



The National Citizens' Coalition CONSENSUS

Special Edition

For more freedom through less government

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Reform MP Speaks at NCC Dinner

Stephen Harper, Reform Party Member of Parliament for Calgary, was our honoured guest at the Ninth Colin M. Brown Memorial Dinner at Hamilton Golf and Country Club in Ancaster, Ontario on May 24. Mr. Harper first spoke to an NCC audience at the same event in 1989, when the Reform Party was barely known and many questioned what role it would be able to play on the national scene.

Five years ago when I first spoke here. . . about the Reform Party of Canada, we had only existed for a couple of years. We had run in one election, only in Western Canada. We had elected Deborah Grey, our first Member of Parliament from Beaver River riding, a remote riding in Alberta. We didn't even have at that point our famous Senator, the late Stan Waters, a longtime National Citizens' Coalition member.

What I did [in 1989] was outline the constitutional agenda, economic agenda, social agenda and the political reform agenda of a new political party that very few in the room had heard about.

At the end of the evening, your president David Somerville said, (and I'm paraphrasing here as I'm not good with exact quotes) "Keep your eye on the Reform Party. It is going to be very big in Western Canada - a very big political force in the next few years." There was a fair amount of skepticism about that then, but as things have unfolded, this shows that either you have a very shrewd and far-sighted president in Mr. Somerville, which some of you including myself believe, or it shows that if you make enough wild predictions, sure enough one of them will come true.

Red Tories and Yellow Tories

David at one time was also a bit of a skeptic about the Reform Party. He didn't mention that when I first met him [in 1987] at some of the Reform Party's earlier founding meetings out in Vancouver and then again in Winnipeg he insisted that the way to go was to reform the PC Party from within. He was going through the phase which I had gone through myself as a Progressive Conservative. I

said it could not be reformed. In fact the line I used was that when push came to shove, you would find there were only two kinds of Tories, red Tories and yellow Tories. . .

In the closing phases of the election campaign in 1993, when the Progressive Conservative Party was really on the ropes, when it clearly had lost the election, . . . what the PC Party did then vindicated for me everything that I and

many others had done in the past seven years. It proved that it was not a party that could be reformed and that it did not even believe in the things that it sometimes claimed quietly that it did. In its dying days the PC Party turned on the Reform Party and, more importantly, it turned on the very values that had led people for decades to support it. It turned against fiscal responsibility, against the Reform Party's plan, it turned against political democracy, reforms to the system, it came out in favour of all kinds of basic "Canadian values" that Conservatives didn't share. This was perhaps the most gratifying moment. . .

(Cont'd. on page 2)



Stephen Harper, flanked by NCC Chairman, Colin T. Brown and NCC President David Somerville

Five Years Of Changes

What has happened in the past five years? Let me start with the positive side. When I spoke here five years ago, the Meech Lake Accord was very much on the table and [looked likely] to pass. This was part of a strategy supported by all major political parties in the country to deal with the unity problems through the appeasement of Quebec nationalism. Today, five years later, the Meech Lake Accord has long since been history, and its follow-up – the Charlottetown Accord – was forced to a national referendum through public pressure and defeated. As a consequence of that, the constitutional disintegration of the country – at least the disintegration in the legal sense in the face of Quebec nationalist pressure – has stopped. There is not today a process of appeasement through constitutional means.

Five years ago we had had a federal election and we had very tentative acceptance by a Conservative government and the country of free trade with the United States. We had a rapidly rising deficit at the federal level and the Conservative Party was responding with some of the largest tax increases in Canadian history, including laying the groundwork for the Goods and Services Tax. Today five years later, there has been a victory, generally speaking, of the concept of free trade continentally and globally in this country – [a concept] in fact now spearheaded by the Liberal government. There has been a significant rolling back of the state and the state's role in the Canadian economy in most parts of the country, even by left-wing governments or nominally left-wing governments.

On the positive side, the Liberal government in Ottawa has announced no new major spending, and particularly no new major social spending programmes. Universality has been severely reduced: it is virtually dead as a concept in most areas of public policy. The family allowance programme has been eliminated and unemployment insurance has been seriously cut back.

Left Consensus Gone

Five years ago in the House of Commons, in Ottawa, we had a wide-ranging three-party consensus basically on a left of centre vision of the country. Today the Reform Party provides an organized opposition which on a daily basis criticizes, attacks and gives alternatives to such things as official multiculturalism, enforced national bilingualism, a pro-criminal justice system, anti-family social policies, open door immigration and anti-democratic measures like blocking redistribution or enacting the gag law. That change in Parliament, that breakdown of the consensus that once governed the country is a significant advance.

These achievements are due in part to the Reform Party of Canada and in part to groups like The

National Citizens' Coalition. I think that we have some reason to be hopeful when you look at those things over the past five years.

