**The Myth of Conservative Canada**

**Michael Adams**

Much has been made of a purported rightward shift in Canadian values. But research shows that Canadians still want government in their lives, and a majority are not embracing conservative social values.

On a fait grand cas d’un glissement vers la droite des valeurs canadiennes, mais les recherches montrent que les Canadiens souhaitent toujours voir l’État jouer un rôle dans leur vie et qu’ils rejettent majoritairement le conservatisme social.

> Change in Canadian Politics, Business, and Culture and What It Means for Our Future that a new force has emerged to supplant the “Laurentian Consensus,” the Montreal-Ottawa-Toronto elites who operated an informal consensus that saw fit to sustain Liberal Party (or pale Red Tory imitation) rule for much of the 20th century. The new force Bricker and Ibbotson describe is a combination of the familiar conservative players of Old Canada (rural Canadians and the West) and “new Canada”: the urban and suburban “multicultural mélange” that is defined by immigrants whose numbers and economic clout are growing, and many of whom are seen as sharing Conservative values.

> But is it really so? Have Canadians undergone a sea change in their values, adopting new attitudes toward the role of government, and social beliefs that will more often than not deliver power to conservative parties?

> The evidence from our polling and social values research at Environics shows the contrary. Canadians are not calling for a dramatic retreat of government from our lives, nor do they show signs of embracing greater conservatism on social issues.

> Definitions of conservatism vary, but small government and low taxes are widely accepted as conservative principles. Is distrust of government as an institution, or unwillingness to pay taxes to advance the work of government, widespread among the Canadian public? Are Canadians becoming more like many Americans in seeing government as wasteful and inefficient (if not downright evil)? Is the time to get something done properly — be it prisons or health insurance or education — it’s best to leave government out of the picture?

We find little evidence of growing hostility toward government among Canadians. Our Focus Canada 2011 survey showed three-quarters of Canadians believe taxes are generally a positive thing, as opposed to one in five (19 percent) who think taxes are mostly a bad thing. Environics has been tracking this question since 2005 — through the economic crisis of 2008 and the ensuing years of first stimulus and then austerity measures — and the responses to this question have remained more or less stable over that time.

> Most Canadians are willing to chip in to public coffers — in principle. But how confident are they about the way their money is managed once government gets its hands on it? Opinion is mixed on the efficacy of government, but Focus Canada 2011 showed just over half (53 percent) are more likely to agree with the government often does a better job than people give it credit for than to believe that “government is almost always wasteful and inefficient” (42 percent). (In 2011, Pew Center research found Americans are markedly more skeptical of government, with 35 percent seeing government as generally wasteful and 39 percent believing government often gets a bad rap.)

> Canadians believe governments have a vital role to play in society. A strong majority (68 percent) agree that “governments are essential to finding solutions to the important problems facing our society.” A large proportion who might be sympathetic to Ronald Reagan’s famous dictum that government is the problem, not the solution, is about a quarter: 27 percent of Canadians believe “governments are more often than not the cause of important problems facing the country.”

> One of the “important problems” Canadians believe the government has a role in addressing is inequality. A large majority (82 percent) agree either strongly (50 percent) or somewhat (32 percent) that “governments in Canada should actively find ways to reduce the gap between rich and poor” — those who think that to be “far too unfeasible.” Majorities in all parties except the Conservative Party agree strongly or even even (77 percent) that those who identify as Conservative supporters agree strongly with what conventional wisdom would see as a leftist aspiration.

> Canadians want government to regulate business. In 2011, 7 in 10 (72 percent) believed either that current levels of government regulation are about right (49 percent) or that the government currently regulates business too little (23 percent). Conversely in five (19 percent) believed government currently regulates business too much — down from 26 percent in 2004.

