

PONDERING CANADIAN NEO-CONSERVATISM



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Canadian neo-conservatism, whose difficulties were analysed here recently by William Watson and Jim Stanford, is in trouble for three reasons: Its most likely recruits emigrate to the United States; the Canadian media lacks a strong neo-conservative outlet; and the Liberal Party of Canada is a ruthlessly effective electoral machine. If neo-conservatives are to have any chance of gaining influence in Canada, they must boldly speak the truth.

Le néo-conservatisme canadien, dont William Watson et Jim Stanford ont récemment analysé les problèmes dans ces pages, est en difficulté pour trois raisons : ses partisans les plus vraisemblables émigrent aux États-Unis ; il n'existe aucun vrai courant néo-conservateur dans les médias canadiens ; la machine électorale du Parti libéral du Canada est d'une redoutable efficacité. Pour avoir la moindre chance de gagner en influence au pays, les néo-conservateurs devront oser faire face à cette réalité.

Largely because the term “neo-conservative” is so new, there is lots of jockeying over its ownership. At an “off-the-record” gathering of prominent Canadian conservatives (of all stripes) in 1997, a participant handed out a questionnaire entitled, “How neo-conservative are you?” You scored points for saying you favoured such things as the legalization of illicit drugs and gay marriage or the privatization of highways; you lost points if you supported capital punishment, drug tests for welfare recipients or school prayer.

It's a kind of ideological beauty contest. On this survey, of course, libertarians (the “get-government-off-our-back” crowd) will outperform social conservatives. But I mention this questionnaire, and the “off-the-record” event at which it was delivered, for a different reason: Canadian conservatives—libertarian, neo-conservative and “High Tory” (to use William Watson's useful taxonomy)—are at once incorrigibly timid (hence the meeting's off-the-record status) and derisive (hence the survey) toward their intellectual allies.

So, for the sake of equanimity and simplicity, I will use the term “neo-conservative” to refer to the potpourri of views that lies beneath the vast umbrella of the Canadian

Right. And, in the interests of boldness, I will describe, bluntly, that which binds us together: our preternatural opposition to evil. To be sure, High Tories and neo-cons consider a great deal of the libertarian project to be nihilist, and thus, evil; and libertarians eschew the neo-conservative penchant for faith-based state interventions. But the only thing that drives us all is a spirited opposition to evil. We know it when we see it; the Left equivocates, then hires a focus group.

Yes, evil. In his March essay in *Policy Options*, Watson traces the lineage of modern neo-conservatism to the likes of lapsed American liberals and Democrats—“liberals mugged by reality” in the famous catch phrase of Irving Kristol—who recoiled at their government's mealy-mouthed support for anti-Communism (and at its winking at the nascent anti-anti-Communism). What Watson omitted to say, however, was that the original neo-conservatives, in addition to being disaffected Democrats, were Jewish. The “New York intellectuals,” as they became known—people like Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and Nathan Glazer—were immigrants who had grown up poor

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in New York and whose families had escaped Nazi persecution in Europe.

Because of his Jewishness, Kristol, who ultimately secured the moniker, “the father of neo-conservatism,” could infuse his arguments against Communism and statism with a moral urgency that John Birch Society conservatives could not. Today, the new black American conservatives, such as John McWhorter, Ward Connerly and Deroy Murdock, have picked up where the Jewish neo-conservatives left off. The arguments used by contemporary black conservatives against minority set-asides and racial preferences—often drawing on their own harrowing experiences with white, liberal guilt—are visceral, no-holds-barred.

That kind of moral opposition to the sins of the Left has never enjoyed much traction in Canada, and is, in my view, why Canadian neo-conservatism has withered. Both Watson, and Jim Stanford, in his response to Watson in the April edition of this magazine, have done a fine job assessing the practical failures of Canadian neo-conservatism in the political arena; I will not rehash them here. What I wish to do instead is to offer three possible explanations for why neo-conservatism, as a moral idea, has failed to take root in Canada.

Sometimes the most obvious explanations elude us. Neo-conservatism is unpopular in Canada for the simple reason that neo-cons leave. There has never been a poll on the political attitudes of the vast Canadian diaspora in the United States. I’ll save pollsters the trouble: At least 90 per cent are neo-conservatives. *National Post* Op-Ed columnist Mark Steyn once quipped that all the neo-cons in Canada could fit into *Post* editor Kenneth Whyte’s jalopy. That’s a bit of a stretch, but only a bit. And far more important than the sheer number of Canadian neo-conservatives now living in the United States is their formidable status as opinion leaders. There are Canadian neo-conservatives in the Bush White House, at all the major social-policy magazines and think tanks, and at all of the most influential newspapers. Those who work in management positions at US banks and other financial institutions are very wealthy, and, accordingly, very influential. At a recent New York dinner for my famous Toronto high school, Upper Canada College, I learned that just 5 to 10 per cent of the school’s well-heeled graduating class now attends university in Canada; most who come to the United States after high school end

up staying here. And, by and large, they have grown into conservatives. Were all these people suddenly to return to Canada, an ideological depth charge would wallop the nation’s intellectual class.

