

The Harper Government: Towards A New Social Order?

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The election of Stephen Harper's Conservative government on January 23, 2006 has significantly shifted the terms of the social policy debate in Canada. While in some respects the Harper government represents a continuation of the market-based neo-liberal trajectory that has been set over the last 20 some years, in other respects it represents a turn of a kind that we haven't seen before at the federal level in Canada. Many aspects of the Conservative agenda are likely to alter both the framework and nature of social policy discussions. This ranges from specific program proposals in areas such as childcare and healthcare, to the federal-provincial decentralization agenda; from proposals to enshrine property rights in the constitution, to changes in the process of Supreme Court judge selection that could have long run implications for court challenges and equality-based claims. Of particular concern, however, and permeating through specific policy proposals, is a reformulation of what the "social" itself means, both in terms of how we understand the role and nature of "social" policy, and more fundamentally, how we do or should constitute ourselves as social beings.

The Conservative Election Platform

In the Conservative party election platform issues to do with health care, child-care, "security" for seniors, post-secondary education, as well as same-sex marriage, all fell under the rubric "Stand up for Families". Significant in the Conservative platform was the absence of any notion of "the social" in a broad, communitarian sense; in the sense of building "social foundations", as the Liberals have recently tended to call it, and certainly in the sense of encouraging a collective or social solidarity. Indeed what was striking was the apparent erasure of the very notion of "social policy" itself. What is left is simply a policy for (traditionally defined) families and individuals; an emphasis on increased familial and self-reliance rather than reliance on the state for issues that fall in the category of the "social".

The Conservative election platform reflected both a neo-liberal, market-based approach and, despite efforts to keep a moderate tone, strong elements of a social conservative agenda. This is likely to mean a continued shift both from the state to the market and from the state to the family; a reconfiguration of what are public goods and what are private goods and responsibilities in both these ways. This double tendency can be seen in two of the major pronouncements in social policy areas.

Childcare

Childcare became a major issue during the election. The Conservatives promised to rescind

the bilateral agreements that the Liberal government had signed with the 10 provinces and to withdraw from what appeared, at last, to be some form of publicly funded child care at the federal level. The Conservatives argued that whereas the Liberals and NDP would “build a massive childcare bureaucracy” their approach has to do with choice: that “the best role for government is to let parents choose what’s best for their children . whether that means formal child care, informal care through neighbours or relatives, or a parent staying at home”. The Conservative alternative, the Choice in Childcare Allowance, is to provide all families with a taxable \$1,200 allowance per year for each child under 6. In addition, the Conservatives have promised to allocate \$250 million a year in tax credits to employers to help create child care spaces. These measures, however, in no sense constitute a childcare plan. The former is essentially a form of family allowance that has little directly to do with childcare; the latter provides a limited amount of funds to cover capital costs, but not the ongoing expenses involved in operating a childcare centre. Most importantly for the social conservatives, it provides the option of increased state funding to support the stay-at-home parent.

Healthcare

With respect to health care, the Conservatives have emphasized reducing wait-times and have promised to work with the provinces to develop a Patient Wait Times Guarantee to “ensure that all Canadians receive essential medical treatment within clinically acceptable waiting times”. At the same time, they have signaled that they would allow for a mix of public and private health care delivery. This, it seems, is the real issue. Highlighting the need to reduce “wait times” has become a rationale for allowing private health care delivery.

A New Social Order

Governments over the last 15 to 20 years have already moved well along the path of downloading responsibility for “the social” away from the state and towards markets and families. The qualitatively new dimension that the Harper government brings, however, is a new prominence given to a social conservative ideology. The apparent erasure of “the social” in Conservative party documents is, of course, something of an illusion. It is not simply a vacuum that is being left in terms of the role of the state in encouraging a particular social framework, or in shaping social relations, and the way we interact with each other. Rather, there is a particular type of morality and social order that is being promoted; one that incorporates notions of the “right” type of family, a particular type of religious value, a law and order agenda and the removal of rights with respect to same-sex marriage and reproductive choice.

Some commentators have suggested that Harper is not himself a social conservative and that the party as a whole, in part through the need to appeal to a broader electorate, has become more moderate. While Harper’s political strategy may require proceeding cautiously with a social conservative agenda, the ties to and pressures from this contingent need to be taken seriously: there can be no doubt that the election of the Harper government is giving social conservative elements a presence that they haven’t had before. Harper’s roots in the Reform/Alliance Party, his time spent at the head of the National Citizen’s Coalition and his close relationship to Tom Flanagan are all reminders of Harper’s own personal history. His past pronouncements, similarly suggest, at the very least, a close engagement with social conservative elements of the party. In a telling article in 2003, for example, he argued that since the economic agenda is now taken care of, what really needs to be addressed is the “social agenda of the modern Left”, particularly the welfare state and the damage that is

having on institutions such as the family.

Beyond Harper's personal views and history, pressure to move forward on a social conservative agenda also results from the alliances and forces that form key elements within the Conservative party as a whole. The increased presence of the religious right and its influence on and ties to various Conservative party members is of particular concern. While traditionally the religious right has had less of a presence in Canada than in the US, its influence here appears to be growing. A number of Conservative candidates were nominated with the help of Christian leaders and a growing number of evangelicals ran in the election. The organization Egale identified 34 first-time Conservative candidates as closely identified with the Christian right. Ten of these were elected. Some ten cabinet members have been identified as social conservatives, including Vic Toews (Attorney General and Minister of Justice), Stockwell Day (Public Safety) and Jim Flaherty (Finance). Other Conservatives with ties to the Christian right include David Sweet (former head of Promise Keepers Canada); and Maurice Vellacott, (with ties to Focus on the Family Canada). An increasing number of evangelical lobby groups, grassroots organizations and educational institutions have also established a presence in Ottawa. Many of these have links to groups in the US and have considerable influence with Conservative party members.

