

Canada's 2006 Election: A Chilling Echo of Bush's Republicans

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The 2006 federal election has set the stage for a possible dismantling of Canada's distinctive social and economic fabric. The newly evolved Conservative Party, in many respects a chilling echo of the USA's Republican Party, is poised for a two-stage attack to reshape Canada in line with its Canadian version of America's neoconservative ideology.

With slightly more than a third of the popular vote and only 40 percent of the seats in Parliament, the Conservatives will form a precarious minority government. From this it's obvious that the majority of Canadians opposed the Conservative platform and their philosophy, but the opposition was split amongst three parties, leaving the Conservatives with the largest number of seats. From this perspective, the Conservatives are in no position to claim that they have a "mandate" to try to enact any of their reactionary policies. And nor would they have a chance, given that all three opposition parties oppose the Conservative platform and objectives. But herein lies the danger.

Having learned through previous election defeats that the bulk of Canada's people are philosophically opposed to the radical right-wing objectives of the "new" Conservatives, Stephen Harper cleverly and successfully concealed the party's true agenda throughout the election campaign. And now in his shaky minority position, Harper will continue with his innocent-looking choir-boy persona, together with his awkward, artificial restraint of language. During this time, none of his hard-core objectives will be presented. Instead, he'll introduce some basically non-controversial matters, such as accountability legislation, the strengthening of powers for the Auditor General and the Ethics Commissioner, some amendments to the justice system to deal with violent crime, and other such measures. Unfortunately, he'll be able to put through some of his reactionary tax proposals, because a defeat on budget matters would immediately bring down his government. Basically, the Conservative Party's prime objective will be to survive a few months in a non-controversial manner so as to gain the respect and confidence of the public to give them a mandate for a majority in the next election. That will be Harper's fundamental agenda.

Along with this approach, and before the Liberals can regroup themselves with a new leader, a further strategy for Harper might be to engineer a premature defeat of his government over some contrived matter in a way that would result in public sympathy for the "honest, moderate, hard-working Conservatives." This of course would be accompanied by a nearly unanimous massive barrage from the corporate mainstream media extolling the prospects and virtues of a Conservative majority. Such a strategy would fulfill the second stage of the Conservative agenda. If that should happen, Canada would quickly face some catastrophic changes.

There's no difficulty putting forth most of the Conservative objectives once they'd form a majority government. These have been amply detailed and documented over the years, although they haven't been incorporated in a single manifesto comparable to the Republican Party's Project for the New American Century. In the 2006 election most of the original Reform-Alliance agenda which is still the basis of the current Conservative Party was almost entirely removed from their election platform—but there is no reason to believe that the party has actually turned its back on its original *raison d'être*.

Undoubtedly, first on their agenda would be Medicare. Medicare has already been sabotaged and undermined, indirectly, through the efforts of the earlier Reform Party. Ironically, it was Paul Martin, as the Liberal finance minister from 1993 to 2002, who carried out their reactionary policies. Over the years, the Reform Party and the Business Council on National Issues have badgered the federal government to reduce expenditures on social programs, especially Medicare. Martin obliged with his huge budget cuts during 1995-97. These cuts amounted to a 40 percent reduction in federal social spending, compared to Mulroney's overall 25 percent cut (for which he had been vilified!). This almost mortally wounded the Medicare system, and subsequent federal increases have not repaired the damage.

At a conference staged in Vancouver, November 11-12, 2005, the major opponents of Medicare, including the Fraser Institute and American and European insurance companies, openly discussed strategies on how to destroy the Canadian health care system. As a high level participant, Preston Manning, the Reform party's founder, presented a "substantive prescription" that could be summed up as: "Completely dismantle national medicare, have the federal government hand over more taxing power to the provinces and let them handle health as they please" (*Toronto Star*, November 26, 2005). In essence what they recommended was American style health care delivered by American multinational corporations in partnership with insurance companies.

Like his American neocon counterparts, Stephen Harper has a fanatical Straussian belief in free enterprise, which led him to become the president of the National Citizens Coalition, an extreme right-wing lobby group which was originally founded by insurance companies to destroy the Canadian health care system. It seems his entire life has been dedicated to the goal of increasing the amount of corporate control over politics, and especially towards the wrecking of Canada's Medicare. With a majority government, the Harper regime would drive a stake through the heart of the single-payer Canadian health care system—in the face of this juggernaut, opposition parties and hostile public opinion would have as little effect as they did on Mulroney when he forcefully put through the Free Trade Agreement and the GST legislation. Harper could do this directly in one fell swoop, or if he felt the public reaction would be too hostile, he could destroy it just as effectively by a dramatic reduction of funding and over a few years it would simply wither away from neglect.