Canadians relocate to the United States for myriad reasons, not all related to the Americans’ lower-tax regime or to the perceived lesser status of Canadian universities. The buzzword is “opportunity.” When they evaluate new talent, Canadian employers squeeze new graduates into a kind of Procrustean economic bed: If you studied English literature, you might be able to work in PR; if you studied law, you are branded as a lawyer. Not so in the United States. When I tell Americans that I’m a law-school graduate, they ask me what I do now for a living. When I tell Canadians the same thing, they ask me which law firm I work for. Torys? Blakes? This kind of economic parochialism is felt most in Canadian media and social-policy jobs. And due to the lack of a strong internship system at all but the largest newspapers and think tanks (of which there are very few), young Canadians “who want to make a difference”—to borrow the Gen-X mantra—turn south.

So why don’t all those expatriates, or at least a proportionate number of them, get assimilated into the US Left? After all, PC indoctrination and left-wing ideas flourish just as much at the elite US colleges as at Canadian institutions. My sense is that changing immigration rules and procedures explain a lot. Back in the 1960s, Canadian immigrants to the United States were as politically and economically diverse as those from any other First World nation; they arrived in the US to re-unite with their extended families, who in turn sponsored them for their green card. Or they came for stints during or after graduate school, happened upon an American spouse, and stayed to start a family. Today, the overwhelming majority of Canadians who end up emigrating to the United States first come down on one or more of an alphabet soup of specialized visas—including TNs (i.e., NAFTA), post-graduate “practical training” F-1 and J-1 visas, and H1-Bs. To qualify for any one of these visas, you must be in possession of a practical (i.e. non-arts) Master’s degree from an accredited institution, and/or be a member of a profession (such as law or medicine). Annual incomes for the H1-B (the most popular of the visas, offering a 3-year renewable term of employment) range from (Cdn) \$80,000-\$200,000. All of which means that most people who emigrate to the United

States would, had they stayed in Canada, place in the top 5 to 10 per cent of all wage earners; they are also professionals. In other words, they belong to the natural Tory/Canadian Alliance constituency.

A second reason for neo-conservative weakness in Canada is, yes, the liberal media. Contrary to popular myth, there is no right-wing media in Canada; in fact, there is no single, national neo-conservative media outlet whatsoever. The *National Post*? The *Post* has always been much more of a politically incorrect newspaper than a neo-conservative one. To the extent that the case for neo-conservatism exists at all in the mainstream Canadian media, it is a pastiche central-Canadian libertarianism—for the legalization of marijuana; against gambling and the rights of gun owners. As for more traditional neo-conservative views, they are ghettoized, occasionally featured on the Op-Ed pages as a kind of intellectual oddity. The largest newspaper in Canada, the *Toronto Star*, has a liberal bias codified in its official charter. No editorial board of any major Canadian paper (including the *Post*) stoutly opposes abortion, defends the death penalty, argues in favour of restricting immigration levels or supports keeping illicit drugs illegal. This is curious, to say nothing more, since a strong and consistent majority of Canadians supports capital punishment, is queasy about unfettered access to abortion and porous borders, and worries about the putative effects of drug legalization (especially on children).

In my view, a single, deep structural reason prevents the emergence of a national neo-conservative voice in Canadian media. Simply, it is the fact of Toronto: it is among the most liberal cities in North America, and yet one whose readers' tastes drive the decisions of advertisers across the country. (A friend of mine, a Toronto lawyer with a large, white-shoe law firm, once confessed to his urbane colleagues that he had voted Alliance in the last election; they continue to regard him, he feels, as the moral equivalent of a child molester.) Not surprisingly, then, the *Post* has faced challenges in trying to win over the Toronto market. In a recent interview with *Report* magazine, Alliance MP Jason Kenney mourned the fact that the *Post*, after two years, had morphed into "another central Canadian newspaper." A more avowedly neo-conservative paper—similar in editorial tone perhaps to the *Washington Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*—would most certainly fail in Canada's largest city,

and, by extension, as a national project (since national advertising is funneled almost entirely through liberal Bay Street). Meanwhile, the Canadian neo-con counter-media on the Internet, which doesn't need to bother with Toronto, has thrived. Canadian neo-con websites like www.conservativeforum.com and www.enterstageright.com have won much acclaim, and are among the most popular sites anywhere on the Internet. (They are certainly more popular than left-wing upstarts, like www.tao.ca—"analysis, resistance and revolution"—or Judy Rebick's new website, www.rabble.ca: "news for the rest of us"). And the pro-life e-mail bulletin, www.lifesite.net, assembled inside a tiny office in downtown Toronto, is easily the most influential conservative wire service anywhere in Canada (regularly "placing" news items in all the daily papers).

