

Five Principles for Conservative Victory

by Bob Tarantino

If the Conservative Party wants to win the next election it should start speaking as if it wanted to win.

What does “speaking to win” mean?

To answer that we need to look at two examples of conservative parties not just winning elections, but coming from behind to do so: the 1994 Republican Congressional victories in the United States, and the 1995 Conservative majority government in Ontario.

Mike Harris was twenty-two points below Lyn McLeod’s Liberals at the beginning of the campaign and as late as two months before the November 1994 Congressional elections, nearly sixty percent of voters indicated they disapproved of the job Republicans were doing in Congress.

In both cases, the media peremptorily dismissed conservative prospects for victory. In both cases, canny politics allowed conservatives to outplay liberals and their media mouthpieces, and the message from voters was emphatic: conservative policies can win.

But in order to do so, conservatives must be confident and, perhaps more importantly, explicit about their beliefs.

The unifying element of the Harris and Republican victories was a campaign platform manifested as a promise to voters: the Common Sense Revolution and the Contract With America, respectively. It is worth reminding ourselves what those were: the CSR was a written commitment to implement five key policies (including cutting income taxes and cutting government spending), backed by specific commitments (e.g.,

cutting provincial income taxes by 30% in three years); the CWA consisted of eight reforms to be passed on the first day of the 104th Congress, and ten bills to be introduced within the first one hundred days.

To distill the matter even further, they decided on a core set of policies; they wrote them down; they promised to implement those policies; and they never backed down.

Hysterical editorials in the *New York Times* or the *Toronto Star*? Dirt off their shoulders. Liberal denunciations as racist, sexist, elitist? No matter: the covenant with the electorate was paramount.

Likewise it's critical the federal Conservative Party identify a short list of core policies and promote them. Five "flagpole" policies are all that is needed: five key policy initiatives with which the CPC will cast its identity. Then the party needs to buttress those policies by pledging to put them before the House of Commons within the first three months of the next Parliament.

The good news is that the CPC has already done much of the heavy lifting: a fifty-one page policy declaration adopted in March 2005 sets out in some detail what the party stands for. It's not perfect – there are no numerical commitments in the "Tax Relief" section, for example – but it serves the purpose of providing a solid foundation on which to build.

The fundamental benefit of such a "contract" is *focus*. By focusing on policies, the party will be able to address a number of strategic issues with which it is afflicted. As it is, the Tories are stuck in a reactive phase, both in a substantive sense (most of what we hear from them is rehashed sniping about the corruption and mismanagement of the

Liberals – reiterating *ad nauseam* what we've all known for at least the last six years) and in a tactical sense (the Liberals and NDP are announcing policies at a furious clip, leaving the Conservatives to either shout “me too!” or mumble vague criticisms).

What's more, a concise policy statement will allow the Conservatives to frame the debate on the issues they want to implement and just as importantly to avoid charges they harbor a “hidden agenda.”

What should be the components of a Conservative electoral “contract”? In reviewing the CSR and the CWA, one notices the elegant manner in which the drafters addressed the perennial concern about splitting the sometimes fragile alliance uniting social conservatives, fiscal conservatives and libertarians: social issues were subsumed in fiscal policies.

In other words, divisive matters such as abortion and family breakdown were treated only to the extent that they were either a function of, or could be addressed by, fiscal issues (such as seeking to lower rates of out-of-wedlock births by reforming welfare policy). A similar emphasis on small-government conservatism would benefit the CPC.

The bottom line is this: The Conservatives won't win simply by proclaiming themselves the anti-Liberals. After a decade in power, an incompetent and corrupt Liberal government was paraded before the electorate in June 2004 – and the electorate declined the opportunity to run them out of office.

Despite another year of further dithering and further excavation of scandalous dirt, an insufficient number of voters are enthusiastic about replacing the Liberals, likely

because the primary alternatives, the Conservatives, has done a poor job of explaining what a Conservative government would look like.

The Tories need to manifest for people what a Conservative victory will mean to their daily lives, in terms of the safety of their families, the balance in their bank accounts and the pride with which Canadians can carry themselves as a result of the praiseworthy conduct of their government.

Instead of a focus on conservatism, the CPC seems to display a reticence to play politics; no such false modesty troubles our opponents, nor should it. The Liberals, with the assistance of their client media, are able to smother debate with vague platitudes about multiculturalism and airy references to the Charter. Conservatives don't have that luxury – and only the clarity of a principled plan will allow them to pierce the Liberal/media miasma.

If Conservatives start to talk like they *want* to win, Canadians may just begin to realize that they *should*.

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