On the negative side, while the advance of the ideological left has been halted it has not really been reversed – certainly not in Ottawa, at least. In other parts of the country this is not the case, as in my home province of Alberta, where the traditional economic and social policies that have governed the country really are in full retreat, and so are the groups that supported them. In Ottawa, whether we are talking about the constitution or senate reform, parliamentary reform, direct democracy, deficits and debts, management of social spending, privatization, crime and punishment family values, or all of these things – while the Liberal government is generally not moving in the old direction, it is really not moving in any direction.

Liberals Doing Nothing

One of the not-too-well kept secrets in Ottawa today is that, to be blunt, nothing is really happening. I've worked on Parliament Hill several times in the past. I've been there now with this Parliament over four months. There has been virtually no legislative agenda. We have thirty bills, most of them of a minor nature. We had a federal budget in which the magnitude of the tax and expenditure changes was really quite small by recent standards. The government is studying virtually every major area of public policy and they are studying on more than one track. They're studying social programmes, employment programmes, training programmes, old age programmes, the health system, defence, foreign policy, tax reform, the issue of family trusts for example. There is really not a major area of public policy, not a major issue that is not being studied by a Parliamentary committee, by a process within the bureaucracy, by some other consultative process or by a mixture of all three.

Why is this happening? First of all, it is happening because there is a real clash within the core of the Liberal Party, between the ideals the Liberal Party has historically stood for, (at least what it stood for in its most recent incarnations under Trudeau) and the reality it now faces on many fronts, particularly on the financial front. So there is this clash between reality and ideals, and at this point an inability to shape those ideals toward an accommodation with the realities.

Secondly, there is a paralysis because the Liberal Party in itself covers an enormous constituency – not just geographically (which they like to brag about) but ideologically, too. Within the Liberal Party are people who would easily fit into the left wing of the New Democratic Party all the way to people who would easily fit into the Reform Party. These people are well represented not only in caucus but in cabinet, and part of the problem with the Liberal

government is the paralyzing inability to put together a consensus out of this range of groups.

Pushing The Government

Now in my view, this is where the Reform Party comes in in this Parliament. . . We've seen in the past thirty years or so the power of the New Democratic Party at the federal level. The party was never elected, but through representing a strong sense of values and public policy objectives it was able to push ideologically uncommitted governments in a certain direction. In my view, that's what the country needs from the Reform Party in the life of this Parliament. The country needs a party that is willing to lay out a strong sense of public policy values and push the government in that direction. We do need some kind of vision. . .

I'm about to talk about the future, which is very mixed. What we want to see happen as Canadians – whatever our particular views or aspirations in politics – is a country that makes the future happen. We do not want to see a country where the future is done to it, usually by external forces. Having said that, I want to speak about the two major forces that we do face today. They are the financial crisis, which I made some allusion to, and the constitutional situation, or, speaking broadly, the Quebec situation. The Quebec situation is entering a phase which appears more serious and perhaps more final than ever before. . .

Two Forces: Two Crises

In 1989, the time I last spoke here, I had written a strategy paper for the Reform Party in which I observed (and I'm not claiming any particular insight here), that two forces were then driving the political situation and economic situation in the country. These two forces continue to drive political events in the Canada today.

Number one is the crisis of the welfare state: the particular form of big government that we have developed since the Second World War, and particularly since the 1960s. We are experiencing a crisis of the welfare state with the compounding problems of high unemployment, low economic growth, very high government expenditures, and multiplying priorities, at the same time as the inability to service them. These types of problems are common to virtually all Western countries.

The second crisis driving events is the Quebec question. What does Quebec want? The traditional answer that traditional political parties have been used to giving in past generations – that is, a two nations model crafted by an elite consensus – has failed. This approach is failing to appease Quebec nationalism and it has also failed to provide a basis on which to build a unified Canadian nation. These two crises are not unrelated.

Federalism has been sold in Quebec for a large part of the last generation as "profitable" federalism, particularly by Premier Bourassa. Federalism was deemed worthwhile because it could deliver a tremendous amount of money to the province. At the same time, uncertainty about the future of Quebec has led governments to be very hesitant in their efforts to deal with the growing financial crisis of the Canadian state. . . If you look at the pattern in the past 10 or 15 years, really since the second oil crisis, most countries in the world have retrenched in response to the financial problems of the welfare state. Canada and a few other countries have been very noticeable in their failure to deal with those problems. Usually there is a linkage between that and underlying unity problems within the country itself. Unity problems prevent the development of a national consensus on any kind of major retrenchment.

A Voice And A Vision

In the face of these crises, it continues to be my view that the role of the Reform Party is to represent what I call the voice of the democratic right in Canada – to represent those values and policies that were once, and were properly, the role of the Conservative Party but which that party abandoned. Now the Reform Party must represent those views, both outside Parliament, as it has done for the past several years, but now also inside Parliament. I'm talking about standing for a clear vision of a country based on a competitive international market economy, for economy within the government itself, for individual freedom, for family values, expansion of our democracy into a modern and direct democracy, for the equality of provinces within the federation and for the equality of all Canadian citizens before the law. . .

