

Richard Nimijean • All in the brand

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Canadians are very perceptive when it comes to political affairs. The latest example is the report in the July 25 *Citizen* that "Canadians are growing weary" of the slogan "Canada's New Government."

The slogan is an exercise in rebranding, a political strategy to remind Canadians that the state is not Liberal and to convince them that the Liberals are not "Canada's natural governing party."

Brand politics challenge democracy, with the emphasis on style and communication over substance and action. Branding strategies involve symbolic and political dimensions, changing how the government "looks" to the public, how it communicates with the public, and how it frames initiatives.

One danger is that the political world of a government can seep into the non-partisan world of the public service. Many federal government websites, including the main portal, are awash in a blue strikingly similar to the blue of the Conservative party's website. An aide to Jason Kenney, secretary of state for multiculturalism and Canadian identity, suggested that this was coincidental, reflecting the desire of bureaucrats to please the government.

However, trouble arose when some public servants were instructed to use the political descriptor "Canada's New Government" in departmental communications. A scientist was fired for ridiculing this policy, but a public outcry led to his reinstatement.

In brand politics, governments seek to manufacture an image for themselves in which they represent the national consensus.

The Liberals spoke of their ongoing commitment to "caring and sharing," reflecting the "Canadian way," yet during their most recent tenure in power, socioeconomic inequality actually increased. They hyped their green agenda even though Canada's environmental record worsened.

The Conservative government engages in similar tactics, for example framing the Afghanistan mission in terms of Canadian values. In 2006, Mr. Harper suggested that support for the mission was necessary because Canadians do



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Stephen Harper heads Canada's government, not Canada's New Government, Richard Nimijean writes, and the more often he uses the new brand name, the more convinced Canadians will be that Harper can't separate politics from governing.

not "cut and run." (Now, the federal government is being advised to avoid such language if it wishes to increase support for the mission, instead emphasizing issues like development and human rights, which are supposed to resonate with Canadians.)

Similarly, it is a traditional political strategy, when seeking to deflect criticism, to blame the previous government. Whenever Canada's poor environmental record is raised, the Conservatives react by blaming the Liberals.

Rhetorical strategies associated with brand politics worsen the quality of democracy while increasing citizen cynicism and dissatisfaction.

People demand action from governments, not explanations or justifications when goals or values are not achieved or realized.

Mr. Harper notes that Liberal governments often talked but did not act. However, this criticism could be levelled also at his "New Government." Accountability requires that governments act upon the desires and wishes of citizens and to be clear in their commitments. Polls suggest that Canadians' top priority is the environment, and yet Canadians have very low approval ratings of government environmental policies.

When Canadians elected the Conservatives, they expected a government that acted on its promises and did not engage in excessive spinning. However, the slogan "Canada's New Government," presumably intended to remind Canadians of the discredited Liberal regime, shows that it, too, practises brand politics.

Ironically, it reminds Canadians that their "new government" is not that different from Canada's "old" governments.

The lesson is clear: Governments, whether Conservative or Liberal, need to take responsibility for their decisions. No more blaming previous governments for current problems. No more empty celebrations of Canadian values. Governments should do what they were elected to do and avoid political posturing, or take the political fallout for not acting as promised.

Both the government and Canadians could benefit if the Conservatives were to abandon the slogan "Canada's New Government."

For Stephen Harper, voters might be more supportive of the government because they wouldn't feel as though they were subject to the government's political considerations, which differ from its responsibilities as government.

And if dropping brand politics reduces overall cynicism, and Canadian democracy is thereby strengthened, then everybody wins.

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