

# THE ELECTION CHOICE

*Posted on April 29, 2011 by Keghart*

thestar.com

Category: [Opinions](#)





[The Toronto Star](#), Editorial, 29 April 2011

Two-and-a-half years ago, when Stephen Harper was seeking his second mandate from Canadian voters, some of those inclined to support him and his Conservatives were seduced by the hope that he would grow in office. He might seem mean-spirited and divisive, they argued, but give him another chance. The sobering exercise of power would surely shape him into a more mature, more inclusive leader.



[The Toronto Star](#), Editorial, 29 April 2011

Two-and-a-half years ago, when Stephen Harper was seeking his second mandate from Canadian voters, some of those inclined to support him and his Conservatives were seduced by the hope that he would grow in office. He might seem mean-spirited and divisive, they argued, but give him another chance. The sobering exercise of power would surely shape him into a more mature, more inclusive leader.

So much for that. Canadians have now had more than five years to see the Harper Conservatives in action, constrained only by having to navigate the shoals of two minority Parliaments. Throughout, the Conservatives had a choice. They could have accepted the fact that two voters in three did not support them. They could have reached out to opponents and sought genuine compromise on tough issues. They could have tried to unite an electorate fractured among parties and philosophies.

Instead, they took another path. They chose to double down on the politics of division. The second minority Harper government was like the first one — only more so. Contempt for Parliament, demonizing critics, shutting down legitimate questions — the sorry litany has become all too familiar. As with all organizations, the tone is set at the top. If the guy in charge does not trust others and is terminally suspicious of every contrary view, his government will reflect that.

It is especially ironic that Harper finds himself in this position. He has betrayed — or perhaps forgotten — the democratic Reform principles that sent him to Ottawa vowing to break up the cozy club of entrenched power brokers. “You’ve become what you used to oppose. What happened to you?” the NDP’s Jack Layton asked Harper in one of the few memorable moments of the televised leaders’ debates. There was no answer — nor could there be.

On other issues, the Harper government has disappointed. Its foreign policy has squandered much of the credibility that previous Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments built for Canada around the world. Even Brian Mulroney, while negotiating much closer trade links with the United States, championed a clearly distinct role for this country in such areas as the Middle East and opposing apartheid in South Africa. The Harper Conservatives seem dismissive of the possibility that

Canada could play a progressive, constructive role in international affairs; their failure to obtain a seat on the United Nations Security Council showed that the rest of the world has — sadly — reached a similar conclusion.

At home, it has pushed an expensive and counterproductive tough-on-crime agenda. Its pork-barrelling around the G8/G20 summits is all too predictable. Its support for the military has morphed into a blank cheque for fancy fighter jets that we don't need, and will cost many billions more than advertised. It has presided over growing social and economic inequality, stripping millions of Canadians of any stake in the country's economic success.

The Conservatives' strongest suit — their main claim to the “stable” majority government they crave — is the economy. Voters are rightly relieved that Canada escaped the worst of the global recession. They should keep in mind that the record is much more mixed. The Conservatives get credit for the durability of our closely regulated banking system, despite their doubts on regulation. Just as important, previous governments, most notably those of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, built the firm foundation that carried us through. The Conservatives are riding on the tough and controversial deficit-fighting work of their Liberal predecessors.

Harper is now going for broke, grasping for the majority mandate that has twice eluded him. By now it is clear what that would mean: smaller government, a diminished role for Ottawa in national affairs, and a push, if not a lurch, to the right on social issues.

Above all, it would mean a government that would not propose a bold vision of a better Canada five and 10 years down the road, mainly because it does not believe in such things. Government as the solution to all problems may be out of date. But government can still be a vitally relevant part of the solution — if it wants to be.

The Harper Conservatives deliberately chose not to aim high. Far from growing in office, they have diminished themselves and our national politics. For that alone, they do not deserve a renewed mandate.

