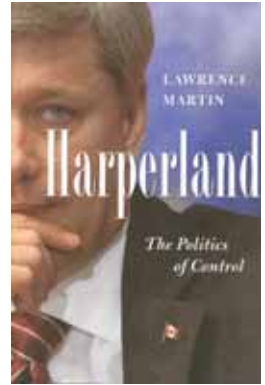


Harperland: The “march of audacities”

Lawrence Martin. *Harperland: The Politics of Control*. Toronto: Viking Canada, 2010.

Review by Geoff Norquay



In April 1963, *Washington Post* publisher Phil Graham delivered a speech to the overseas correspondents of *Newsweek* in London, which continues to be quoted today:

So let us today drudge on about our inescapably impossible task of providing every week a first rough draft of history that will never really be completed about a world we can never really understand. (Emphasis added)

Graham clearly knew the limitations of daily and weekly reportage, and that only the passage of time can provide the perspective necessary for a more thoughtful, balanced and nuanced analysis of daily events.

Not that Lawrence Martin appears to have set out to write anything more than a “first rough draft of history.” Indeed, the subtitle of *Harperland, The Politics of Control*, pretty well gives it all away. Though the author worked hard and interviewed many of the right people, he unfortunately brings an agenda to the enterprise.

The result is a one-dimensional, black-and-white listing of all the ways in which Stephen Harper runs a government of “absolute dictatorship,” a government of “stonewalling, deceit and muzzling,” a government of “brass knuckles,” a “peace, order and hood government.” No, that’s not a typo, that’s “hood” as in gangster. And as for the Prime Minister himself, “Harper was unable to emotionally connect; he displayed a vindictiveness, a penchant for seizing the moral low ground.”

What we have here is a polemic in which the vast majority of evidence is marshalled to prove one thesis; namely, that the Prime Minister of Canada is a mean-spirited control freak. Contrary views need not apply. There are brief pauses along the way to provide some context, but then it’s quickly back to the central theme and the “march of audacities.” This is the quaint turn of phrase used by Martin to catalogue the 51 separate pieces of evidence that illustrate how the Prime Minister has sought to “subvert democracy.”

Of course, it’s not just Lawrence Martin who is tough on the Prime Minister. Independent and objective third parties weigh in as well. The NDP’s Charlie Angus says, “Harper’s got this deep fundamental flaw, despite all his braininess, and at the end of the day, that fundamental flaw is going to do him in. It’s a mean streak, a level of viciousness that comes out.” There’s an assessment from an anonymous Ignatieff adviser: “People think he’s a dictator, a nasty bastard who is power crazy.” Ed Broadbent sees a “touch of evil” in Harper, and Frank McKenna describes the government as “thugs.”

Well, I guess that settles it then; Stephen Harper is a pretty scary guy.

To be sure, Stephen Harper is a controversial leader and prime minister. Like all leaders, he can be single-minded to a fault and deeply partisan. He plays the game of politics for keeps. And every government makes some

decisions that are self-serving, and others that are just plain wrong.

There is, of course, another Stephen Harper:

- His creation of the Conservative Party out of the ashes of its two stalemated and exhausted predecessors and his moulding of the new party into a credible alternative showed a combination of creativity, inventiveness and tough resolve that changed the face of Canadian politics and earned him the prime ministership.
- During his time in office, the fiscal imbalance has been addressed. Provinces have been provided with a level of fiscal resources that much more closely matches their constitutional responsibilities. With the exception of the odd and entirely normal blip, federal-provincial relations are calm and business-like.
- The voices of separation in Quebec are the quietest they have been in a generation. The Parti Québécois’ “winning conditions” have evaporated, with the result that Pauline Marois is close to being removed as leader of the party by her own partisans.
- While the recovery remains fragile, the institutional and fundamental strengths of Canada’s economy are the envy of the industrialized world. As controversial as it was at the time it was initiated, the government’s stimulus plan is seen by most economists to have worked.

Along with Stephen Harper’s intellectual development and the evolution of his views on a host of pertinent subjects — he springs fully formed onto the pages of this book — none of these developments makes it to the pages of *Harperland* except in the most cursory fashion. They don’t fit the central thesis so they are ignored. Many of the “audacities” are presented entirely without context, or without even the possibility of a more benign interpretation. And little judgment has been exercised as to the relative importance or scope of the various examples: the appointment of an unelected senator to cabinet ranks right up there with proroguing of the House.