> In short, Canadians tend to think government is reasonably effective in how it operates (although many see room for improvement); large majorities think government has an important role to play in addressing society’s problems, including inequality and the excesses of the private sector; and three-quarters are quite happy to fork over some of their own money to make a functioning government possible. These are not attitudes one would expect from a population that is utterly disgusted with public government endeavours that is evident south of the border.

> Canadians do not have the deep suspicion of government evident south of the border.

> When Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird revealed his behind-the-scenes efforts to oppose anti-gay policies in the US, the socially conservative lobby group REAL. Women of Canada condemned him as a “left-wing elitist” who is out of step with “grassroots Canada.” Unles “grassroots Canada” excludes the majority of Canadians, REAL Women is mistaken: Minister Baird’s work on this file fits quite nicely with public attitudes today as well as polling indicates that Canadians are becoming more socially liberal; more at ease with diverse family models, di verse sexual orientations and gender identities; and generally more comfortable with sexuality, in real life and in popular culture.

> Environics Research Group’s social values research differs from standard polling in that instead of tracking attitudes on the issues of the day, it seeks to measure the orientations that underlie those attitudes, such as how different values and concepts like authority and fairness. Unlike the colloquial use of the term “values” (defining what is inherently good and bad), they define values more neutrally, as deeply held beliefs about how the world works (for instance, whether violence is accepted as a sometimes justifiable means of solving problems) and how our values surveys, the value “flexible families” (which tracks openness to same-sex couple models) has grown most. And then, on sexism, Canadians do not want the public sector to carte blanche from the public to grow or solve every problem. But nor do Canadians have the kind of deep suspension of all government endeavours that is evident south of the border. Instead, much has been made of a purported rightward shift of the broker. They see that many aspects of government work well, and they are likely to favour moderate re forms to government, including more efficient privatization of services or drastic parting back of government functions. These attitudes have not changed much during the Harper government’s time in power.
Michael Adams

... saying “Fewer Canadians have scored high on the value Sexism, while more Canadians have scored high on the value Sexual Permissiveness.”

Standard polling also offers evidence of growing social liberalism in Canada. Since Canada legalized same-sex marriage, support for the policy has only increased. The last time we tracked this item, in 2010, we found almost 7 in 10 Canadians (68 percent) supported same-sex marriage — with 43 percent expressing strong support, while strong opposition stood at 20 percent, a decline of about 10 points over the past decade. In the United States, the Pew Center found this year that among the one in two Americans who support same-sex marriage, 28 percent have changed their minds to come to their position. Open-ended questions that have asked Americans to state reasons for this change have found a range of reasons, including that someone close to them had come out, or that they simply stopped feeling that it was a big deal. Although no data have been gathered on the extent to which Canadians have switched positions on this issue, the pace of change in attitudes on same-sex marriage north of the border has been sufficiently brisk that many Canadians must also have experienced a change of heart. And intergenerational social change continues to move toward support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights: a large majority of young people (79 percent of those aged 18 to 29) are positive about same-sex marriage.

If members of REAL Women think that’s bad news, they should see the numbers on abortion rights. Three-quarters of Canadians (74 percent) agree that “any woman who wants to have an abortion should be able to have one,” while 22 percent disagree. This proportion has risen considerably since the early 1990s, when a slim majority of the population (55 or 56 percent from 1990 through 1993) agreed and proportions in the high 30s (37 or 38 percent in the early 1990s, when a slim majority of the population (55 or 56 percent from 1990 through 1993) agreed and proportions in the high 30s (37 or 38 percent in the early 1990s) disagreed.

In an Alberta that is more comfortable and tolerant than its ancient caricature, and which has a popular Muslim mayor in its financial hub. The real question is whether Canadian conservatism has evolved into a brand that can appeal to a plurality of Albertans in 2012, since Wildrose eventually became associated not with Smith’s party line but with some of its candidates’ harder-edged stances, including one candidate’s Musings in a blog post that gays and lesbians were headed toward an eternity in the “lake of fire.”

