TIM HORTONS VOTERS

Americans can have their Tea Party. In Canada, the political beverage of choice is coffee—Tim Hortons coffee, in particular.

In the fall of 2009, Prime Minister Stephen Harper skipped a summit meeting of world leaders at the United Nations, opting instead to sip hot chocolate at Tim Hortons headquarters in Oakville, Ontario. Rather than sashaying about on the world stage, rubbing shoulders with political celebrities and sketchy foreign despots, this fifty-year-old dad and baby boomer planted himself close to home. Harper was there to hail the return of Tim's from the US as a Canadian, publicly traded company—an unsubtle way to persuade Canadians of Harper's true patriot love and homespun authenticity.

In his remarks, Harper delivered an ode to the doughnut chain and its hallowed place in Canadian iconography. In the space of a couple of minutes, in fact, Harper managed to link this doughnut store to many great things about Canada: hockey, family and even Pierre Berton, chronicler of Canada's nation-building efforts. And

not accidentally—this prime minister never said anything accidentally—Harper's tribute to Tim's cast the business in the sepia-toned hues of a simpler Canadian past: a time when there were only six teams in the National Hockey League and when his hometown Toronto Maple Leafs were winning Stanley Cups.

"Now, if I were to look back to the early days," he said, "I think there were a couple of things about Tim Hortons that really connected with Canadians. First, of course, was the name and reputation of the co-founder, the great Toronto Maple Leafs defenceman Tim Horton. Baby boomers who grew up watching the Original Six remember him as one of the strongest and sturdiest blueliners ever to play the game. And, of course, for millions of long-suffering Leafs fans across the country, the name Tim Horton conjures up their four Stanley Cups and the glory years of the 1960s."

Naturally, being a politician, Harper inserted himself into this picture as well. "Millions more Canadian hockey parents like me know well that when it is twenty-below and everyone is up for a six a.m. practice, nothing motivates the team more than a box of Timbits and nothing warms the parents in the stands better than a hot double-double," he said. "Perhaps no one said it better about Tim Hortons than the great Canadian author Pierre Berton. Let me quote: 'In so many ways, the story of Tim Hortons is the essential Canadian story. It is the story of success and tragedy, of big dreams in small towns, of old-fashioned values and tough-fisted business, of hard work and of hockey.'"

It is a truism of Canadian politics in the early part of the twenty-first century: everybody wants the support of the "Tim Hortons voters." It now seems easier to categorize Canadian voters by coffee choice rather than their loose, partisan affiliation. This is a cultural development roughly a half-century in the making. When the first Tim Hortons store was opened in 1964, most Canadians cast their ballots in elections based on loyalty or attachment to a party—only about 10 to 20 percent changed their vote choice

between elections. Fifty years later, that mass of "shopping" voters had swelled to as much as 30 or 40 percent in each election. People were far more attached to their brand of morning coffee than they were to the Conservatives, Liberals or New Democrats.

Canada's modern Conservatives, it's fair to say, were the first to figure this out. Between the 2004 and 2006 federal elections, as the Conservative party was in the midst of overhauling its brand and its platform, top strategist Patrick Muttart would repeatedly drill this wisdom into the troops who were out trying to expand Conservatives' support: "[It] means going to Tim Hortons, not to Starbucks."

So what is a Tim Hortons voter? The Tim Hortons constituency speaks of solid, double-double-drinking citizens, looking for politicians to serve them up simple, plainspoken truths in Timbit-sized, consumable portions. They are the "ordinary" Canadians depicted in the hugely popular "True Stories" ads for the doughnut chain, which helped vault this fast-food outlet to Canadian-icon status. Tim Hortons voters don't like fancy, foreign synonyms for their morning coffee and they like their politics to be predictable, beige—just like the doughnuts and decor at their national treasure of a food retailer. Tim Hortons voters support the Canadian troops. That's why there was an outlet of the doughnut shop in Kandahar, Afghanistan, where thousands of Canadian troops were stationed through most of the first decade of the twenty-first century. And that's also why Tim Hortons was chosen to be the exclusive corporate distributor of the special poppy-embossed quarters to honour Canadian veterans in 2004. Tim Hortons voters are older Canadians, maybe even retired from their jobs, who remember the real Tim Horton, just as Stephen Harper does. Conveniently, for all those politicians hanging out at Tim Hortons, older Canadians are the ones who vote, in far higher proportions than younger people. And, as Harper pointed out, Tim Hortons voters like hockey. They also like that other true-Canadian sport: curling. The annual men's

curling championship in Canada is actually called the Tim Hortons Brier, thanks to the chain's sponsorship.