Under the title of issues ignored, the principal exclusion is Quebec. The province makes only guest appearances in the book as the home of the sponsorship scandal, through its connection to Michael Chong’s resignation and as the source of difficulty over arts funding and youth justice in the last election. But the history of Stephen Harper and Quebec is just a bit more complex.

When I worked for him in 2004-05, the *National Post* repeatedly demanded that he “stop wasting his time on Quebec” and concentrate on areas of the country where he could actually win some seats. The *Ottawa Citizen* derided him as a “Belgian waffler” in war type when he mildly suggested that Belgium might serve as a model for managing relations between two language groups in a federal state. Yet Harper persevered. Despite the media giving him up for dead on scores of occasions, despite the unlikelihood of a former Canadian Alliance Party leader ever succeeding in Quebec, Harper found the language and the linkages to connect with Quebecers. He developed the concept of open federalism and once in office, he delivered on the UNESCO promise. His declaration that the Québécois constitute “a nation within a united Canada” squared a circle that had bedevilled prime ministers for half a century. He kept a skeptical party with him and he established a beachhead in Quebec for his party. An analysis of how the prime minister came to build his bridges to that province

would have brought some insights into Harper’s views on the federation and some needed balance to this book.

On the audacities without context front, the recommendations of the Gomery Commission are a case in point. Martin takes the government to task for ignoring Justice John Gomery’s recommendations concerning the role of the Clerk of the Privy Council and his relationship with the prime minister: “Gomery, whose inquiry into the sponsorship scandal had facilitated the decline in Liberal support, was once a godsend to the Tories. But now they were in office, they had little interest in what he had to say about reforming the system.” It’s almost as if Martin is saying that since Gomery had done so much to discredit the Liberals, the Conservatives owed it to him to adopt his recommendations.

The only problem with this analysis is that Justice Gomery had advanced some bizarre recommendations on the organization of senior roles in the public service. He proposed that the Clerk should “represent the public service to the Prime Minister and Cabinet,” whatever that meant, and that the “deputy minister (Secretary) in charge of the Treasury Board Secretariat would assume the role of head of the public service.”

Another case of missing context is the alleged politicization of the Privy Council Office in the promotion of the government’s economic stimulus plan to combat the recession. Martin goes hard on the \$34 million spent to inform the public about progress on the action plan and cites opposition charges that this was yet another example “of the Conservatives using public money for partisan gain.” But he neglects to mention that the opposition parties had spent month after month in Question Period in the winter and spring of 2009 demanding to know where the projects were and accusing the government of taking far too long to roll out the approvals.

These criticisms were beginning to take a toll, so not surprisingly, the government responded with a comprehensive plan to inform Canadians exactly

where the stimulus was being spent. And the “\$50,000 in printing costs for a glossy report” that Martin decries? Well, that would be for one of the regular quarterly reports on implementing the action plan that the Liberals had demanded and that the government had received good marks from the media for agreeing to provide.

To be fair, there are some glimpses of more balanced analysis: “It had only taken four-plus years. In that time, the liberal consensus that had dominated Canada for so long had become imperiled. It was one man’s doing. Stephen Harper had come to power and implanted himself with a force that the old system could barely withstand.” Now that would have made a fascinating central thesis, and a useful jumping-off point for analysis of how the country is changing, and how the Conservatives are tapping into these changes. What was the Liberal consensus? How and why did it begin to wane? Is there, as Allan Gregg suggests, an emerging alternative consensus that the Conservatives are tapping into? Is it a passing fad or here to stay? How are the Conservatives nurturing it? What’s worked and what hasn’t for them? Are the Liberals fighting back and how? These are all questions that could be explored for a useful progress report on an interesting hypothesis.

Martin also captures much of the backstage drama of the parliamentary crisis in 2008, in a chapter that provides an informative and readable narrative.

Years from now, when the definitive history of Canada’s 22nd prime minister is being written, historians may find some interesting anecdotes in *Harperland* to illustrate a point or buttress a hypothesis. In the meantime, this book unfortunately remains a somewhat narrow and limited “first rough draft of history.”

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