

Stockwellifying Stephen Harper

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Reading the headlines or watching the news this week, Canadians might be excused for thinking they had stepped into a time machine and been transported back to 2000. Much the same as happened to Stockwell Day in his election campaign three-and-a-half years ago, Conservative leader Stephen Harper now finds himself under heavy bombardment for his positions on divisive social issues such as abortion, gay marriage and capital punishment. But unlike in 2000, when the attacks on Mr. Day were understandable if not entirely justified, they are way out of line this time.

The Liberals, and many of their friends in the media, would have us believe Mr. Harper has some sort of secret agenda to recriminalize abortion, reinstate the death penalty and turn back the clock on gay rights. But on each of these issues, the Conservative leader has done little to validate the scaremongering. Instead, it appears to be based on the media's ability to find a few outspoken social conservatives within Mr. Harper's party -- something that could easily be achieved within the Liberal party as well -- and on his unwillingness to dictate which position each of his MPs must take on every issue.

On abortion, for instance, the entire "controversy" that has unfolded over the past week began when The Globe and Mail reported that Conservative MP Rob Merrifield, the party's health critic, believed that women should be required to have counselling before undergoing the procedure. This was hardly an earth-shattering development, considering that Mr. Merrifield had expressed similar sentiments previously. Nor could Mr. Merrifield be accused of having taken an extremist position, considering that Paul Martin, the Liberal Prime Minister, has said much the same thing.

Even so, Mr. Harper has not endorsed Mr. Merrifield's position; instead, he has merely made an admirable commitment to allow his MPs to bring forward private member's legislation on abortion or any other issue, and to allow free votes. But that didn't stop Liberal Cabinet minister Judy Sgro from turning up at a Conservative rally this week, apparently on instructions from her party's headquarters, hollering at Mr. Harper about "taking away" her rights.

On capital punishment, it has been much the same story. This time, Hamilton-area candidate Tom Jackson had the audacity to say that he "personally [does] support capital punishment when beyond a shadow of a doubt and when all the evidence is in and for premeditated murder." It was a sentiment similar to one that has been expressed by many Liberals. And again, Mr. Harper did not endorse his candidate's position, merely saying that the party has no official position on the issue and that individual MPs and candidates are free to make up their own minds.

Then there's gay rights -- a perennial hot potato for the Conservatives, but one that Mr. Harper has handled with impressive poise -- something that cannot be said of one elderly supporter who stupidly fell for the bait and took a swing at a gay marriage activist who crashed a Harper function. On this issue, Mr. Harper has provided a more clearly defined party position: If elected, the Conservatives would withdraw the reference to the Supreme Court on gay marriage, and instead allow Parliament to decide the issue with a free vote. While personally opposed to changing the marriage laws, Mr. Harper can't be labelled a family values crusader simply for suggesting that such an important decision should be made democratically rather

than by unelected judges. .

What makes all the media hoopla surrounding Mr. Harper's supposed social conservatism so outrageous is that he is giving the people of Canada exactly what they have been asking for. For years, there have been calls from all corners for the revitalization of parliamentary democracy, mostly by putting more power in the hands of individual MPs. Now, Mr. Harper is planning to do just that on some of the most important issues facing the country -- and instead of being applauded, he is being chased around the country by reporters eager to advance the "controversy."

If anything, Mr. Harper's views resemble those of Mr. Martin -- a supposed social liberal who has expressed a degree of discomfort with both abortion and gay marriage -- far more closely than Stockwell Day. We think voters are smart enough to know that this is not a case of history repeating itself.

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