Is it any wonder, to borrow the doughnut chain's jingle, that politicians always have time for Tim Hortons? Almost every MP in the forty-first Parliament, regardless of political affiliation, had an average of ten to eleven Tim Hortons outlets per riding when he or she got elected. Neither Starbucks nor Second Cup could claim that same political-market penetration. Where politicians once made church basements the fixture of their campaign road trips, the refreshment-stop of choice is now the ubiquitous Tim Hortons. It's a fitting change of venue. Canadian politics no longer bears much resemblance to the church (except maybe the occasional sermon) but our marketing politicians seem right at home among sales posters, advertising and cash registers. Harper's finance minister, Jim Flaherty, made a Tim's pilgrimage in 2009 to unveil his government's spending plans—an announcement that once would have been made only within the hallowed halls of Parliament. Former Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, denounced by rivals as an ivory-tower intellectual "just visiting" after spending much of his career abroad, would make repeated visits to Tim Hortons while on the road, to assure doubters of his connectedness to Canada (in vain, as it turns out). The late New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton did his share of Tim Hortons appearances. Former Liberal deputy prime minister Sheila Copps launched one of her federal leadership bids at the site of the original Tim's in her hometown of Hamilton.

The Tim's addiction has even reached into civic politics. Jim Watson had Tim Hortons sponsor his swearing-in as mayor of Ottawa in the fall of 2010. Meanwhile, when Rob Ford walked into a radio studio to do one of his first interviews as the new mayor of Toronto in the fall of 2010, Tim's wasn't far away either. "We laughed because in rolls Rob in his mini-van, pulls into the underground, gets out with his Tim Hortons coffee, walks over to the machine to pay for the parking and then comes up to the studio

alone," the radio station's program director Gord Harris told a newspaper interviewer.

This political obsession with Tim Hortons is the most visible evidence of just how much Canada's democratic culture has become enmeshed with consumer culture—as you shop and eat, so shall you vote. But while Tim Hortons has been a marketing success, Canadian politics cannot make the same boast. Over the past fifty years or so, Canadians have, by and large, checked out of the political process. Some sobering statistics:

- Voter turnout, with a few exceptions, has been steadily declining since the Second World War, from nearly 80 percent of the population casting ballots in the 1950s and 1960s, to only about 60 percent in more recent federal elections.

- The turnout figures are even more dismal for young people, with Elections Canada estimating that fewer than half of voters under the age of thirty showed up at the ballot box in the last few federal elections.

- Only about 2 percent of Canadians belong to a political party, according to studies by academics William Cross and Lisa Young. Moreover, within this tiny fraction of the Canadian electorate, all but a scant few are over forty years of age. As Nathan Cullen, the idealistic New Democrat MP from British Columbia, was fond of noting in his run for the federal NDP leadership in 2011–12, Mountain Equipment Co-op has been more successful than political parties at recruiting members in Canada.

- Repeated surveys carried out for the Manning Centre for Building Democracy show that Canadians hold their politicians in low regard. A full 90 percent of respondents to a 2012 poll said that politicians were most concerned with money; only 10

percent believed that "people" were the prime preoccupation of the political class. More than three-quarters of the respondents to the same poll said politicians were "untruthful" and only 1 percent had a "very favourable" view of politicians.

- Democratic literacy in Canada is not what it should be. A poll by the Dominion Institute in 2008 showed that over half of Canadians believed the prime minister was directly elected by voters and 75 percent could not identify the head of state.

- In the fall of 2011, after a year of multiple elections in many parts of Canada, the Gandalf Group polled Canadians about advertising. While 72 percent of Canadians tended to see normal commercial advertising as truthful, the poll showed only 30 percent believed they were getting any truth from political ads.

These studies paint a picture of a country deeply cynical or just plain bored with politics, and maybe even democracy. The profound irony is that the more Canadian politics focuses on communication—as witnessed by the 25-percent-and-upward increases in Ottawa communications jobs under Liberal and Conservative governments since the beginning of the twenty-first century—the less the message is getting through. As federal politics has become more partisan, Canadians have become unattached from parties. The political class is stuck on "send" but the Canadian public isn't in "receive" mode. The people who work in the political realm, including all the elected politicians, the folks in the backrooms, the journalists and the pundits, are increasingly conducting an exclusive dialogue, often laden with marketing jargon. We may have to confront the fact that marketing—this increasing tendency by all sides to treat politics as a shopping trip—is turning people off democracy. To use the language of shopping, people aren't buying.

