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March 08, 2006

Harper's Eleven

Meet The Fixer, The Enforcer, The Beauty, The Brain. There's a new crew of power players in Stephen Harper's Ottawa.

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Politicians reveal a lot by the way they boast. Jean Chrétien took pleasure in recalling times he kept his cool while lesser politicians panicked -- a valuable attribute, no doubt, but one that might have led him to downplay a crisis worth worrying about. Paul Martin liked to talk about his ambition to bring about historic change -- a noble mission, but one that could have caused him to neglect the more mundane demands of governing. If Prime Minister Stephen Harper shows a telling tendency to brag, it's in the way he talks about his own chess master-like ability to "think a few steps ahead" or "see things coming."

In time, perhaps his pride, too, will point to a potential weakness. For now, though, Harper has reason enough to see himself as a top-tier strategist. In less than three years he has created a new political party and led it to victory. Power in his Ottawa is built around his strategy for accomplishing the next step -- leaping from minority to majority. His new team, notably the 11 core players profiled in this issue of *Maclean's*, was assembled for how they fit into that plan. He's taken calculated risks to promote youthful voter appeal on his front benches, balanced against a quotient of experienced savvy. His top behind-the-scenes aides are known for their skills as campaigners and organizers, not as policy wonks or ideologues.

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Harper's choices are markedly unsentimental. He is relying overwhelmingly on politicians and advisers who don't have longstanding ties to him -- arguably the most dramatic departure from the Chrétien and Martin years, when power and personal bonds went hand in hand. Chrétien turned two advisers he had leaned on for decades, Eddie Goldenberg and John Rae, along with a friend from his student days, Jean Pelletier, into the most influential backroom trio in federal politics. Martin's unflagging loyalty, over many years, to his close-knit crew of operatives became the leitmotif of his rise -- and fall.

But Harper's old friends and ideological fellow-travellers are glaringly absent from the roster of his new Parliament Hill elite. Scan the list of Harper's Eleven and you will find not a single name that was prominently linked to him when he was rising in Reform, taking over the Canadian Alliance, and capturing the leadership of the reborn Conservative party. Power in his government is flowing through those he thinks can provide what he needs now, or next -- not as an acknowledgment of past services.

In fact, Harper's quest for the right person for the moment can make him quick to acquire and discard aides. He has churned through a succession of media managers and chiefs of staff in the past few years. Most recently, he dumped William Stairs, his communications director -- who had seemed to have won Harper's trust during the election -- over differences about how to handle the uproar following David Emerson's appointment as trade minister. Critics suggest Harper is guilty of a petulant inability to work with those who fail to meekly fall in line; admirers point to his steady rise as evidence he has been proven right most of the time. Most recently, they say, polls showing Canadians weren't really outraged by the Emerson defection vindicate Harper's instinct to largely ignore the media frenzy. "Harper is getting ready for a Throne Speech and a budget in April," said one long-time adviser. "It's logical that he would step back during this period, and not spend two hours a day worrying about the needs of the Parliamentary Press Gallery."

Harper's skepticism about the need to feed the daily -- no, hourly -- hunger of the media is one of his defining traits. As Alliance leader, he kept merger talks with the Progressive Conservatives secret for three months in 2003. In the run-up to the recent election, he resisted constant pressure to announce policies early. Instead, he hoarded them as campaign ammunition -- a tactic that worked brilliantly.

Harper is drawn to those who, like him, are willing to bide their time, and don't seem dazzled by the prospect of media exposure. That's good news for discreet operators like Patrick Muttart, whose post-election aura as a wunderkind campaign architect isn't hurt by the fact that he's been virtually invisible in Ottawa. And it explains why Harper has warmed up to a once harsh critic like Senator Marjory LeBreton, a former top Mulroney aide, who urges him to "stay out of people's faces" -- the sort of advice he's primed to hear.

Strategic value trumps shared history with Harper every time. Back when he was consolidating his position in opposition, he was seen as close to smart young MPs like B.C.'s James Moore, Alberta's James Rajotte, and Ontario's Scott Reid. Not one of them made it into his first cabinet. Instead, the up-and-comers drafted into the cabinet big leagues include Edmonton's Rona Ambrose and Ontario's John Baird, who have only grown close to him since 2004. Their individual talents matter, but so do the key voter demographics they represent: Ambrose, younger, educated women; Baird, urban Ontario.

