

# Can Harper woo the women? [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

They say politics makes strange bedfellows.

And so, across the land, a lot of women are checking out their new "date," Stephen Harper, and wondering if he's marriage -- i.e. majority government -- material.

And, if he's smart Harper will be trying to figure out how to woo those women. Harper's new "old school" Tory (as opposed to Reform) advisers are already telling him he has to develop policies women like if he's going to win a majority government in the next election -- and not meet the fate of Joe Clark's minority Conservative government which only lasted nine months, says political analyst and McMaster professor Henry Jacek.

It's not going to be easy. After all the tax breaks he's promised, he hasn't got a lot of money in the kitty to create female-friendly programs. And he's already promised to deep-six a long begged-for-by-women child care plan that would have created thousands of desperately needed child care spaces in favour of giving families a tiny tax break -- which of course doesn't create one new child care space.

Imaginary conversation: "Hi honey! I've got good news and bad news: Stephen Harper's giving us \$1,200 -- minus taxes -- a year to help pay for child care, but I lost my \$40,000-a-year job because I couldn't find a babysitter."

"We've seen that the party hasn't been terribly sympathetic on a lot of women's issues, such as abortion and child care," notes McMaster University associate political science professor Karen Bird. "Twenty-five dollars a week won't solve the problem if I face a 300-parent waiting list for a day-care space."

Still, a taste of power could be what forces change when no amount of female election lobbying did.

"He knows he's got problems," says Jacek. His party didn't nominate many female candidates (only 38 compared to the Liberals' 79 and the NDP's 108) and only 14 female MPs women were elected.

To contrast: Martin had 10 female MPs in his cabinet alone and managed to elect more women - 21 - this election than the now governing Tories. Even the fourth-place finishing NDP elected 12 female MPs.

The lack of female candidates in the Conservative campaign is "a real demonstration that the role of women is not at all a priority for them," says Bird.

And that perception translated into not only a gender gap in support for the party, but poor election results in cities, says Jacek.

"He's got a women's problem. He's got a cities problem. And he wants a majority," says Jacek.

"We have to count on the fact he wants to win the next election. And for women, that's helpful."

- reprinted from the Hamilton Spectator

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