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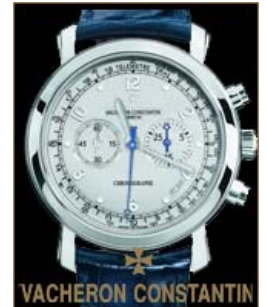
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From *The Economist* print edition

After a year in office, Stephen Harper's no-nonsense government has shown itself to be effective but its longevity is still uncertain

Peter Schrank



IN FREAKISHLY warm weather, Stephen Harper met the press earlier this month in the snow-free gardens of his official residence to discuss his new-found commitment to the environment. He candidly admitted that his Conservative minority government had let the public down when it presented a climate-change plan whose main targets were set 50 years in the future, and vowed to do better. He promptly named a new environment minister with a reputation as a political pitbull.

A different politician might have chosen a different backdrop for this confession of failure. But as Canadians have learned from watching Mr Harper over the past year, their young prime minister is not a man to dodge realities, however unpleasant. On issues ranging from revisiting same-sex marriage to ending favourable tax treatment for business entities known as income trusts he has followed his instincts rather than the opinion polls.

It has worked. Instead of falling within months, as Canada's liberal punditocracy had predicted, Mr Harper has become an increasingly assured performer. The talk in Ottawa now is that, despite commanding just 125 of the 308 seats in the House of Commons, his government may even manage to carry on until 2008.

Mr Harper took office in favourable circumstances. The Liberals, whom he ousted a year ago, bequeathed a robust economy and a large fiscal surplus. They did this despite lavishing large dollops of extra money on the health service, which has kept normally querulous provincial premiers



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happy. A dozen years in government left the Liberals tired, divided and discredited. They were in leaderless disarray until last month.

The prime minister has avoided making any big mistakes. Unlike his predecessor, Paul Martin, who had so many priorities he had none, Mr Harper has focused on just a few issues and concentrated on doing what he promised. He summed up his philosophy by saying, "I believe it's better to light one candle than to promise a million light bulbs."

He has carried out four of the five chief policies he set out in the election campaign: money for child care, a cut in the sales tax, tougher laws against street crime, and legislation to make politicians and the civil service more accountable. Completing the fifth—a cut in patients' waiting-times—depends on the provinces.

Mr Harper has been able to get things done partly because he centralised more power in the prime minister's office. Cabinet ministers must clear all their big speeches and news releases with prime-ministerial staff. Mr Harper makes all the key announcements himself, the relevant minister just a nodding head in the background. In this he is following a trend in Britain and other countries, notes Donald Savoie, a professor of government at the University of Moncton.

Although ministers with large egos might chafe, they have not done so publicly. There have been few leaks to the media. To help steer the ship of state, Mr Harper hired a seasoned first mate in Kevin Lynch, a senior financial official recalled from a post at the IMF to head the civil service. The result is a government that conveys unusual clarity of purpose.

Opinion polls show that Canadians approve of Mr Harper's leadership, but that has not rubbed off on his party. Recent polls have put the Conservatives neck-and-neck with the Liberals, both at between 30% and 35%. In Canada's regionalised party system, changes in allegiance take place slowly, says Roger Gibbins of the Canada West Foundation, a think-tank in Alberta. Others note that uncommitted voters may want to see more of Mr Harper before they convince themselves that he does not plan to inflict social conservatism on them, as opponents have claimed.

"Conservative numbers go up when they focus on fiscal issues," says Nik Nanos, a pollster, "and down when they start freelancing on social issues like same-sex marriage, the gun registry and crime bills."

The year ahead promises to be harder. Mr Harper has now committed himself to a stronger policy on climate change, which will not be easy to achieve in such an energy-hungry country. A House of Commons committee is reviewing the issue: if it recommends stricter targets than Mr Harper wants, he could face a damaging fight.

The provincial premiers want the prime minister to act on his promise to redress "the fiscal imbalance". In other words, they want more federal money. That demand comes most vocally from Jean Charest, the premier of Quebec, who is expected to call his own election this spring. Mr Harper's best hope of winning a majority at the next federal election lies in picking up seats in Quebec. But the "fiscal imbalance" is a Pandora's box that Mr Harper opens at his peril.

Then there is foreign policy, where Mr Harper looks less assured. He has repaired relations with the United States, which frayed under the Liberals. But Canadians do not like their governments to be subservient to their more powerful neighbour. His opponents accused Mr Harper of just that when he extended Canada's military deployment in Afghanistan until 2009. That could become very unpopular if casualties mount (so far 45 Canadians have died there in the past four years).

Mr Harper's warmth towards the United States contrasts with his coldness towards China, which he has criticised for human-rights abuses. Chinese trade and investment are increasingly important for western Canada. This month he sent the finance and trade ministers to Beijing in an apparent effort to mend the breach.

The coming year will either make or break Mr Harper. He faces tougher opposition. The new Liberal leader, Stéphane Dion, is both an environmentalist and a Quebecker. Minority governments in Canada last an average of 18 months. Nobody in Ottawa is in a rush to force a new election. But sooner or later, Mr Harper's government will fall on a parliamentary vote of confidence. He is a skilful parliamentary tactician, and may be able to pick the issue on which that vote will come. The broader test of his qualities as a political leader will be whether he has chosen the right candles to hold up to the electorate.

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