Implementing the Social Conservative Agenda

The social conservative influence can already be seen in a number of policy areas. As noted above, Conservative childcare proposals are formulated in a way that accommodates those who favour a traditional family and stay-at-home solutions. In addition, the social conservative agenda calls into question what were thought to be acquired rights with respect to individual choice in the area of household formation, sexuality and reproduction. The Conservatives have promised to hold a free vote on the definition of marriage, and if it passes, to introduce legislation "to restore the traditional definition of marriage while respecting existing same-sex marriages." A Globe and Mail survey found that 136 of the incoming MPs indicated that they are opposed to same-sex marriage, while 153 support it. There is, therefore, a very solid bloc opposing same-sex marriage and a vote on the issue would be close.

Women's groups are also concerned about the Conservative agenda with respect to abortion. During the election, Harper would only say that his views on the issue are "complex", and that he "was not proceeding with an abortion agenda". It has been estimated, however, that there are at least 90 anti-choice MPs in the new parliament (including 16 Liberals and 74 Conservatives) and a large number whose position is unknown. Women's groups are also concerned that a private member's bill could be introduced on the subject. Conservative Party policy allows for free votes on issues of conscience, so even if Harper has said he won't proceed with an abortion agenda, the issue could nevertheless be introduced, debated and voted on. There are also other ways in which reproductive rights could be affected, including through the appointment of anti choice ministers, possible funding cuts for services and groups that are pro-choice, and through encouraging delisting abortion as a medically necessary procedure.

Since election day the Conservatives have moved quickly to implement their agenda. In April it was reported that a coalition of social conservative lobby groups was being mobilized in support of the Conservative childcare plan. These groups include REAL Women, the Canada Family Action Coalition and the Institute for Canadian Values, "a faith-based public

policy think tank.” The May 2nd Budget further indicated the Conservative government’s intent to move decisively in this area. Their childcare plan will be implemented through what they are now calling the “Universal Child Care Benefit” (UCCB). As promised, this will provide families with \$100 month (taxable) for each child under age 6, effective July 1, 2006. The government will continue with its plans to cancel the childcare agreements signed by the previous Liberal government. Other aspects of the budget include a range of tax cuts, significant increases in military spending, a \$2 billion cut in federal program spending, a withdrawal of commitments made to Aboriginal people under the Kelowna Accord (which would have provided spending on health care, housing and other initiatives), as well as the withdrawal of funding to implement the Kyoto plan.

Consequences of the New Social Agenda

Overall, then, in the area of social policy, the Conservative agenda involves proposals for a new type of social and economic order, one that involves not only the continuation – and probably a more aggressive continuation – of a neo-liberal agenda of privatization and market-based solutions, but also the promotion of certain ways of forming the social fabric. This variant of neo-liberalism isn’t just about increasing reliance on the market; it is also about intrusion into private areas of family and household life, foreclosing possibilities and (at least for a sizeable number in the Conservative bloc) imposing a narrow, religious-based morality. The consequences of this range of possible changes for the provision of social services, the downloading onto unpaid labour in the home, for notions of community and solidarity, for the deepening of inequalities and increased vulnerability of individuals and communities, for the ability for people to lead independent and engaged lives, and to make their own choices in critical areas of their lives, are profound.

The Conservatives have advanced a discourse of “choice”, most prominently in the area of childcare. Yet many of their policies act in precisely the opposite way- to limit choice and foreclose possibilities. Looking at economic, labour market and social security provisions taken as a whole, it is difficult to see how anything other than more of the low wage, precarious type of work will flourish under a Harper government and that this will be accompanied by the continued erosion of the public and broader public sector (hospitals, schools etc) that both provided more stable jobs and the type of services needed for families, households and individuals to continue to function. The result is likely to be an acceleration of the trend to a social and economic framework defined by a combination of more precarious work, and a reduction in state provided income security, and where the choices and survival strategies available to people will be very narrow indeed.

For the left, this points to the need to understand the consequences of a market-driven agenda, but also to take seriously the increased presence of social conservatives and their ability to tap into and construct responses to the insecurities of the current era. What the Conservative platform indicates is the importance of taking into account the social, as well as the economic aspects of neo-liberalism as a whole, and the importance of better understanding the multi-faceted ways in which the “relations of ruling” are currently being reconstituted. Ties to social conservative groups in the US serve to remind us that imperialism does not just involve economic and political relations of power, but also the reformulation of social relations at multiple levels. Currently Canadians do not as a whole give a lot of credibility to the tenets of social conservatism. However, the presence of such a strong current within the government does mean that issues that were thought settled 5, 10, 20 or more years ago are once again open for debate. For the left, it will require not only a re-assertion of the importance of rights, for example, in the area of reproductive choice, as

well as collective rights in the areas of social and economic policy, but, in addition, further debate on the type of alternative arrangements between the economic and the social that might be possible.

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