

# The “Scandalization” of Canadian Politics: The Hard Truths of Neoliberal Conservatism

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*We are gripped by scandal. In Ottawa, Prime Minister Stephen Harper is implicated in a top-level cover up of illegal expense claims by one his own foot soldiers: now-suspended Senator Mike Duffy. In Toronto, police surveillance data reveal that Toronto Mayor Rob Ford and Alessandro Lisi (his “occasional driver and friend” !?!) move effortlessly between drug deals, football fields and the mayor’s office. Lurid pictures abound: Senator Duffy clutching his bags full of bombshells, Harper looking blindsided in the House, mysterious envelopes being passed between Ford and Lisi in the woodlots and gas stations of Etobicoke.*



Disturbing times. Entertaining times. For many of us, also hopeful times. Who has not dared to dream that crack and runaway expense claims will bring the HarperFord era to an end? After all, scandal helped do in so many others... Richard Nixon, Paul Martin, Mel Lastman, Nicolas Sarkozy and a string of Montreal mayors. The list is long.

## The Scandalization of Politics: Who Benefits?

We are talking about much more than a few incidental scandals. More and more of what goes by ‘politics’ according to the media – statecraft, elections, parliamentary debates – is taken over by endless ‘revelations’ about individuals, their personal failings or corrupt practices. Political conflict takes the form of duels between individual establishment figures: politicians, newspaper editors, radio hosts, and police chiefs. We all fill social media sites with our own views about who we think are the good guys in this gladiator sport.

Can progressive and left forces benefit from scandalized politics? In a recent commentary on years of spectacular political scandal in France and Italy, Pierre Rimbert and Razmig Keucheyan say no. They suggest that continuous trial by media and public inquiry invites a sort of ‘apolitical rebellion’ by citizen-spectators.[\[1\]](#)

Why apolitical rebellion? Rimbert and Keucheyan argue that when media-fuelled scandals occupy our attention, the air seethes with *schadenfreude* about the powerful. Yet this resentment often remains passive: private rather than collective and focused on individual misgivings instead of systemic corruption. Observers of scandal may feel that “they have enemies” (Antonio Gramsci)[\[2\]](#), but this sense remains vague and unorganized. It is focused on personalities or abstract figures (‘the bureaucrat,’ ‘the politician,’ the ‘city worker,’ the ‘urban elite,’ ‘the suburban bumpkin,’ ‘the drug dealer’), not social forces like the state, the ruling class, patriarchy or white supremacy. Isolated and disorganized, mistrust and outrage quickly morphs into cynicism: the sense that getting politically involved is useless and that salvation lies in withdrawing to the private sphere.

All this explains why scandal risks pushing politics into a conservative direction. This is particularly the case in times of deep economic, social and ecological uncertainty, such as ours. Scandal can hit the 'left,' 'centre' or the 'right.' Yet in all cases, the danger is that politics is reduced to morality contest while systemic corruption remains intact. Names and personalities change but policies and structures of power are not questioned.

What is worse, scandal evokes desires to 'clean up the mess' by means of authoritarian intervention. Problems with elected politicians? Bring in the RCMP or the Police Chief to restore order. Yes, the very RCMP whose legitimacy is actively in question because of their role in cracking down on political protests and clearing the path of resource companies when First Nations attempt to defend their land, as the Mikmaq of Elsipogtog have been doing. Yes, the same Toronto Police force that, Rinaldo Walcott urges us to remember, "constantly stops, questions and cards black people and aboriginal people with less evidence of suspicious activity than warrant documents concerning Ford and Lisi reveal."[\[3\]](#) But never mind, why not propose the Police Chief for mayor anyway?[\[4\]](#) In Jesse McLaren's words: "the media praise of the police chief ... shows how a drug scandal amidst the 1% can still reinforce the 1%,"[\[5\]](#) and, in the process, further demonize the many people of colour in North Etobicoke who became 'collateral damage' in the paramilitary drug raids (through which the police retrieved the 'crack tape' featuring Mayor Ford).[\[6\]](#)