T he Alberta election gave Wildrose schooling in the realities of contemporary Canadian politics. The social conservatism articulated by its “same-sex marriage” candidates reflected a white, Christian conservatism that landed with a thud in the pace of change in attitudes on same-sex marriage. and which has a popular Muslim mayor in its financial hub. The real question is whether Canadian conservatism has evolved into a brand that can appeal to a plurality of Albertans in 2012, since Wildrose eventually became associated not with Smith’s party line but with some of its candidates’ harder-edged stances, including one candidate’s Musings in a blog post that gays and lesbians were headed toward an eternity in the “lake of fire.”

Canada has one of the highest immigration rates in the world. It has the highest proportion of foreign-born residents of any G8 country, and ranks not far behind Australia in the proportion of its population born elsewhere (20.6 percent of Canadians were born elsewhere, as compared with 26.8 percent of Australians). One of the great successes of Canada’s immigration program to date has been the extent to which immigrants have become citizens. Of the world’s major immigrant-receiving countries, Canada has traditionally had one of the highest naturalization rates, with large majorities of migrants being motivated — and encouraged — to become full citizens with rights identical to those of any other Canadian. Equipped with voting rights and the ability to run for elected office, immigrants have a large potential impact on the country’s politics through their personal choices.

Clearly Multiculturalism Minister (and former Citizenship and Immigration minister) Jason Kenney believed there was enough overlap between his party’s values and the outlooks of new Canadians that it was worth courting these newcomers, who might once have been assumed to be “natural” Liberals. Many newcomers to Canada arrive from countries with more socially conservative cultures, where patriarchal authority is more widely assumed, where sexual modesty is more closely observed and where gay rights are nascent at best.

Conventional wisdom also posits that because many people migrate in search of economic opportunity, immigrants to Canada will want to keep the...
In short, proponents of the emerging Canadian conservatism argue that immigrants lean “conservative,” both socially and fiscally. And there are some data to fuel the hypothesis. Qualitative research suggests that newcomers — especially the two largest groups, South Asian and Chinese newcomers — are focused on their children's education, oriented to saving money and attracted to small-business opportunities.

And yet the image of the immigrant “striver” focused solely on economic mobility is outdated. These days, ambition for the future and the sense of achievement among immigrants stands to experience much greater success in their home countries than in Canada. Those who abandon booming Asian economies for a life in Canada are not thinking only of dollars and cents; if they were, they would be more likely to stay in immigrant-stocked city areas. And they are not only concerned with upward mobility; many immigrants want to have an abortion, the decision should be between a woman and her doctor.”

The young, highly educated, globally connected people our immigration program attracts do not always fit the stereotype of the immigrant striver or the conservative patriarch trying to maintain control over his family in a land of loose morals and low necklines. Many immigrants are even attracted to things that would make it more difficult for governments and introduced changes that will make it more difficult for government to grow in the future, such as the reduction of the GST by two points. Its attacks on things like the census, research-focused NGOs and environmental monitoring have troubled those who care about evidence-based policy-making. But these things do not keep most Canadians up at night. To the extent that the government has touched social programs, it has often described its changes in terms like “closing loopholes” and “preventing abuse,” positioning its changes as pragmatic, not populist.

Yet even with these nods to moderation, the percentage of voters who support the federal Conservatives appears to have topped out in the high 30s. Stephen Harper may harbour ambitions of a new conservative era for Canada. But he won his majority thanks to studied moderation, astute strategy and tactics, and the mathematical contribution of a persistently fragmented centre-left. The Conservative Party was not propelled to power or kept in government because of a sea change in Canadian values or attitudes. The Canadian electorate remains largely attached to the values that have shaped the country. It is this still largely progressive Canadian electorate that is holding conservative governments to the centre.

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about same-sex marriage, abortion and marijuana use, the gaps in rates of agreement strongly. That is a majority, and just eight percentage points off the rate of strong agreement among those born in Canada.