In addition to all these problems, there are also the modern facts of globalization and the New Economy. Protestations by Conrad Black, Howard Kurtz, and other media mavens to the contrary, the medium of the print newspaper is dying, at least as a profit-making tool. While it is true that only a handful of online news media have successfully made money in the last two years, even fewer (exclusively) print magazines or newspapers born in the age of the commercial Internet have turned a profit. Meanwhile, the profit margins of the titans, like the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, are sagging quickly; newsprint is fast becoming more expensive; advertising, with the economy in general, is drying up; micro-credit financing and other ways of paying for content online are in rapid development; hand-held computers (e.g. Avantgo, Vindigo) that allow users to download online content and read "on the go" are today's fastest-growing telephony application, now at one million users in America and growing. All this is to say that the world of media rests on shifting sands. And so, even with the best of business models and the deepest of pockets, a stand-alone, traditional print newspaper is antiquarian from the get-go. And so, this suggests that liberal media bias, the 800-pound gorilla of Canadian (and American) politics, is probably here to stay, at least until neo-conservative publishers can figure out how to make money online.

The third main reason why the right is languishing is the Liberal Party. The Liberal Party of Canada is a well-oiled hypocrisy machine. One of the arguments that President

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Bush often makes in favour of free-trade zones is that they enable democrats and free-marketeers, such as Mexico's President Vincente Fox, to vanquish corrupt political dynasties, like the PRI party. Perhaps that is why Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's Liberals originally were so suspicious of NAFTA in the 1980s. Today, however, the future of the Liberal dynasty looks more secure than ever, and Jean Chrétien has experienced a Damascene conversion to the virtues of free trade: His irascible comments about know-nothing protesters at the FTAA summit in Quebec City in April could have been spoken by Alan Greenspan. And yet, in his own constituency affairs, Mr. Chrétien acts, perfectly insouciantly, like a caricature of a crony capitalist. He blithely dismisses allegations of ethical impropriety in securing loans and grant money on behalf of his constituents by asserting that this is what members of Parliament are paid to do.

How does he get away with such bald-faced hypocrisy? It's not due to a docile press corps; the *Post* has pilloried him time and again on the facts of the "Shawinigate" scandal. I attribute the phenomenon to artfully skilled Liberal handlers. During last fall's federal election, Liberal attack dogs dissected every sentence uttered by Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day, scouring for malapropisms and snafus, and then fired off hourly summaries to editors across the country. Mr. Chrétien and his party have never been subjected to such treatment themselves. Both Reform and the Alliance have tried, but never with such success as the Big Red Machine.

If Canadian neo-conservatism is to survive, it needs to employ the same chutzpah routinely marshaled by Liberal attack dogs. It needs to find the same boldness that animated the New York intellectuals. For the argument against higher taxes is not just utilitarian. It is also moral; it is morally wrong for the government to take your money and to spend it on social programs that inculcate dependency and despair—native welfare, employment and pay equity, and multiculturalism, to name just a few of the most egregious examples. So, too, is it wrong for thousands of Canadians to languish on waiting lists, as their benign tumours metastasize to become malignant, all because of a stubborn prohibition against private medicine.

A more concrete example: Last fall, Alberta Treasurer Dr. Steve West was loudly heckled by provincial Liberals and New Democrats, when he first predicted that his province might soon be in

the enviable position of eliminating its personal income tax. Howard Sapers, the Liberal treasury critic, said he feared the governing Tories would aim to increase gaming revenues or fees to make up for the lost tax revenues. Other critics said the province's poorest citizens would not benefit because they pay very little personal income tax. Subsidies for child care or housing supplements would be a better idea, said Brian Bechtel, the executive director of the Edmonton Social Planning Council. "I think the principle of people paying according to ability to pay, which is part of the income tax system, is an important principle," he said. "[The poor] would benefit much, much, much less from a removal of income tax than would people who are very wealthy."

Only in Canada does this kind of pro-tax hysteria pass unchallenged. For the Canadian Left, income tax is the very last source of revenue that should be abolished; it is, as they see it, an absolute good to take money away from those who earn more than a bare minimum income. But this is plainly not so, either as a matter of economics or as a matter of morality. The Klein Conservatives, in winning re-election recently, were successful in arguing that abolishing income tax would make everyone better off and nobody worse off, and that it would increase the incentive to create wealth. But all throughout the Alberta election, very few people (in government or in the media) made the moral case against taxes—the idea that, *ceteris paribus*, lower taxes are always a good thing, and that they need not be justified solely by an appeal to utilitarian, supply-side economics.

Some might consider my prescription mere rhetorical excess, an editorialist's trick. I submit to you that it is not. Neo-conservatives in Canada have enjoyed a modicum of political success (notably, Mike Harris' first electoral victory) thanks to a simple, direct message: Ethnic quotas are racist; welfare is corrosive to the soul; high taxes destroy jobs. These are, in my view, unassailable truths that resonate with much of the thinking public. Speak boldly, and they will come.

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