AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN HARPER

Leader of the Conservative Party of Canada



1) As you know, the Canadian population is increasingly diverse. Many wonder if that diversity is being reflected in our elected institutions. Can you please give us some idea of the diversity of your caucus. For example, how many women, immigrants, visible minorities, and Aboriginal peoples were elected in your party in the last federal election?

A belief in the equality of all Canadians is a founding principle of the Conservative Party of Canada; therefore, our party does not conduct demographic profiling, as some other political parties do. To the best of my knowledge, among our caucus, we have the following numbers that correspond to these identified groups: 19 women, 7 immigrants, 10 visible minorities, and 1 Aboriginal person.

2) What measures has your party taken to involve immigrants and minorities as party members, electoral candidates, and MPs? Are these measures working? Does more need to be done?

The Conservative Party of Canada believes that having innovative policies and an open and honest approach to doing politics are key aspects of attracting new members, and potential candidates to our party. For example, at our founding policy convention our party reaffirmed its commitment to immigration reform by adopting a suite of policies which promote diversity and multiculturalism and also restore fairness and compassion to our immigration and refugee system. The following is a sampling of the significant policies and initiatives adopted at our convention which demonstrate our party's pledge to ensuring that both our membership and candidates are derived from all of Canada's cultural and immigrant communities:

Diversity Principles

The Conservative Party believes that Canada's multicultural society is a valued reality and accepts the need to foster understanding and equality of opportunity while promoting common values across Canada.

Multiculturalism

The Conservative Party recognizes the rich, diverse make-up of the Canadian population and the contribution of these communities to our history and the Canadian way of life. The government must ensure that each community is able to enhance and contribute to Canada without discrimination and barriers.

Immigration Principles

The Conservative Party supports a welcoming and well-managed immigration system for Canada based on:

i) a fair and transparent process that earns the respect and confidence of Canadians as well as of the international community;

ii) compassionate measures to assist in family reunification;

iii) ensuring that Canada is successful in encouraging skilled immigrants to make Canada their destination of choice;

iv) a clear and workable process for immigrants to obtain equivalency for their international skills, training and experience;

v) addressing the need for adequate long-term funding for settlement services providers; and

vi) upholding Canada's humanitarian tradition of providing safe haven for refugees.

In keeping with these principles the Conservative Party is committed to streamlining and improving the immigrant application and refugee determination process and also to revamping the

process for recognition of foreign credentials. I believe that it is imperative that new Canadians are afforded the best possible opportunity to use their education and skills here in Canada, and that Canadian society can benefit greatly from their wealth of knowledge and experience. The Liberal government has long talked about immigration reform, but has consistently failed to deliver. Immigration is such an essential part of Canada's social fabric and key component of our country's economic growth that it can no longer be a casualty of broken Liberal promises. Those in the immigrant community no longer trust the Liberals to deliver on commitments to immigration reform and are recognizing the Conservative Party as the only viable choice if they earnestly want to see reforms to the system.

I am excited to see countless members Canada's immigrant and minority communities embracing our policies and choosing to put forth their name as Conservative candidates, making the decision to join our party, and expressing their intention to vote for us in the next election. In addition to the immigration consultations, Conservative MP Deepak Obhrai heads our Bridge Building initiative which consults regularly with cultural community leaders to identify and understand issues of importance to their communities. I have also set up a Community Relations Office which is designed to foster good relationships with cultural communities.

3) Research suggests that in order to secure a party's nomination, immigrants and minorities need to have more education, more experience and deeper roots in their communities. Given that in order to run, a candidate must first be nominated, how do you ensure that immigrants and minorities are able to participate equitably in nomination contests?

I believe that it is vital to have a cohort of candidates which reflects the diversity of Canadian society. I also believe the best way to achieve that diverse mix of candidates is to have an open and honest nomination process. Our party has numerous examples of women and minorities who have experienced resounding electoral success, all-the-while respecting the democratic principles that are so important to the Conservative Party of Canada. I would also like to stress that education levels and socio-economic background have never been a barrier to success for those who seek candidacies in our party. Elitism has no place in our party and I think women, minorities, and new Canadians consider that a refreshing change.

4) Outside of the electoral arena, how does your party involve a diverse range of Canadians in, for example, consultation activities or the setting of party policy? What challenges do you face in trying to reflect the interests of some many individuals?

The recent revelations about the level of politicization in the immigration process have probably shocked quite a few Canadians. Unfortunately, these revelations do not come as a shock to anyone who has gone through the process, or has family members who now find themselves mired in a system which is unnecessarily slow, and prone to unfairness and political interference. I, along with our Citizenship and Immigration critic, Diane Ablonczy, felt that it would be a good idea to provide a forum for new Canadians to express their frustration with the immigration process and to offer them the opportunity to offer constructive criticisms and suggestions for improvement. Accordingly, the Conservative Party launched a series of National Immigration Consultations that have been an overwhelming success.

The Conservative Party listened very carefully to what new Canadians were telling us, and, as I've illustrated in the answer above, we have adopted policies that reflect our commitment to improving the immigration system. That result, in its own right, would have made the process all worth it, but I think one of the most important benefits of the consultations was the level of trust and understanding our party fostered with various immigrant and minority communities. They have seen so many Liberal promises come and go, and so little action ever taken to improve the system, that it was really encouraging to see their enthusiasm in embracing the opportunity to speak up for meaningful immigration reform.

As for challenges in reflecting the interests of so many individuals, I don't see it as a challenge at all. I'm finding that as I travel across the country and meet with Canadians that there are basic and fundamental issues that are common to all of us. We all want a better Canada, and a government that will provide the vision and the policies to make that happen.

5) Although the Conservative Party fielded a diverse slate of candidates in the last federal election, and your caucus includes MPs from all walks of life, the perception that your party is "anti-immigrant" or "intolerant" remains. Why do you think this is, and what steps is your party taking to address that perception?

When I attend our caucus meetings and I look out over our collection of MPs, I'm always amazed that anyone can accuse our party of intolerance. I see Steven Fletcher, the first quadriplegic Member of Parliament. I see Nina and Gurmant Grewal, immigrants to this country and the first husband and wife duo in the House of Commons. I see women who have brought extensive private sector experience and enormous talent to our caucus and have flourished in their roles as senior critics in high profile portfolios. I see our Members of Parliament, the young and the not so young, from various different backgrounds and occupations, all working for a better Canada. I can offer no other explanation than to say that our political opponents have worked very hard to perpetuate the myth that the Conservative Party is intolerant. When a political party is rife with corruption, consistently breaks promises, and no longer reflects Canadians' values it resorts to scaremongering. I trust Canadians to see through the scaremongering and to choose good government over corruption and broken promises.