In caucus, Harper controls backbenchers with what is widely perceived as a gag order to maintain the appearance of a unified political party — despite well-known fissures. Major announcements come out of the PMO’s office, generally, and not out of cabinet ministers’ offices. Cabinet ministers who wish to speak to the media require “message event proposal” approval by the PMO’s office.⁷ When a cabinet minister gets unleashed, it’s so unusual it becomes part of the news.

To date, all have stood loyally in line, backbenchers and cabinet ministers alike, with the exception of defector Belinda Stronach, one who is not easily intimidated, and maverick Garth Turner. Some contend this is characteristic of all ruling governments: that keeping disenchanted backbenchers in line has always been a leadership challenge. But consider the internal fortitude required to hold together a party with two radically different visions of the political right wing: the traditional blue Conservative brand which sees a social role for government in public society that is counterbalanced by the extreme conservative element of the party — Stephen Harper’s wing — which detests the notion of an active government promoting progressive ideas such as equality and minority rights.

Within this harder core, Harper’s challenge has been to keep at bay some who would like to turn back the clock on gay marriage, legal abortions, women’s rights, and support for the poor. Keeping the extreme conservatives quiet as a requisite to maintaining minority government status has been one of Harper’s most significant chill effect operations; his caucus has been obedient.

Chill effects only work if they’re supported by language and rationale that make authoritarian actions appear reasonable. It is telling that the

Harper government framed its first round of funding cuts as reducing government “waste” — as if programs ensuring public voice and access to justice could be dismissed in a media soundbite as wasteful. In fact, many of the funding cuts were aimed at advocacy groups with no history of “waste,” organizations big and small across the nation who operate on lean budgets, rely on the *pro bono* work of lawyers, and whose *raison d’etre* is to give voice to vulnerable, powerless Canadians. Groups, for instance, that provide legal services to poor people or that promote programs to support women who are abused or struggling financially. As a result of the funding cutbacks, a number of Canadian organizations have been forced to shift their mandates away from public advocacy, a core element of a vibrant democracy, toward something the federal government might find worthy of funding.

Lining up the enemies

The funding cuts were one of several arrows slung by a government intent on silencing its critics and maintaining complete and absolute control over its public service. It has led to some ugly and unprecedented public battles between public servants and their Prime Minister. For instance, in 2008, the Harper government unceremoniously fired Linda Keen, president of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, after she imposed the closing of the Chalk River nuclear reactor. The closure resulted in a temporary domestic shortage of life-saving medical isotopes for cancer and cardiac diagnosis and other treatment, but there was more to the firing than the brief shortage in nuclear capacity.

On the Hill, where politicians enjoy revelling in such controversies, the story wasn’t so much about Keen’s firing as it was about the ham-fisted treatment of public servants who happen to cross Stephen Harper. “I have to tell you, it’s quite a story,” said Liberal environment critic David McGuinty. “Anybody who seems to try to do their job in this town these days...seems to lose it. These are the kinds of Republican tactics this town has never seen before.” McGuinty suggested that it was part of a pattern that reminded him of the U.S. government’s witch hunt for Communists following the Second World War.⁸

Speculation sprouted ears, but, incredibly, it was the Conservative booster paper, *The National Post*, which wrote:

Mr. Harper was unable to resist blaming the impasse...on Ms. Keen, who he suggested was a Liberal partisan. Why he did this is open to conjecture, but as the *Post* reported this week, Ms. Keen has made enemies in the nuclear industry because she has imposed tough new international standards on any new reactor built in Canada, in doing so hurting AECL's ability to sell new reactors to the government of Ontario. She has also ended "pre-reviews" of new reactors, a process that warns operators if there are fundamental barriers to them being granted operating licences. Both measures have made AECL less attractive to potential investors at a time when the government is mulling whether to sell off all or part of the nuclear operator.⁹

"If there is a single Canadian public agency with an outstanding international reputation, it is Elections Canada."¹⁰ And yet, in its harshest assault on a public agency to date, the Harper government has launched a law-suit against Elections Canada for supporting a search warrant to raid Conservative party headquarters to make sure the party's advertising financing is on the level. In moments like this, it is often wise for the sitting government of the day to welcome the transparency of open scrutiny as an essential element of ensuring accountability. Not so in Stephen Harper's government.

