

Harper's Conservatives and Canada's 2011 Voter Suppression Scandal. "Suppressing Our Knowledge of Voter Suppression"

Part I

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That 2011 voter-suppression scandal, the "robocalls" fraud: it was all smoke and mirrors, right? So how could Harper's Conservatives have organized a fraud that never happened?

*Try consulting Paul Well's book *The Longer I'm Prime Minister: Stephen Harper and Canada, 2006-*, published in 2013. The jury citation for an award this book won called it "impeccably researched" — and it contains not a whisper about the scandal.*

And what do official sources say? On April 24, 2014 Yves Côté, Commissioner of Canada Elections, the bureaucrat who supposedly enforces the Canada Elections Act, published a Summary Investigation Report on Robocalls in which he indicated that the national voter-suppression scandal most of us remember must have been a collective hallucination.



Côté admits that confusing telephone calls were made across Canada. But except in Guelph — where a 22-year-old Tory operative was thrown under the bus by Conservative Party national headquarters and Sun Media and then charged by Elections Canada with sole responsibility for the crime — Côté's gumshoes found no evidence of criminal intention to violate the Elections Act. And so he shut down his investigation.

Beyond just stating his conclusions, Côté suggested how we should interpret this non-event: "the data gathered in the investigations does not lend support to the existence of a conspiracy or conspiracies to interfere with the voting process."

A chorus of those media pundits whom investigative journalist Michael Harris calls "Harper's Helpers" took the hint. "Sorry, Truthers," John Ivison trumpeted in the *National Post* on April 25, "the robocalls affair is not Canada's Watergate." Quoting Christopher Hitchens' description of conspiracy theories as "the exhaust fumes of democracy," Ivison hoped for a reduction in "similar emissions."

On the same day, Tasha Kheiriddin declared at *iPolitics* that the "conspiracy theory" around robocalls had indeed gone "poof," and proposed that the affair "may yet be filed under 'History's Greatest Hysterias', next to the Tanganyika Laughter Epidemic of 1962 and the Dancing Plague of Strasbourg in 1518." And on CBC News Peter Mansbridge suggested in his best funeral-director style that journalists who had received awards for investigative work on the scandal — he meant Postmedia's Glen McGregor and Stephen Maher — ought to apologize to the Canadian public.

These responses seem symptomatic of what Stephen Marche calls in *The New York Times* "[The Closing of the Canadian Mind.](#)" The capacity of Canadians to gather information about ourselves, Marche says, has become stunted: "The Harper years have seen a subtle darkening of Canadian life." And since public ignorance fosters corruption, "The darkness has resulted, organically, in one of the most scandal-plagued administrations in Canadian history."

But isn't obscurantism what Harper-era pundits habitually do? Mansbridge has made a career out of substituting mournful sonorities for evidence, and furrowings of the brow for thought. And perhaps mere instinct led Ivison and Kheiriddin to scour Hitchens and Google for follow-ups to Côté's notion of how best to flush the voter-suppression scandal down the memory hole.

Yet the least attempt to research the subject would have shown them how vulnerable Côté's report is to elementary fact-checking: the first two statements in its Executive Summary are flatly misleading.

Côté writes that during the 2011 election (from March 26 to May 2, 2011) the Commissioner of Canada Elections "received approximately 100 complaints" from voters victimized by "nuisance telephone calls or calls providing them with incorrect poll location information." But we know from court documents filed by Elections Canada that more complaints were received in the early morning of election day in Guelph alone, while in an internal email William Corbett, Côté's precursor as Commissioner, confessed that Elections Canada's national communications system collapsed on election day under the volume of messages pouring into it.

Côté then claims that when, beginning on April 29, 2011, returning officers received complaints about misleading poll-location calls, they "dealt with these instances as errors." This is untrue: internal emails made public in November 2012 by Maher and McGregor show that Elections Canada officials at local and senior levels were aware from the start that the false information was being distributed by the Conservative Party.

On May 1, 2011, one election officer wrote to an agency lawyer that "The polling station numbers given out by the Conservative Party... are all wrong. Most of them are quite far away from the elector's home.... The workers in the returning office think these people are running a scam." And on April 29 and May 1, agency lawyers shared with Arthur Hamilton, the Conservative Party's lawyer, their knowledge that polling-station misinformation in a rapidly growing number of ridings across the country had been traced back to Conservative Party sources.

One reason for communicating with Hamilton may have been that an election official in St. Boniface, one of the first ridings in which misdirection calls were reported, had informed her superiors that the calls there were stopped by Conservative Party headquarters "at the request of the local [party] association."

So there is, after all, more to be said — about Harperite fraud, cheating, lies, dishonour, and deception? Yes indeed.

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