The scandalization of politics builds on deeper, worrisome trends. It thrives when political and ideological distinctions flatten or disappear. In Ottawa, opposition to the Harper government has been weak for years as the NDP under Jack Layton and then Thomas Mulcair have made an absence of principles *the* principle ('proposition,' not 'opposition').[\[7\]](#) In Toronto, years of privatized urban development, business tax reduction and law-and-order policing have drastically reduced the scope of policy debate on City Council, and this long before Ford was elected.[\[8\]](#) When elected politicians have nothing substantial to discuss, scandals are much easier to personalize.

In Canada, the obstacles against the scandalization and personalization of politics have always been less than sturdy – although perhaps not quite as weak as South of the border. It is easier to turn politics into a personality contest when citizens in our first-past-the-post system are used to voting for single representatives in their riding, when parties are formally absent from municipal politics (as they are in Ontario), when courts and judges rival elected bodies in the policy process,[\[9\]](#) and when even in the best of times, the left fails to break the capacity of the two big parties of business and property – the Liberals and Conservatives – to turn politics into a game of 'brokering' narrowly conceived individual and group interests.

### Scandal and Politics: Where is the Difference?

What if we just set aside personal scandals to focus on the tasks at hand: 'policy,' 'governance,' 'restoring the reputation of Toronto and Canada in the world.' Many pundits have suggested just that. For Edward Keenan, Ford's antics are a distraction from the proper business of politics because "every time a real debate threatens to break out about the city, we get a new revelation about his personal life that hijacks the conversation."[\[10\]](#)

But how easy is it to separate personality from serious political debate? Where exactly is the line between the personal political style of people like Harper and Ford and their ideological convictions? Feminists have long insisted that the personal is always political in important ways [even though politics should not of course be reduced to a matter of individual moral

integrity, as waves of media scandal often do].

Could it be that in Harper's and Ford's supposed aberrations, one can see the truth of neoconservative/neoliberal politics? As Haroon Siddiqui reminds us, Harper and Ford represent two stylistic variations of a hard right politics that is moving closer to espousing a "Tea Party ethos."[\[11\]](#) Harper has rammed through an unprecedented number of far-reaching policies by stealth and cold rationalism. Meanwhile, in his effort to conquer the last bastions of moderate, 'progressive' neoliberalism in Ontario, Ford has reinvented the very visceral right-wing populism of Preston Manning and Mike Harris that Harper rode to power but tries to bottle up for release when it suits his tactical considerations.

### Scandal, or the Hard Truths of Neoliberal/Conservatism

We could do worse than to search for a pattern linking the political styles of Harper and Ford to the ideological convictions they share with other Conservatives, and quite a few others. The Senate-crack scandal tells us volumes about the fundamental character of hard right politics, much of which has become mainstream across the political spectrum and in many social circles over the last generation.

Hatred of democracy: Both Harper and Ford are profoundly authoritarian in person and in political orientation. Harper has seriously magnified a decades-long trend: the concentration of power in the executive branch of the state, notably the Prime Minister's Office.[\[12\]](#) In Toronto, the Ford brothers see City Council as a mere nuisance. In their anti-parliamentary perspective, this makes sense. The powers of the mayor's office remain much more limited than the PMOs, despite the City of Toronto Act which was passed to buttress the role of the mayor at City Hall. When Harper and Ford react to their respective scandals by blaming others (the courts, the corporate media, the elected opposition), they are simply restating their deep mistrust of anything – even the timid formalities of liberal democracy – that limits their capacity to do as they please and as they are used to doing as party autocrats (Harper) and petty capitalists (Ford).