The Harper Conservatives are not only suing Elections Canada, but they also voted against a symbolic motion that would have expressed all-party confidence in Elections Canada. "It means that they don't have any respect for what they are, a government, and that Mr. Harper doesn't feel at ease with civil servants, with independent organisms, organizations or offices, with journalists, with oppositions, in a word with democracy," said Bloc Leader Gilles Duceppe of the Conservatives' vote.¹¹

National Post political editor Kelly McParland wrote this about the Harper government: "The thing is, if you expect to find enemies everywhere, you'll probably succeed."¹² *Globe and Mail* columnist Lawrence Martin wrote: "Hardly a week goes by without the Conservative government, with the subtlety of a dump truck, adding a delightful example to its control-freak highlight reel."¹³

But this isn't the story of a control-freak out of control. This is the story of someone who is diligently trying to choke the sources of communication that do not reflect the Harper agenda. At times, it expresses itself in foolhardy attempts: Trying to force the impenetrable, immovable Auditor General Sheila Fraser to allow central control over her press releases was an act of pure folly. The Auditor General brought down the seemingly teflon Liberal government under Jean Chrétien; she is no shrinking violet.

Choking the information flow

Choking the information flow by quietly killing Canada's Coordination of Access to Information Requests System (CAIRS) has been one of the more authoritarian attempts to stifle freedom of speech in Canada. Access to Information is the way most Canadians can learn about the hidden dealings of their government, and the requests system is a way of channelling such requests. It is a bureaucratic, formalized way of asking questions and getting answers. It is essential to open, accountable government — something Harper himself promised during the election campaign. But it is yet another casualty of the Harper chill effect. Before the Harper government decided to scrap CAIRS, it had been publicly criticized for taking too long to respond to requests and for heavily censoring documents that revealed information the government didn't want made public.

The number of complaints received by the information commissioner in 2007–08, for example, soared to 2,387 — more than 1,000 higher than the previous year. The level is the second-highest on record, next to the 2,821 received in 1988 — 2,242 of those from a single complainant.¹⁴

The Canadian Association of Journalists, which isn't prone to political intervention, has expressed concern over the decision to shut down the information registry. In a May 2008 news release, it wrote: "The CAJ believes the elimination of the CAIRS database is part of a disturbing trend by Ottawa toward less openness toward government information, a trend that could ultimately result in the public only getting the information government wants it to know."¹⁵

With the scrapping of CAIRS, the Harper government has revealed the core of its playbook: Make sure your central staff has the power to say yes or no to information. Make your core “leak-proof,” so the fortress of government is hard to shake, rock, or topple. It is anti-democratic, authoritarian in its approach. In an earlier era, we would have decried it as fascism or communism, take your pick. Either version hurts the free flow of an open democracy. But governments can only get away with drastic measures if they use words that make their extreme actions feel reasonable. The Harper government’s explanation for rendering access to information ineffectual: They said it’s no longer useful. Not useful for whom?

The media as “special interest”

Every centrally controlled, authoritarian government in the world has successfully choked the free flow of public information and clamped down on a right that is seen as fundamental to Canada: Freedom of the press. Stunningly, Harper has waged an unprecedented war on the national media, raising all manner of warning flags in the process. First, a primer on Canadian journalism: In Canada, it is among the highest journalistic honour to be given the right to report on the dealings of our federal government. The profession’s cream tends to rise to the top on Parliament Hill, creating an unwieldy group of smart, driven journalists who are not easily intimidated and who are skilled at squeezing answers from the very best.

Communications experts have long advised their Prime Ministers: Fight with the national press corps at your peril. But to understand Stephen Harper is to understand that he holds a deep and long-abiding distrust of the media. He treats the nation’s press corps as though it were a special interest group whose dissenting voice must be silenced. Since its inception, the Harper government has tried, overtly and probably in vain, to control, contain, and manage the news in ways not previously seen in Canada. Anaskis and Heer argue that Harper has tried everything he knows to de-legitimize the media’s “role in holding his government to account.”¹⁶

It began almost as an inside joke, where in the early days of the Harper mandate the most precarious job on the Hill appeared to be that of Communications Director. Harper went through three directors before he finally landed on staunch Conservative communications advisor Sandra Buckler, who was widely seen as one of his most trusted advisors before she stepped down in the summer of 2008. Buckler has been described as keeping “an iron grip” on the parliamentary press gallery, which is how Harper likes it. Buckler’s treatment of the national press gallery has been the subject of great debate — often by national reporters who are disgruntled by obvious attempts to muzzle.

Early into Buckler’s job, the press gallery found itself fighting her attempts to restrict journalists’ access to cabinet ministers, to withhold basic statements by heads of state and premiers, to issue stock photos for closed meetings instead of allowing photographers in, and to stop holding the Prime Minister’s news conference in the national press theatre, favouring instead the freedom of the Commons foyer. CanWest reporter Meagan Fitzpatrick wrote:

Harper’s resistance to holding formal seated press conferences has been one of many ongoing irritants between his office and the national press gallery. The spats have escalated at times to the point where Harper has said he will bypass the national media completely and only speak to local media.¹⁷

