

Harper is no mere Harris clone [CA] ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

If you liked Mike Harris, you'll probably like Stephen Harper.

If you hated Harris, you won't necessarily loathe Harper. You'll find parts of his platform hard to swallow and some of his rhetoric eerily familiar. But it would be a mistake to assume that the federal Conservative leader is a clone of the tax-slashing Tory premier who led Ontario for seven turbulent years.

Superficially, there are a lot of similarities.

Harris cut provincial income tax rates by 30 per cent. Harper is promising a 25 per cent reduction in federal income tax rates.

Both men believe that downsizing the public sector improves efficiency, eliminates waste and encourages individual initiative.

They share a distaste for legislated gun control, publicly funded child care, federal intrusions into provincial affairs and policies that put Canada at odds with the United States.

Both believe that private operators should be allowed to deliver medical services within Canada's publicly funded health-care system. Both portray themselves as middle-class family men. And both can be harshly critical of those whom they regard as malingerers or handout seekers.

But the two Conservative leaders -- and the circumstances of their times -- differ in important ways.

When Harris came to power, tax cuts were largely untested in Canada. He imported large chunks of the U.S. Republican party's "Contract with America," drawn up by ardent free enterpriser Newt Gingrich, and gambled the formula would work in Ontario.

Without waiting to eliminate the province's \$11 billion deficit, he chopped taxes. He cut spending immediately and sharply, affecting everything from hospitals to schools boards. He shrugged off the turmoil he created.

Harper would inherit an entirely different situation if he were elected. Ottawa has been running a surplus for seven years. There is enough manoeuvring room in the federal budget to cut spending without starving health care or social services, provided Harper were prepared to gut other programs. His tax cuts would not represent a sudden or seismic policy shift. Paul Martin reduced taxes by an unprecedented \$100 billion four years ago.

It is disingenuous of Martin to claim Canada can't afford Harper's tax cuts, when his own tax relief package is still being implemented. On the other hand, it would be useful to hear from Harper why federal taxes need to be cut when they're already going down, what services Canadians would have to sacrifice to pay for his tax cuts and what his timetable is. Harris was at least frank about his plans.

A second area in which Harris and Harper appear to diverge is their openness to social conservatism.

As premier, Harris steered clear of moral issues such as abortion, gay rights, the dark side of gambling and role of religion in public life. He allowed some of his ministers to implement socially conservative policies such as the Tory tax credit for private schooling. But his "Common Sense Revolution" was primarily about cutting taxes, shrinking government and promoting private enterprise.

Although Harper downplays the impact that faith and family values will have on in his approach to government, he has explicitly and repeatedly welcomed social conservatives into the party. He is open to private members' bills on abortion and capital punishment. He has pledged to bring in legislation to protect "traditional marriage."

The most obvious dissimilarity between the two Conservative leaders is in style and personality.

Harris governed as a shrewd jock, a guy who followed his gut instincts and liked stirring things up. He had no qualms about denigrating welfare recipients, demonizing teachers, belittling government employees and breaking unions. He knew who his core supporters were and didn't care what the rest of the population thought of him. His goal was to wrench the province sharply to the right, no matter how disruptive the process.

Harper is a cerebral economist, making a visible effort to loosen up. He thinks strategically, reacts with puzzlement when a remark he considers quite logical offends people, then retreats into euphemisms. He would take no pleasure in hurting vulnerable Canadians, but would be capable of dismissing their plight as a provincial responsibility. His goal is to project an image that is moderate, reasonable and reassuring.

Those looking for a damn-the-torpedoes neo-conservative like Harris will find Harper a bland, but acceptable, substitute.

Those looking for a safe alternative to the governing Liberals will be left wondering what lies beneath the cotton batting in which Harper's policies are so carefully wrapped.

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