Arbitrary rule: During their election campaigns, both Harper and Ford made much of their commitment to 'transparent' and 'open' government (in Harper's case to distinguish himself from the Liberals and their own sponsorship scandal). Unfolding revelations show the opposite: an addiction to secrecy and willful deception. Harper, and most brazenly the Ford brothers have tried to sell their penchant for 'breaking the rules' of government as an example of their supposed 'outsider' status on Parliament Hill and at City Hall. Arbitrary rule is not only personal whim and political marketing. It follows from the very anti-democratic centralization of power that has shaped the political process since the late 1970s, in Canada and beyond. Both are necessary to impose the 'discipline' of the market and the 'values' of family, nation, and individual resilience. In turn, arbitrariness in decision-making personalizes politics and breeds more scandal.

Virulent anti-egalitarianism: There is no secret that the mission of Harper and Ford is to dismantle policies and organizations that may mitigate (if only so slightly) the deep-seated racialized class and gender inequalities that have shaped this country since contact, and that have in many ways intensified since the 1980s. In their opposition to substantial social equality, they are not alone. They share it in effect with all those political forces that have accepted, one by one, the virtues of expanding the rights of investors and property owners while presenting the 'free market' as class-less, gender- and colour-blind field of equal

opportunity. HarperFord proudly wear their anti-egalitarianism. What better way to deepen inequality than by cultivating a public hatred of those at the receiving end of their stick (indigenous peoples, people of colour, workers, migrants, gays and lesbians, low-income women, cyclists and environmentalists) while presenting themselves – the very beneficiaries of the upward distribution of wealth and power – as victims and advocates of ‘the little guy’? A political style that celebrates the brutality of the dominant and their symbols (war heroes, the monarchy, brawling hockey players) is difficult to control. It easily morphs into the kind of domineering outbursts and abusive habits were on display during the HarperFord scandals. Unfortunately, a disturbing but telling aspect of the media coverage of the Ford scandal is how it focuses mostly on Ford consuming crack in public view, not his racist and homophobic slurs, for which he has been known for many years.[\[13\]](#)

Fiscal irresponsibility: Harper and Ford are not responsible managers of the public purse, contrary to what they, their supporters, and even many of their critics argue. The monetary aspects of the HarperFord scandals demonstrate a view of public office as a transmission belt for private gain. Senate expenses for Conservative party fundraising, mayor’s office resources for private football practices, questionable election finances, anyone? These cavalier attitudes are in fact symptomatic of a fiscal recklessness that treats billions as pocket change. Witness Harper’s approach to procuring fighter jets and Ford’s complete disinterest in the financing of subway construction. Neoliberalism and neoconservatism are not about fiscal discipline in general. We know this also from the infamous right-wing regimes of the recent past, including those led by Mulroney, Harris, Reagan and Bush. Neoliberal/conservatism is not about ‘saving taxpayers’ money.’ It is about gaining control of the top echelons of the state in order to discipline or destroy some of its branches (those involved in redistribution, progressive taxation or limiting property rights), expand others (those involved in policing, warfare, and handing out patronage, PPP contracts and corporate bailouts) and reduce the range of manoeuvre of future governments (by shrinking the revenue base of the state). Debts and deficits have their good political uses.

Not all neoliberals and neoconservatives are individual control freaks, violent machos, cultural nationalists, proud gas guzzlers, or outspoken hate-mongers. Some of them are personable, openly gay, cosmopolitan, environmentally sensitive, cool with hipsters. Not all of them are even white men. But Harper’s and Ford’s personal political styles are not right-wing by accident. The path forged by Pinochet, Thatcher, Reagan, Mulroney, Bush, Harris and selectively solidified by Blair, Chrétien, McGuinty, Miller, Hollande and Obama keeps the door open for those who revel in acting out their anti-egalitarian, racist, sexist and homophobic aggressions. If you would like the same ‘wine’ (HarperFord’s policies) but in a ‘bottle’ with a different ‘brand’ (TrudeauStintz), better be careful what you wish for.

