

## God's Wrath, and the Tories': Harper's zeal for retribution seems religious

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With the country well into its third year of minority government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper there has been very little commentary on what may be the most important driver of his policies.

No other prime minister in our history has so strained the fundamental edict of the separation of church and state.

Perhaps that's because the church in question is not the Catholic Church or the Anglican Church — the ones that used to come to mind in such conflicts. No, this church is the evangelical Alliance Church (the same one attended by Preston Manning) and the implications for public policy are far more dramatic.

Few Canadians probably even realize that the prime minister who is steadily changing the nature of their country is a born-again, evangelical Christian. Unlike his fellow born-again, George Bush, Harper has been careful to manage his blending of church and state. But if you have any doubts, read Stephen Harper and the [Theo-cons](#), the meticulously researched 2006 article by Marci McDonald in the Walrus Magazine.

### **Theocracy lite**

There is lots of evidence to suggest that Harper has no problem creating a theocracy lite in this country, partly based on his own religious convictions and partly to ensure that he keeps his core constituency happy. Some of Harper's policies — from his aggressive support of Israel (taking his lead from the Christian right in the U.S.), to legislation that would take into account the death of a fetus in the murder of a pregnant woman (encouraging his anti-abortion supporters) are pretty obvious.

But it is the extent to which retribution is at the core of this man that strikes me as one the most disturbing aspect of his government, because it is so at odds with the values of the vast majority of Canadians.

Whether its his war on drugs (and drug users), his obvious preference for the death penalty, his refusal to register any complaint about the illegal treatment of Omar Khadr in Guantanamo, his politicization of the procedure for choosing judges or his appointment of Stockwell Day — the man who believes the Earth is just 6,000 years old — as his minister of public safety, Stephen Harper is making it clear that his god is not a forgiving god. Forgiveness is for sissies.

### **Stockwell Day, the avenger**

Stockwell Day was chosen carefully as minister of public safety. His retribution credentials are impeccable. He has [suggested](#) that one way to get around the lack of a death penalty in Canada might be to release murderers into the general prison population so that “moral prisoners will deal with it in a way which we don’t have the nerve to do.”

In 2004, when he was the Conservative Party’s foreign affairs critic, Day refused to issue any statement of condolence or sympathy to the Palestinian people when Yasser Arafat died — referring his befuddled colleagues to an article by David Frum suggesting that Arafat had died of AIDS.

One of the most controversial issues that highlights the Tories’ desire for retribution is the government’s determination to close Vancouver’s safe injection site for drug users.

The harm reduction project, called Insite, has been praised around the world, positively assessed in 22 peer-reviewed papers and is supported by the city, local police and the even B.C.’s right-wing Liberal government. Health Canada recommended in 2006 that funding for the project be extended and that similar programs be tried in other cities.

### **Faith over science**

But for Harper and his party, their evangelical Christianity trumps science. The International Journal of Drug Policy recently featured an [article](#) charging that the Harper government directly interfered in the work of independent scientific bodies, tried to muzzle scientists and deliberately misrepresented research findings. All in the service of ensuring that drug users retain their status as criminals to be punished.

Last September, Health Minister Tony Clement told the Canadian Medical Association: “To me, prevention is harm reduction. Treatment is harm reduction. Enforcement is harm reduction.”

Dr. Keith Martin, a British Columbia Liberal MP and former Reform Party star, is also a former substance-abuse physician. He admits that Clement may succeed in closing Insite: “But in doing that they will be essentially committing murder.”

### **Other peoples’ death penalties**

It is no secret that the Harper government and its public safety minister support the death penalty. But their preference has taken them to extremes and revealed their contempt for democracy and the rule of law. Not content with the current law, democratically arrived at, Harper and Day will do anything they can to circumvent it, doing by stealth and administrative fiat what they cannot do, yet, in Parliament.

In a stunning abuse of process, Day simply [declared](#) that they were no longer going to follow the policy of seeking clemency for any Canadian sentenced to death who has “... been tried in a democratic country that supports the rule of law.” The new position was applied in particular to Ronald Allen Smith, a 50-year-old Albertan scheduled to be executed in Montana. Smith was convicted in 1982 for the brutal murder of two young men.

When it suits the government, however, it casually violates its own stated principles and intervenes — as it has done on the case of Mohamed Kohail, 23, a Canadian citizen sentenced to be beheaded in Saudi Arabia for the death of a man in a school yard fight. In

March the federal government announced — rightly, of course — it would be seeking clemency for Kohail. The rationale for the intervention was the patent lack of democracy in Saudi Arabia. But it is difficult to resist the conclusion that on the minds of these two crusaders was the political advantage of challenging a Muslim state.

What principle was in operation for 18 months throughout which time the government refused any action in the case of Brenda Martin, the Canadian held in prison without trial on charges of money laundering? Retribution or incompetence? It's hard to know but politics soon dictated that the policy was again flexible. After her conviction, the government took the bizarre action of flying her home in a private government jet at a cost to taxpayers of \$82,767. No price is too high to take political advantage — the rule of law notwithstanding.

### **Judgment days**

Retribution was front and centre early in the Harper government's term in the new process for choosing federal judges. That was accomplished by two fundamental changes to the independent provincial screening committees advising the government. Harper added one more federal appointee to the committees, giving the government a de facto majority but more importantly, making that new appointee a police officer with the intent of ensuring the judges appointed are tough on crime.

This so alarmed the Canadian Judicial Council that it issued a statement declaring that: "This puts in peril the concept of an independent body that advises the government on who is best qualified to be a judge."

There is much more evidence suggesting that retribution is a prime motivator of this government. A Canadian citizen suspected of terrorist affiliation, Abousofian Abdelrazik, has been in legal limbo for five years in Sudan, courtesy of the Harper government's refusal to act.

Changes to the Young Offenders' Act to ensure that offenders are duly punished has been a goal of Stockwell Day for years and the government pursues the goal against all the scientific evidence and the admonishment of the judiciary.

Harper has announced that the government will be cutting \$26 million from funding for community organizations that support people with HIV or AIDS.

His tax bill giving the government hands-on authority to prevent funding of morally suspect films overtly punishes any filmmaker thinking of violating Harper and his government's Christian mores.

### **The new crusades**

Perhaps the most fundamental example is the explicit militarization of Canadian political culture. Harper recently announced the commitment \$40 to \$50 billion in additional spending for the military over the next twenty years and this for a country with no identifiable enemies in that period — other than vaguely defined "terrorists."

Retribution thus becomes one of Canada's principal exports as the Harper regime eagerly awaits the next opportunity in the global crusade against Islamic terrorism.

Conservatives govern this country by virtue of fewer than 25 per cent of eligible voters. Yet

this putative minority government status is treated with complete contempt by Stephen Harper, in stark contrast with literally every other minority government in Canadian history. The source of this contempt, also aimed at the media, the civil service, political opponents and the law itself, may not be simply the man's well-documented arrogance. Evangelical Christianity has its own special disdain for democratic governance.

When the Bentley (Alberta) Christian Centre was under Stockwell Day's guidance (he was school administrator from 1978 to 1985), it [featured](#) a social studies lesson that declared that democratic governments "represent the ultimate deification of man, which is the very essence of humanism and totally alien to God's word."

That about sums it up. Theocracy lite. But give these people a majority and it will get much heavier.

*Murray Dobbin writes his [State of the Nation](#) column twice monthly for The Tyee.*

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