A similar pattern holds for more seasoned politicians. Veterans Harper worked with in his Reform and Alliance years, notably Calgary's Diane Ablonczy, were passed over in favour of perhaps more moderate figures, such as Jim Prentice, another Albertan, but one who remained a loyal Progressive Conservative through the nineties -- and only developed a rapport with Harper in the past 18 months.

Harper's willingness to invest trust in such new allies was something few saw coming. Back when he was taking command of the Alliance, and then creating the new Conservative party, conventional wisdom had it that if he ever became PM, he would transplant hard-core Calgary conservatism to Ottawa. University of Calgary political scientist Tom Flanagan was widely seen as a permanent fixture as his most important confidant. But Flanagan has faded into the background.

Rather than elevating Calgary's distinctive neo-conservative culture, Harper's victory has given new life to veterans of Mike Harris's Ontario government, like Treasury Board Minister John Baird and Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, and resuscitated figures rooted in the Mulroney era, like LeBreton, Industry Minister Maxime Bernier, and Michael Wilson, his ambassador to the U.S. The key PMO figures -- Ian Brodie, Mark Cameron and Muttart -- were all Ontario-based before the election, and are all more recent additions to Harper's inner circle than his old Calgary network. (In general, the makeup of Harper's cabinet and Martin's are uncannily similar. Average age, 52 in Harper's, 55 in Martin's; 21 per cent women in Harper's, 28 per cent in Martin's. [See a full comparison.](#))

It's intriguing that Harper, along with Prentice, his unofficial chief operating officer, has been reading historian Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals*, which explores how Abraham Lincoln elevated into his cabinet former adversaries who had once disdained him, and then let them do their jobs. Harper also seems to be ignoring past differences, and the tempting inference would be that Harper plans to afford strong ministers a lot of leeway. Those who have worked closely with him, though, say not to expect him to function as a hands-off delegator.

His desk tends to be piled high. He reads thoroughly on many issues, fleshes out his thinking in one-on-one sessions with experts, then expects highly informed discussion among officials. "You never just walk in and talk to him about an idea," said one adviser. "You write him a well thought-out memo, that you read over and over again to make sure it makes sense. Then give it to him, and then set up a time to go and see him." Detractors say he too often tries to control too much. But others contend he is learning to be selective. "He will micromanage a number of portfolios and utterly ignore a number of other portfolios," one former aide predicts. Which issues will he want to take the lead on? Another former staffer answers that question simply: "The ones he thinks will get him his majority."

Signs of a tendency to intrude on issues deemed strategically crucial for the next election have already appeared. Health Minister Tony Clement was muzzled early by the PMO when he wanted to talk with reporters on a Quebec plan to allow private delivery of publicly funded medical services. Health wait times is on Harper's short list of five priority policies, and he wanted to study Quebec's approach before his government pronounced. Media-friendly ministers like Clement had better get used to it. In these very early days, Harper appears to be succeeding in instilling his patiently opportunistic style on his regime.

As part of his painstaking decision-making process, Harper does sometimes seek informal advice from outside his core group. Many assume Flanagan will still be tapped on occasion, along with his former senior policy adviser, Calgary consultant Ken Boessenkool. An underestimated source of guidance, according to an informed insider, is Ray Speaker, former Alberta Reform MP and *éminence grise*, and one of Harper's hand-picked negotiators in the merger talks that created the new Conservative party. These days, Speaker is a member of the federal security intelligence review committee, a role that brings him to Ottawa frequently -- offering convenient opportunities for regular chats with the PM. However, Speaker and the other outsiders aren't expected to carry the weight of, for instance, David Herle with Paul Martin, or John Rae with Jean Chrétien.

Harper's cabinet structure, more streamlined than Martin's, should help him maintain control. He chairs the priorities and planning committee that will manage his top-of-mind files. Prentice runs the operations committee that will try to keep everything else on the rails. But that will get harder. In opposition, Harper could choose what to actively oppose. In government, inconvenient issues, like Ralph Klein's health reform scheme, demand action.

Harper achieved power by steadfastly believing in his own ability to plot out the next few moves. He aims to consolidate it by sticking to his game plan, but he can hardly do it alone. The question now is whether his supporting cast has what it takes to follow -- and sometimes carry -- this least improvisational, most methodical Prime Minister from minority to majority. If that happens, who will second-guess Harper when he says he saw it all coming?

With Linda Frum and Laura Payton

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