## Dangerous Times

Scandalized politics is dangerous in more ways than one, particularly when it is connected to a surge of populist politics.[\[14\]](#) For progressives, radicals and the left, scandal is dangerous because it can keep popular anger passive and foster cynicism. Worse, it can deepen the desires for authoritarian solutions right-wing populism has been cultivating for decades. Once politics is reduced to a gladiator sport between good and bad heroes, it becomes a matter of pure faith in leaders and supposed conspiracies against them. The significant minority who say they support Ford and Harper appear to be motivated in part by such faith. In the case of Ford, we are talking about faith in a man, who, while privileged and reactionary, also promises to relieve working people’s monthly bills, answers phone calls and has no qualms about “transgressing the [superficially polite] social code of the white

and middle-class sphere,"[\[15\]](#) a sphere that includes some progressive and left circles.

But there is hope. Persistent scandalization presents very real dangers for ruling circles. This is particularly the case with scandals involving right-wing populists who typically have an ambiguous relationship to other ruling fractions. On the one hand, people like HarperFord are the vanguard of neoliberal/conservative politics. They are still around – or resurface in waves, to be more precise – because their thirst for pushing the agenda of executives, libertarians, nationalists and social conservatives is as boundless as the appetite of ruling classes and financial markets for profits and concessions.

On the other hand, the personalization of politics exploited and intensified by the populists is dangerous for ruling circles too. As we know at least since Marx's portrait of French emperor Louis Bonaparte,[\[16\]](#) populist leaders are often lone wolves, erratic characters or megalomaniacal patriarchs dreaming of personal rule. They are difficult to predict and control. Once embroiled in scandal, populism can trigger a type of blowback: the very resentful style of politics that brought them to power risks turning against them. The result can be a form of political cannibalism within the hard right and much beyond.

The FordHarper scandals are turning not only the Conservative party but also official politics into a farcical succession of feuds between individual politicians, aides, senior bureaucrats, corporate bagmen, police brass and publishers. How long can it be before organized crime bosses make their appearance, too? The arbitrariness of populist Conservative rule thus opens windows into the arbitrariness of power more generally. As McLaren points out,[\[17\]](#) the major Toronto papers and business lobbies like the Toronto Board of Trade are worried about HarperFord because their own agendas are threatened by the unpredictability the scandals breed. These worries explain the attempts to separate the men (HarperFord) from their policies, which they otherwise support, partly or in full.

### Is There a Way Out?

HarperFord's scandals thus could be a morbid symptom, a sign of the mortal decline of a generation of neoliberal-neoconservative rule. But the death of neoliberal conservatism won't come easily. It certainly won't result only from the demise of Ford and Harper as leaders, as important as that demise might be. It won't arrive if we happily elect Trudeau, Mulcair, Stintz or Tory as successors. It won't become reality with a new "governance model" for City Hall and the mayor's office.[\[18\]](#) And, it won't happen if we consider HarperFord simply as symptoms of rogue right-wing politics rather than also as characteristics of much broader, mainstream realities. A sustained period of extraparliamentary political mobilization, a consequent shift in the balance of social power, and the formulation of qualitative alternatives to social polarization, environmental destruction, sexual violence and racist humiliation are necessary for a deeper political shift.

Demonstrating that scandal is symptomatic of the deep political truths of our neoliberal/conservative age is only really possible through collective political mobilization. In Toronto, this is what happened between the summer of 2011 and the fall of 2012, when the previous round of political scandals (about election expenses and conflicts of interest) and intensifying tensions between the Fords and other parts of the establishment (over waterfront development and transit policy) combined with the popular movements against budget cuts. In this context, the alliance of Ford supporters began cracking and the Mayor suffered his first big defeats in City Council.[\[19\]](#) [\[20\]](#) So far, the fractures in the Harper regime pale in comparison. But across Canada, Idle No More and variegated protests against

pipelines, tar sands and fracking projects have helped politicize Conservative rule and highlight the disastrous effects of neo-colonial capitalism, notably for ecology and indigenous peoples. Many more such mobilizations are necessary to translate the contradictions revealed by scandals into a deeper political sea change. •