According to the reporters themselves, it quickly became commonplace that journalists who report stories the Harper government doesn’t like would find themselves frozen out of the Prime Minister’s media loop. During an April 2006 news conference, Harper decided to overlook the practice of media lined up to take their turn to ask questions, ignoring a question by CBC reporter Julie Van Dusen and picking another reporter in the audience instead. “Van Dusen was shocked. After a stunned pause, she interrupted the Prime Minister, ‘Why are you ignoring the lineup? We’re in a lineup, and I’m next.’ Harper continued to ignore her until the other reporter chose not to ask his question. Van Dusen then asked her question, but Harper gave a very short answer and left.”¹⁸

After that incident, full-fledged press conferences in Ottawa became a rarity. Veteran Hill reporter Hugh Windsor says something is different under Harper: “Other Prime Ministers have always accepted the press, but Harper’s essentially said, ‘Fuck you,’” he explains.¹⁹ *Maclean’s* magazine reporter Paul Wells says Sandra Buckler is the first Prime Minister’s Communications Director who won’t return most routine phone calls from reporters looking for information.²⁰ Even bureaucrats who normally help to answer media questions have been forbidden to do so under Harper.

A wave of fury over the Harper government’s treatment of the media erupted in early 2006, when Harper imposed a media ban on covering the return of the bodies of soldiers killed in the line of duty in Afghanistan — a widely accepted American practice that is considered greatly out of step in Canada.²¹ Some speculated the media ban was imposed for political reasons, to minimize Canadians’ negative view of our nation’s participation in Afghanistan, which moves Canada out of the role of peacekeeper and into active combat.²²

Scott Reid, former spokesperson for Paul Martin, said, “It’s not so much the decision they took...but the motivation... It was that they are concerned that permitting these pictures to be published will lead to deterioration in public support for the mission in Afghanistan.” Reid argued that the Conservative government has “torn a page from the Bush White House.”²³ In an emotional eulogy for his daughter, the father of slain Canadian soldier Captain Nichola Goddard issued a stern rebuke to the Prime Minister for barring the media from his deceased child’s homecoming. Tim Goddard said he could “see no reason” why the media should be kept away from ramp ceremonies at Canadian Forces Base Trenton. “I find it troubling that the privacy decision means that we are keeping the press outside the wire, where the bad guys are,” he said during his daughter’s funeral.²⁴ *The Toronto Sun*, a media outlet that should naturally be in sync with a Conservative federal government, warned in an editorial: “This is about democratic freedom — the very thing we are asking our soldiers to fight and die for overseas. Lest we forget.”²⁵

A naughty or nice list

In March 2006, *Embassy* writer Sean Durkan reported on the press gallery's complaints that Buckler and Harper were trying too hard to control the press rather than let the press do its job.²⁶ Durkan wrote: "...Ms. Buckler made it clear she didn't care about any of the gallery's concerns, and indicated that even more plans were in the works to control the flow of information to reporters and limit their access to government." In its efforts to control the media, the Harper government began the practice of a central list where reporters were forced to sign up in order to have a chance of covering a PMO story.

During an announcement on the controversial settlement to the softwood lumber dispute, the PMO's office decided to have Harper appear in the foyer of the Commons for brief remarks. He made his statement, then left the foyer without answering questions.

Later that evening, Harper called four parliamentary reporters from three different news organizations and granted them interviews about the softwood deal. All four had earlier told the PMO that they were prepared to put their names on its list, though they had neglected to tell press gallery officials of their decision. Two of the reporters were employed by CanWest Global, the country's largest media chain, which has now instructed all its correspondents to sign the PMO list.²⁷

Toronto Star Parliament Hill reporter Richard Brennan, known in political circles as "The Badger" because he is tenacious, says that, when it comes to controlling the media, Harper is simply taking a page out of the Republican handbook in the U.S. In October 2007, Brennan said:

Nothing Mr. Harper does surprises me. He is all about control—controlling the message and his own caucus. Do I find it threatening? I most certainly do. Any time a politician attempts to subvert freedom of expression, it is a matter that should be of concern to every Canadian... Reporters are appalled, but again not surprised. The reporters on the Hill are used to the PM's bully tactics by now.²⁸

The *Toronto Star's* editorial writers refer to Harper's "obsession with controlling the message, and his penchant for secrecy"²⁹ as though it's

simply how Canada's Prime Minister does business. Control and secrecy are the waters Harper swims in. The *Vancouver Province's* Alan Ferguson refers to it as Harper's "ill-concealed contempt for the media."³⁰

At one point, in May 2006, about two dozen national reporters walked out of a Harper press conference to protest his muzzling tactics.³¹ For his part, Harper blames the national media, accusing them of being biased against him. He prefers local media, where he feels he has greater control over the message. "Unfortunately, the press gallery has taken the view they are going to be the opposition to the government," Harper told London's A-Channel TV. "They don't ask questions at my press conferences now. We'll just take the message out on the road. There's lots of media who do want to ask questions and hear what the government is doing for Canadians, or to Canadians. So we'll get our message out however we can."³²

