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OttawaWatch 10: Around the edges at the Tory caucus

By Lloyd Mackey

*While I was teaching at Trinity Western University for six-weeks, at the beginning of 2005, I was able to slip over to Victoria to observe the Conservative MPs' caucus meeting, at the venerable Empress Hotel. As it happens, the meeting took place when the Conservatives were still in opposition. One year later, to the month, they were elected to form a minority government. Covering that caucus meeting enabled some of the research I was engaged in, preparatory to writing **The Pilgrimage of Stephen Harper/Stephen Harper: The Case for Collaborative Governance (2005/6) ECW Press**. By the way, as noted in the piece, Belinda Stronach, who later bolted to the Liberals and became one of the prime minister, Paul Martin's cabinet ministers, was still at the time of writing, a Conservative MP.*

It was easy enough, of course, to slip across the water from the Fraser Valley to Victoria.

And all with good reason: The Conservative caucus was meeting at the grand old Fairmont Empress Hotel, less than half a dozen kilometers from the place where I was born 65 years ago.

One Conservative MP greeted me with a congenially-rude question.

“What are you doing here, Lloyd?” he asked. “Are you covering this event, or just hanging around?”

“A little bit of both,” I replied, cheekily.

Truth to tell, I was also thoroughly enjoying the green lawns, the blooming pansies and the ability to walk around town in a light jacket. And I can report that the palm trees around the corner at the Grand Trunk Pacific Hotel are doing nicely, thank you.

It was just the place to be, especially on Tuesday morning, January 25. The *Globe and Mail* had – count them – five separate stories and columns on the latest wrinkles in the same-sex marriage discussions. In the next few paragraphs I will try to highlight the main points made in the articles and some of the Conservative responses to them.

One story noted that a letter signed by 134 academics, was to be delivered later in the day to Conservative leader Stephen Harper. In short, the letter accuses Harper of misleading the public by suggesting parliament can outlaw same-sex marriage without invoking the Constitution's notwithstanding clause.

The party's justice critic, Vic Toews, drawing on his previous experience as director of constitutional law and attorney-general for Manitoba, asserted that even 134 academics could be wrong. He said Harper was on sound ground in maintaining that nothing the Supreme Court has said about the issue requires the utilizing of the notwithstanding clause.

A senior journalist in the scrum said, immediately after Toews' departure, that he certainly did his homework and knew his stuff. But she admitted she did not understand the issue fully and wondered if her audience would.

Another *Globe* story suggested that Belinda Stronach, the highest profiled of a handful of Tory MPs not opposed to the same-sex marriage definition, was irked with an ad campaign targeted at ethnic minorities.

Scrummed at the caucus, she certainly did not look irked. She allowed that Harper, as leader, had every right to run the campaign, and insisted she had no discomfort over her minority position.

The fact is that a number of social conservative advocacy groups have been trying to "help" Harper by suggesting to him that the Conservatives will only win over socially conservative recent-immigrant voters by plumping in favor of traditional marriage.

In effect, Harper is handling the offer of help very carefully. The ad campaign is designed to find out directly whether the advocacy groups are right.

Globe columnist Margaret Wenté implied, in her column, that they are wrong.

The campaign "won't work", she says. "Sikhs, Chinese and Muslims may not believe in gay marriage, but they're not going to desert the Liberals over it. They like living in a pluralistic, tolerant and secular state."

Wenté suggests Harper take a look at places like Mississauga, where she lives.

To that extent, she is right. But urbanites who believe male-female marriage definition is not on the radar screen would do well to check with some of the rural and small city ridings where it is definitely an issue. Mississauga and Abbotsford, last time I heard, are both still part of Canada.

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The Conservative position is that one-third of the population has no problem with equal status for what Harper calls "non-traditional partnerships", but would not want such partnerships to be called marriages. He maintains that his party is reflecting the middle ground. It is a position he believes he must take if his party is to do its job, properly, as the official opposition in a minority parliament.

But he is also likely looking over his right shoulder at an event set for February 19, on the very campus where I am currently teaching *Journalism in Political Context*. (At the risk of repetition for reinforcement, that's Trinity Western University.)

Sponsored by the Christian Coalition International, the daylong event features Christian Heritage Party leader Ron Gray and his possible successor, Chris Kempling, as speakers.

Stressing that the CCI is "not a political party" the promotional literature for the event says it is an opportunity to introduce attendees to the organization as "an umbrella ... to give Christians a united voice in the public square."

The inclusion of Gray and Kempling as speakers is interesting, in that the CHP tends to try to draw socons away from the Conservative party by maintaining that Christian activists really should be careful about drifting into "middle ground."

Kempling is best known for his battle in the courts with the BC College of Teachers, over his right to write letters to newspaper editors questioning the "normalcy" of homosexual behavior, while working as a school counselor. What is less known is that he recently renounced his Conservative party membership in favor of the CHP, expressing the sense that the Tories were not supportive enough of his position.

For my students, I hope the event will provide a helpful example of the dividing lines between advocacy, journalism and politics, in the whole public policy process.

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