In some circles, it's become conventional wisdom to blame television for the decline in political participation, since voter apathy parallels the rise of this medium as the primary source of political information for the Canadian masses. Neil Postman, the eminent US cultural critic, wrote a devastating critique along those lines in his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, detailing all the ways in which the pillars of democracy—government, religion and education—were being eroded by our need to be entertained. The problem with seeing politics as only entertainment, though, is that it casts the voters as passive, mere spectators with no responsibility for its decline or its repair. Shopping, however, involves an exchange. We all seem to know that politics is a sales job in modern times, but how did we, the citizens, let ourselves become buyers?

We have been reading for years about consumerism's effect on everything from our health to our education to our family life. Rabid consumption has made us fat. It's destroyed our environment and erected malls and big-box stores where our communities once thrived. But consumerism has been infiltrating civic institutions, too. Shopping culture has crept into democracy as surely as television has. Where TV demands images, consumerism demands transactions. In schools and universities, education becomes an "investment" toward future income. At the ballot box, voters become "taxpayers." And if education and civics can't be entertaining, they must at least promise a material reward—more money in one's pocket, specifically, so consumer-citizens can buy more stuff.

In this world, citizens aren't informed consumers. They tune in only to the politicians—and the governments—who provide them with tangible improvements to their material world. It creates a democratic debate resting on value for the dollar, not values of the heart or head; one about wants, not needs. And in turn, this is not a citizenry that be easily sold on anything that increases their taxes,

or reduces their consumption—witness the longstanding political difficulty of "selling" environmentalism to Canadian citizens.

What's more, in a nation of consumer-citizens, the customer is always right. It is not the politician's job to change people's minds or prejudices, but to confirm them or play to them, to seal the deal of support. Speeches aren't made to educate or inform the audience, but to serve up marketing slogans. Political parties become "brands" and political announcements become product launches. Canadian author Gilbert Reid, writing on the website The Mark in 2010, laid out the rules for handling citizens as consumers. Do not talk of sacrifice, collective good, facts, problems or debate, he wrote. Instead, make extravagant promises and blame others when the wishes can't be fulfilled.

Reid wrote, "The Citizen—and I'm idealizing here—was an adult, had an attention span, was patient, was interested in the common good, had some knowledge of history, had empathy for others, was open to debate, and was willing—often—to make individual sacrifices for the good of all. The 'Consumer' is the exact opposite of the 'Citizen.'" Is this the sum total of civic life in Canada as it approaches its 150th birthday as a nation?

In the chapters to follow, we'll look at how Canadian political marketing has met Canadian consumer values and what this means about the state of our democracy in the twenty-first century. It's a story that unfolds in three parts. Part one, "The Pitch," spans the years from the postwar period to the 1970s, when Canada became a consumer society and Canadian political practitioners began to realize they could borrow tools and wisdom from the marketing world. In many ways, this was an age of innocence and discovery. If we could find a way to people's hearts through the tools of the marketplace, what could possibly go wrong? The second part, "The Bargaining," spans the 1980s and 1990s, when tension started surfacing between the consumer market and the political world, along with debates over where to draw the line between the two realms. Part three, "Sealing the Deal," takes

us into contemporary Canadian politics and culture, where the fusion of marketing and civics appears to be nearly complete.

Through each act in this three-part shopping trip, we'll see patterns and common threads: the traffic between political-marketing techniques in Canada, the United States and Britain. We'll meet the people in the polling and marketing industries—Martin Goldfarb, Allan Gregg and Patrick Muttart—who helped build the bridge between civic and consumer culture. We'll see ongoing ambivalence on the part of our politicos, over whether to treat citizens as educated or sedated consumers. We may well want to throw up our hands, and conclude these are forces that have been too powerful to resist, on either side.

It would be tempting to blame politicians or the plotters in the political "war rooms" for this reality, and certainly, as we'll see, modern methods of advertising and marketing are as fundamental now to Canadian political operatives as old-fashioned speeches and town hall meetings were to their historical predecessors.

But in the pages to follow, ordinary citizens may also recognize their own complicity in their transformation into consumers of Canadian democracy. And perhaps, by the end of the story, we may want to ask whether it's time to draw some clearer lines between our civic life and our shopping pursuits.