I believe that the Canada we know today will not survive the life of this Parliament. Whether this is a good or a bad thing depends on your perspective and depends on what improves. Quebec nationalism will either be defeated or it will triumph. I am not as certain as some that Quebec nationalism will be defeated but I think it will be resolved. I am more sure that the problems in the welfare state and in big government will continue to worsen until there is major reform across the range of government programmes as is now occurring in some provinces. Either that or the state as we know it will experience a financial collapse. Those are the two choices. The Liberal government has lost a valuable first year in its mandate by not acting decisively on those issues. But those are the crises that will drive them.

The National Citizens' Coalition speaks of "more freedom through less government" – that has been your slogan for some time. Let me bring this perspective, which may be unusual coming from a

Member of Parliament. Whether Canada ends up as one national government or two national governments or several national governments, or some other kind of arrangement is, quite frankly, secondary in my opinion. What matters and should matter to politicians and people who believe in the kind of values that I believe the National Citizens' Coalition and the Reform Party share is not whether the Canadian state prospers, but whether the Canadian people and the land we call Canada prosper. It's the people, and whether the people who live on that land remain free [that is important]. And whether Canada ends up with one national government or two governments or ten governments, the Canadian people will require less government no matter what the constitutional status or arrangement of any future country may be.

Principled Leadership

I am confident that whether or not Canada continues as a state, with principled political leadership and with an effort on behalf of us all, that Canada as a land and Canada as a people will prosper. And those are the interests which your organization and the Reform Party must serve.

I'm going to end my formal remarks in much the same way as I did in 1989 by contrasting the philosophy of the Reform Party with the philosophy of the Conservative Party. Although we share much in common, there are some differences. John A. MacDonald described his party and his need for a party in this way. He said that he did not need people who supported him when he was right; he always had support when he was right. He required people who would support him when he was wrong, and that was the test of the value of a political party.

In my view that is not the way a responsible political party behaves towards the country. The Reform Party will continue, I believe, as I said in 1989, to need people who support us when we are right and we need people who will be willing to oppose us when we are wrong in the interests of the country. So in closing, as part of your mission of "more freedom through less government", I will ask of you tonight what I asked five years ago: Be vigilant.

I wish you the best of luck in your efforts.

Stephen Harper answered a number of questions after his remarks. One sought his impression of Alberta Premier Ralph Klein's programme for debt reduction:

Although I can't speak of the details because it is not my area of expertise, what Mr. Klein is doing in Alberta is, in principle, what governments need to do. He is taking a look at a situation that is unsustainable financially and he is taking the steps

necessary through expenditure reduction to eliminate that financial uncertainty on a permanent basis within the life of a single Parliament. That is the only way it ever gets done. Any politician who says he is going to do it over two Parliaments is never going to do it. That's the golden rule. That's something you can learn from Ralph Klein.

No Delay

Compare that to the Mulroney government or the Chretien government. The first thing you learn is that any politician who says his plan will take more than one election will not start. The second thing, which I think Mr. Klein is demonstrating, is it is actually possible to get more public support if one proceeds quickly, if one deals with a range of problems at once instead of appearing to pick on certain sectors or on certain programmes. . .

The Klein government is more popular today, according to the polls, than when it started this plan, but there are some major bumps ahead along the way. My personal read is that while Premier Klein is broadly supportive of the programme he is really not the leader of it. But he is an unusual politician who is action-oriented and is not afraid to say no, and he might well carry it off. I think it's critical. If Premier Klein can carry off his programme in Alberta it will lead to a revolution, a very quick political revolution across the country. If he fails, I'm afraid that all politicians in power who have a little bit of nerve will lose it, and then the scenario in the country will become much worse.

NCC President David Somerville spoke briefly to agree with Mr. Harper's comments on the Klein government's programme, and pointed out that one of the driving forces behind the so-called "Klein Revolution" is Alberta Treasurer Jim Dinning. Dinning is quoted as saying, "You can't cross a wide chasm in two short bounds". Somerville stated that Klein was clearly heading in the right direction by cutting back very substantially on the existing system - and doing so with a great deal of passion.

*However, the ultimate success or failure of the programme will depend on the Klein government's ability to change the existing system, so that successor governments and the bureaucracy will be unable to undo the work of establishing smaller, more efficient, less intrusive government in Alberta. To help the Klein government in this important second step of the programme, the NCC has forwarded to every Alberta MLA a copy of Dr. Madsen Pirie's **Blueprint For a Revolution**, which we understand the Premier has made required reading for his caucus.*

A most successful evening was concluded with David Somerville's warm thanks to Stephen Harper for his trenchant insights into today's Canadian political scene.