In a CBC online article entitled *Spin Class, Part 2: How Stephen Harper Beat the Press Gallery*,³³ Ira Basen unpacks the government spin behind the media debacle. The government has framed the issue as trying to bring "order" to a practice that is "chaotic" and an institution that is outdated. Claiming the national media are dominated by "left-wing ideologues," Harper asserted that breaking up media control over what is determined as news on the Hill would be "helpful for democracy." He said: "I've got more control now... I'm free to pick my interviews when and where I want to have them."³⁴ In reality, Harper has blatantly put into motion a strategy to bypass the media filter and instead secure media coverage that favours his agenda, rather than questions it.

He has turned to sympathetic newspapers and radio talk shows, direct emails, websites, friendly blogs and podcasts... According to one survey in an online magazine, Harper's podcast is the fifth most downloaded podcast in the country. Check out the official Prime Minister of Canada website at www.pm.gc.ca and the Conservative party website at www.conservative.ca and see if you can tell which is funded by taxpayers and which is a party organ.³⁵

His distrust of media — of a free and unrestricted press — isn't the only example of Harper's chill effect. Media pundits talk openly of the Prime Minister's dislike of the culture in Ottawa: "[He] seems to dis-

trust many of Canada's national institutions."³⁶ But when it comes to Canada's military, the Harper government is frequently orchestrating American-style photo-ops with soldiers in the background. In a discussion dissecting whether the Harper government was taking the military photo-op too far, CBC television's Peter Mansbridge's *At Issue* panel on May 15, 2008, seized upon Harper's systematic attempts to control the media and attack anyone who might present an opposing viewpoint.

Toronto Star columnist Chantal Hébert explained the Harper method by pointing out his party's oppositional roots: "We have a government currently that is having a really hard time getting rid of its opposition mentality...even in power after two years, the Harper Conservatives still act like an opposition, but with a lot more power."³⁷ Pollster Allan Gregg agreed, calling Harper's controlling, manipulative actions "unique behaviour" for a federal government. He noted the populist roots of this particular Conservative government, saying, "if you are a populist you have an anti-establishment" mentality, and "the best way to deal with them is to attack before they attack us." *National Post* columnist Andrew Coyne defended the Conservatives, saying they merely want to oust the Liberal machinery within the public service and replace it with their own.

Canadian Press Ottawa Bureau Chief Rob Russo said the government is so wary of its public servants that it views the public service as part of its opposition, rather than as potential architects for future policy-making. The result, Russo said, is an atmosphere of fear and tight lips within the federal public service. "I think they're terrified," he said, "and those that aren't terrified are leaving."

Conclusion: What this really means

The Harper chill effect is a by-product of an extreme Conservative running a democratic country in which freedom of expression, as well as belief in a welfare state that ensures government exists for the greater public good over individual benefit, are still strongly held social values. The chill effect is a reflection of Harper the man: authoritarian, controlling in style, distrusting of public institutions, and ideological to the bone. As Prime Minister, Harper has taken a few pages out of the American

Republican playbook, where the leader of the country behaves like “father knows best” and does what it takes to bring dissenters in line.

The Harper chill effect has crept into how his government frames important public policies that are quietly changing the nature of Canada — changes that aren’t publicly debated and considered. Above all, the iceberg beneath the Harper chill effect masks a profoundly radical political agenda, but also an authoritarian implementation of that agenda.

Why risk the most stable minority government status in history and the opportunity to act as though you have majority rule? Upon review, there is a surprisingly long list of examples illustrating not only the Prime Minister’s fundamental “contempt for Canadian institutions”³⁸ but also a list of aggressive, authoritarian actions which threaten the vibrancy of Canadian democracy. It reveals Harper’s deep-seated desire to change Canada as we know it.

As political scientist David Taras suggests, every prime minister tries to set his own agenda and control spin, but Harper has taken the practice to new heights. “What we’re seeing here is a degree of control within the government, within the caucus...that we haven’t seen for a very long time,” Taras said.³⁹ This attitude comes with a price tag. In terms of the Harper government’s popularity, Taras predicts Harper’s “zeal for message control” will take a political toll on the party:

You can only control events for so long, you can only manipulate for so long, and ultimately I think this has harmed the Harper government to the extent that Harper’s image has become ‘Mr. Partisan, Mr. Mean, Mr. Control Freak’. It’s just got to a point where control is the image of what his government is. That’s damaging... You wonder what they’re running from and what they’re afraid of.

The question is: Have Canadians been paying close enough attention to Stephen Harper and his strong-arming tactics — or will the stern father figure get a free pass for displaying something that looks like leadership but threatens the health of our democracy? Only time will tell.