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Notes:

1. Pierre Rimbert and Razmig Keucheyan, "Le carnaval de l'investigation" *Le Monde Diplomatique* May (2013): p. 28. Rimbert and Keucheyan develop their point by borrowing an insight from Antonio Gramsci, who coined the idea of 'subversivism' to describe the vague sense of popular anger mobilized from above in times of crisis. See Antonio Gramsci, Note 46, Notebook 3 in *Prison Notebooks Volume II* Edited and translated by Joseph Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) pp. 44-47.

2. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, op. cit., p. 44.

3. Rinaldo Walcott, "[Rob Ford and the truth about privilege](#)," *The Broadbent Blog* April 11, 2013.

4. As suggested in a [tweet](#) by *Globe and Mail* journalist Simon Houpt, November 5, 9:25 a.m.

5. Jesse McLaren, "[Austerity and the politics of the Ford scandal](#)," *Rabble.ca*.

6. Hassim Reyes, "[Four uncomfortable truths about the Ford crack scandal](#)," *BASICSnews.ca*.

7. Tom Jonken provided a stark portrait of this boundless pragmatism in his report on the 2012 NDP leadership convention, which crowned Mulcair ("[What Would Tommy Douglas Think?](#)" *The Walrus* October (2012) pp. 40-49).

8. On the contradictions of the Lastman and Miller years in Toronto and how they helped Ford get elected, see Stefan Kipfer "[The Hordes at the Gate? Hard-Right Populism Defines Toronto Mayoral Election](#)," *The Bullet* No. 419, October 2011; Parastou Saberi and Stefan Kipfer, "[Rob Ford in Toronto: Why the Ascendancy of Hard-Right Populism in the 2010 Mayoral Election?](#)," *New Socialist Webzine*, 24 November, 2010.

9. On this point, we could do worse than to remember the late Michael Mandel's critique of the 'legalization' of politics in Canada (*The Charter of Rights and The Legalization of Politics in Canada: Revised, Updated and Expanded*, Toronto: Thompson, 1994).

10. Edward Keenan, "[With Friends Like These](#)," *The Grid* Oct. 31-Nov.6 (2013) p. 13.

11. Haroon Siddiqui, "Ford and Harper share many political attributes," *Toronto Star* November 3 (2013) p. A15.

12. Roger Annis, "[The Canadian Appointed Senate and the Drift to Authoritarian Rule](#)," *The Bullet* No. 894, November 5 (2013).

13. Neville Park, "[Don't act so fucking shocked](#)," November 5, 2013.

[14.](#) On this theme of political danger, see Gillian Hart's just released book on the crisis of ANC rule and populism, left and right, in today's South Africa (*Rethinking the South African Crisis: Nationalism, Populism, Hegemony*, Scottsville: University of Kwazulu Press, 2013).

[15.](#) Neville Park, "Don't act so fucking shocked," op. cit.

[16.](#) Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

[17.](#) Jesse McLaren, "Austerity," op. cit.

[18.](#) Richard Florida, "Toronto's problem has grown beyond its mayor," *The Globe and Mail* Sept. 8 (2013) p. A15.

[19.](#) Stefan Kipfer and Parastou Saberi, "From 'revolution' to farce? Hard-right populism in the making of Toronto," presentation at Concordia University, Montreal, October 3, 2012; Jesse McLaren, "Austerity," op. cit.

[20.](#) The French case points toward the same conclusion. President Sarkozy and his right-wing party were booted out of office not only because of the scandals that clouded his regime. They lost the election because their legitimacy was undermined by a series of large-scale political mobilizations, including the successful movements against the deportation of undocumented workers and the increase in the retirement age.

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