In the end, if Harper gets his way, Canada will wind up with basically the same health care system as the Americans have—about the worst in the Western world. Some of the corporate media are already salivating at the prospect and are even urging the current minority government to begin health care "reform" so that "it leads to a broader rethinking of the failed Soviet-style public monopoly on which our health system is based" (*National Post*, January 25, 2006). However, to gain respectability in the current minority government, a communiqué was recently sent to Premier Klein that Alberta must observe the Canada Health Act.

In the case of the CBC, the Chretien Liberals cut more than \$400 million from the public broadcaster, and forced CBC-TV to get half its budget from advertising revenue. Although funding has been partially restored, currently totalling almost a billion dollars, the quality and extent of CBC operations has been adversely and seriously affected. In the 2006 election campaign the Conservatives were evasive and unclear on the matter of the CBC, largely because they're fully aware of the broad public support for this institution. However, if they should form a majority government, there is cause for great concern. For years Canada's private broadcasters have demanded a draconian reduction of CBC operations, and the National Citizens Coalition (headed by Harper from 1998 to 2002) wants the CBC to be totally privatized and out of business. Despite the fact that the CBC, like Medicare, constitutes an integral part of the Canadian fabric, in line with Harper's and his party's overall philosophy, there's no reason to imagine that this institution would survive their concerted efforts to restructure the face of Canada, to make it less "socialistic." So expect the CBC to sign off with "Goodbye and good luck."

With a Conservative majority the Canadian Wheat Board, like Medicare and the CBC, would become a thing of the past, regardless of how the majority of Canada's farmers would feel about it. The Wheat Board is the world's largest marketer of wheat and barley, and it is the most prestigious marketing board in the world. It's always been under constant attack by American grain companies, and recently Alberta. Conservative policy papers have made it clear that they will dismantle and destroy this venerable Canadian institution, but this can't happen until they have a majority. Virtually overnight, Canada's grain industry would be controlled by Cargill and other American companies. It's been the Canadian Wheat Board that's been largely instrumental in blocking Monsanto from introducing genetically modified varieties of grain, but once the board is off the scene this is another feature of private enterprise to which Canadians will be subjected.

Despite its shortcomings, with the previous Liberal government there was the prospect of enacting a childcare program, an aboriginal assistance agreement, and perhaps even pharmacare, but the NDP almost inexplicably decided to defeat the government. With a Conservative majority, we'll have the pharmacare and childcare system that the Americans enjoy—none whatsoever. And don't put it past them that they won't try to privatize the Canada Pension Plan. After all, did Mulroney include Free Trade and the GST in his platform? But we all know what happened. In line with their philosophy, unemployment insurance benefits will be seriously reduced or eliminated. Also on the chopping block are human rights commissions, since Harper considers them "an attack on our fundamental freedoms . . . and in fact totalitarianism." Harper's fulminations about the Supreme Court indicate some form of forthcoming limitations on this body. As for aboriginal people, the former American Thomas Flanagan, a principal advisor and closest confidant to Harper, has made a career of attacking the rights of aboriginals. Try to imagine what's in store for them.

Probably a major objective of a majority Conservative government will be to eliminate the federal taxpayer subsidy to political parties of a \$1.75 per vote, per year, and to replace this with unlimited "donations" from corporations—just as in their ideological homeland, the land of the stars and stripes. And then only millionaires and those beholden to the corporate world will be able to run for Parliament. What better way to remove the stigma, in Harper's words of Canada being "a second-tier socialist country, boasting ever more loudly about its economy and social services to mask its second-rate status" ("It is time to seek a new relationship with Canada," December 8, 2000). Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that in the recent election one of their planks was to remove corporate and union

donations—but which is the real Harper?

