

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? An exit completely typical of him

He's an odd duck, Stephen Harper.

He first came quietly into Ottawa as part of the western-based Reform movement, and last week, after 18 years as an MP and nearly 10 as prime minister, he left town just as quietly as he came.

For a public figure, he is uncommonly private.

Yet in between his coming and going, Harper served as Canada's second-longest Conservative prime minister (trailing only Sir John A. Macdonald), and, whether you like it or not, changed the face of Canada.

He created a legacy which, it says here, future historians will applaud, but which ? more because of Harper's prickly personality than the substance of his accomplishments ? faces much disparagement.

It was completely typical of the man that, upon stepping out of politics and going back to Alberta to set up a consultancy business, he didn't even hold a news conference but instead left a video of what he sees as his major accomplishments in the job.

?We cut taxes, made critical investments and balanced the national budget,? he said. ?We got tough on crime and put families first. We managed our G7 economy through the worst global recession since the Great Depression, and came out in the strongest position of them all. We took principled decisions in a complex and dangerous world. And, whether at home or abroad, we were always proud to stand up for Canada.?

All of these claims ? and more ? are relatively accurate. So you'd think that a politician who did all that would have rated a better send-off.

Not Harper. First, he wouldn't want a formal send-off. And then there's the reality that so many Canadians ? including those who still voted for him in the last election ? find it difficult to warm up to the guy.

His personality, as someone once said about another politician long ago, is akin to sandpaper enclosed in an ice cube. That's just the way he is. And always was.

Successful political leaders, almost by definition, are outgoing, hail-fellow-well-met types, who never miss a chance to smile before a camera, kiss a baby, shake a hand, dance a jig, or whatever it takes to be seen to be jolly and down to earth.

Not Harper. Sure, thanks to the efforts of his personable wife, he did appear in public a few times playing the piano and singing. But for the most part, he sat back, aloof, betraying little real emotion and leaving the impression that he just couldn't be bothered explaining himself.

For all his personal unpopularity, however, and in the face of unprecedented full-scale attacks from the mainstream media (who never forgave him for not talking to them more), Harper still managed to hang onto more than 100 seats in the last election, a remarkable performance for a guy who, all the experts opined, had long overstayed his welcome.

And the current administration, the so-called ?sunny ways? of Justin Trudeau, despite all their campaign talk to the contrary, have continued many of the Harper policies they ostensibly hated.

While Harper's enemies, of course, never had a problem finding fault with him during his years as prime minister, it wasn't always easy supporting him. He had the maddening habit of staying detached from the criticisms of his opponents, even at times when it would have been easy ?and accurate ? to shoot down their darts with a simple recitation of some facts.

He was constantly accused by opposition parties, provincial premiers and journalists, for example, of cutting back health spending, when, in fact, the deal he made with the provinces gave them more money to spend than they'd ever had.

But rather than respond to their constant whining, Harper appeared to take the view that since he knew they were wrong, the public, too, would know the truth. But politics, as you'd expect a skilled practitioner to know, doesn't work that way. So on the health file, and many others, critics continue to hammer away and Harper continued to ride above it all.

Another oddity about Harper was his ability to annoy both his critics and his supporters on the same issue. On the question of social conservatism, for example, critics attacked him for being a social conservative while those, like me, who are social conservatives, despaired over the fact he wasn't ? and never claimed to be ? in that camp.

Ah well, eventually, no matter the record, the public wants something new. Now they've got it.

And Harper has slipped quietly off into the private world where, no doubt, he's well suited.

