

November 30, 2005

Ottawa Watch 53: On the run

By Lloyd Mackey

*This piece marked the beginning of the campaign which culminated in the January 23, 2006 federal election that saw the formation of Stephen Harper's minority government. On a personal note, it marked my recovery from some heart issue that permitted me carefully to hit the road to observe the campaign and, at the same time, promote my book, **The Pilgrimage of Stephen Harper**. As indicated, I did get into four provinces from coast to coast and a fifth, as well, Nova Scotia. Little did I know that the heart fix (three stents) would be temporary and, inside of a year, I would undergo triple bypass surgery.*

Monday night's fall of the government has a way of focusing a political journalist's mind very sharply.

And the reason for the sharpened focus relates to the range of issues that voters might try to weigh and balance before casting their ballots.

This is the third election I have covered from an Ottawa base, and the second in which my personal involvement in the election has related to a book I have just written, about the leader of one of the political parties.

The leaders of all four political parties are the same major players as those in the immediate previous federal vote, in 2004: Paul Martin (Liberal), Stephen Harper (Conservative), Jack Layton (NDP) and Gilles Duceppe (Bloc Quebecois).

It is also the first time I have hit the election trail, having just been cleared for travel by my cardiologist – with one or two cautionary notes about keeping up my exercise and not forgetting my medications. It makes me grateful to God, Edna, my doctors, the University of Ottawa Heart Institute and Montfort Hospital – and the many people who prayed for us – that I am ready and able to cover an election.

For these weeks, Edna and I will be like two ships passing in the night. She will spend a fair amount of time in one of Canada's coldest cities, in the constituency where the MP for whom she works is running for re-election. I will be in certain parts of Canada, where my publisher figures it would be in the interests of book sales to have the author available to answer questions about the book in question, *The Pilgrimage of Stephen Harper* (ECW Press, hard cover, \$32.95). If things work out according to plan, I could find myself in New Brunswick, Ontario, Saskatchewan and BC, at various times between now and election day.

You should be able to get a copy of this book at your local mainstream or Christian bookstore. And thank you for asking.

Now that we have that careful introduction and shameless book plug out of the way, I am pleased to make a few comments about what Christians might want to keep in mind when casting our ballots on January 23, 2006.

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There has been a long pause, while I reflect on the next few sentences. I want to be both forthright and careful.

Perhaps the best way to cover this is to tell you what the religion/ethics writer of a major Canadian daily newspaper told my publisher's publicist, about the reason nothing about *Pilgrimage* was going to be mentioned on the religion page of that newspaper.

As I have it, the explanation was: "I don't think the book is a good fit with the (name of newspaper) religion page, due to (name of city) readers' evident lack of interest in conservative and Conservative politics -- as shown in the last federal election."

I can say that there would be similar reactions in the newsrooms of quite a few newspapers. And the journalists who have those reactions may genuinely believe that extensive coverage of either conservative politics or conservative religion will not be in the best interests of their readership.

For that reason, at least, I would suggest that any Christian who wants to make a well-informed decision on how he or she will vote – or where to find a church, for that matter – would be well-advised to read pretty widely and not depend on one newspaper for information.

And, in the case of the January 23 election, I would encourage thoughtful Christians to read both books that have been written in the past six months, about Stephen Harper. The first one was *Stephen Harper and the Future of Canada* (M&S) by William Johnson. It is much more detailed than *Pilgrimage*, but deals less with the faith/politics interface.

No matter which party one for which one is inclined to vote, I would suggest that Canadian Christians read up on Harper. One of the most common complaints I have heard is that we don't know enough about him or his party.

Have a good read – and a good election. And remember to use the election to sharpen your focus.

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