Canada desperately needs an independent energy policy to ensure a security of supply for Canadians. The USA and most countries have such a policy—except Canada. With the Free Trade Agreement and later NAFTA we're locked into exporting 70 percent of our oil and 56 percent of our natural gas, and with the proportionality provision, the amount of our exports can only go **higher**—in perpetuity. Our reserves are quickly depleting and because of NAFTA we have absolutely no control of our own resources. This is insanity. To defend Canada's interests, our federal government should renegotiate NAFTA to eliminate the proportionality clause (Mexico never agreed to this), and if the US should refuse, we should give the required six months notice and abrogate NAFTA, since the US ignores its rulings anyway. This would once again give us control of our energy resources and our economy as well. The one thing that we could be absolutely certain of is that a majority Conservative government would never do any such thing. Instead they would affirm the "New Frontiers Project," concocted by Canada's corporate elite in 2003, to enable us to have "deep integration" with the USA. Such would be our future.

Canada is already one of the most decentralized countries in the Western world, but Harper promises even further decentralization. To make amends for his past opposition to any special status for Quebec, including his attacks on bilingualism as "the God that failed," Quebec is now promised "open federalism," with dramatically reduced federal intrusion. For those seeking Quebec's independence this is a welcome step along the way, but Harper will extend this to all provinces, with disastrous results for the country as a whole. Under the Conservatives Canada may become a "Commonwealth of Independent Provinces," with the federal government merely showing our flag at the United Nations.

In the previous Parliament about half of Harper's members were "religious social conservatives," and perhaps an equal number or more were elected this time. Many of them, including Harper and the upper echelon of his party, have strong connections to the American Council for National Policy, an extreme right-wing Christian fundamentalist body that's been reputed to have poured in billions of dollars to right-wing Christian activists (Robert Dreyfuss in *Rolling Stone*, January 28, 2004). One of their objectives is to train a new generation of Canadian conservatives on how to bring religion into politics. It's to this organization that Stephen Harper said as a guest speaker in 1997 that "your conservative movement . . . is a light and an inspiration to people in [Canada] and across the world." (<http://www.harperstiestousa.org/>). Also in that speech he took it upon himself to denigrate Canada with the comment: "Canada is a Northern European welfare state in the worst sense of the word . . ." The influence of the Christian right can be summed up in a comment on the prospects of the Conservative Party by the *Edmonton Journal* (December 5, 2003, p. A16): "The [social conservative] bogeymen won't go away just because they'll be hidden from public view inside a new Conservative Party. They'll still be there, under the bed, waiting for a chance to spring up and spout their offensive anti-gay, anti-choice, anti-immigration, pro-gun, pro-death penalty views." But before they can put forth any legislation on these matters they will have to wait until they get a majority government.

As certain as day follows night, the Conservatives will align themselves with American foreign policy. If Harper had headed Canada's government in 2003, there'd have been a steady stream of Canadian soldiers returning from Iraq in body bags, and perhaps ignored in the Bush manner. And so if Bush launches more wars, say in Syria or Iran, Harper's words of Canada being there "shoulder to shoulder with our allies" could only mean that our troops will be there too. Then there's the anti-ballistic defence shield boondoggle that he wants to

revisit—and if he commits us to it, we’ll be in the weaponization of space as well. Such prospects. If Britain’s Tony Blair is Bush’s obedient poodle, how long will it be before Stevie-boy learns to fetch at George W’s command?

As for the incessant mantra “to reduce taxes,” what many people fail to understand is that “Taxes are what we pay for a civilized society.” These are the words once said by the historian, philosopher, and long-serving U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. It’s taxes collected by governments that provides us with the wide array of social services and infrastructure, such as schools, medical services, libraries and parks, safe streets and livable cities. Despite this undeniable truism, most governments seem obsessed with the idea of lowering taxes, and thereby invariably lowering the quality of our social services. And no one is more obsessed with this than Stephen Harper. At the core of his beliefs is that the scale of government must be dramatically reduced at all levels, and that “We must aim to make [Canada] a lower tax jurisdiction than the United States” (*Vancouver Province*, April 6, 2004), and that “[taxes] can be lower than the U.S. and that should be our financial objective” (*Canadian Press*, April 11, 2003). What he doesn’t say is that if this is done, it would eliminate most of the social services that are at the basis of our high quality of life in this country. Is this what we really want?

Stephen Harper’s recent invocation of “God save Canada” at the end of his speeches seems to stir some of his followers to almost jump up and sing “Oh, say can you see . . .” Yes, I can see only too damn well. It’s strange and chilling the extent to which he is prepared to emulate, even the speeches, of his American ideologues—no matter how foreign and creepy it sounds to the ears of most Canadians. On the day after the election, on walking his seven and nine-year old children to school, instead of giving them a hug as a normal father would, he shook hands with them as he saw them off. This tells us more than reams of editorials about the seemingly heartless and cold-blooded nature of this person.

And now what about the Liberals? In the Chretien government from 1993 to 2002 it was Paul Martin, as minister of finance, who was the *de facto* prime minister. During those years he dutifully “restructured” the country along the lines directed by Tom d’Aquino, the head of the Business Council on National Issues. This is what led to the 40 percent cut in federal social programs money and the reduction of the role of government back to where it was in 1951. In his first term as prime minister he assembled one of the most right-wing cabinets we had in decades. It was only when he was in a minority position that he suddenly showed a concern about social programs. Martin’s disastrous 2006 election campaign has left the Liberals in a total state of disarray.

The Liberals not only need a new leader, they basically have to reinvent themselves. They’ve done this before—after their defeat in 1984 they came up with a superb platform in 1993, the Liberal Red Book. It won them the election, but within two years virtually every promise was broken. Why should we expect anything different in the future, especially when the leadership hopefuls are considered. Almost all of the potential leaders have strong corporate and/or American ties. And as for a platform, we already have the *Globe and Mail* (January 27) suggesting that they emulate the victorious Conservatives. It seems a dead certainty that the Liberals in a reincarnated form will be almost a clone of the Conservatives. In effect, what we’ll have is a replay of the Republican and Democratic Parties—two wings of the same party—both with continental right-wing strategies and with hardly any discernable difference. Oh, Canada!

As for the NDP—what to say? After all, this whole nightmarish scenario that’s now unfolding

before us was brought about by their decision to bring down the Liberal government at this time. Although there was still the possibility of extracting a number of worthwhile gains from the weakened Liberal government, the taunts from Harper seemed to goad Jack Layton to pull the plug. What did they hope to gain from an election? The best scenario would have been another minority Liberal government, but with an increase in NDP seats to give them the balance of power. Actually, this would have been a good outcome. But somehow they lost their compass. Inexplicably, they proceeded on a concerted course of action to reduce the Liberals to a “burned out hulk.” For Jack Layton, it was as if Harper and his Conservatives didn’t exist—his fury was directed at the “corrupt” Liberal Party. But what really turned the polls dramatically against the Liberals was the announcement that the RCMP were investigating Ralph Goodale, the Liberal finance minister—courtesy of a request by the NDP. And the rest, as they say, is history. In the final analysis, it appears that the NDP didn’t care if their actions resulted in a minority Conservative government, or even a Conservative majority. Yes, they got 10 extra seats, so good for them. But what about the consequences to Canada?

This isn’t the first time that the NDP carried out a dubious course of action that resulted in a dramatic negative setback for Canada. The current debacle is almost an identical replay of what occurred in 1988. Back then, in an equally ill-advised campaign, Ed Broadbent gained an even greater number of seats for the NDP, but effectively sold out the country by enabling Mulroney to enact the Free Trade Agreement, later to become NAFTA. Since almost 60 percent of Canadians opposed the trade agreement, splitting the vote thwarted the will of the people. The only way to have blocked the FTA was for the NDP to have formed a coalition (or a tacit agreement) with Turner’s Liberals **before** the election. But that would have required the parties to have acted in the interests of the country rather than merely engage in partisan politics.

So what hope is there for Canada under these circumstances? If the Conservatives and a revamped Liberal Party essentially morph into a carbon copy of each other—both intent on integrating us into the USA, who can we turn to? It will have to be the NDP, but this party is in desperate need of reinventing itself, every bit as much as the Liberals. Instead of just trying to get “additional seats” for “working families,” there has to be some truly meaningful substance to this party. In addition to support for social programs, they have to develop a proper economic development strategy for Canada. Furthermore, many of us are tired of the “New” in their party title—isn’t it time they became the “Canadian Democratic Party”? What they desperately need is another Tommy Douglas, or at least his vision of the party being a social movement and the conscience of the nation. It’s only such a party that could possibly save us from some day having to vote for an American president.

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