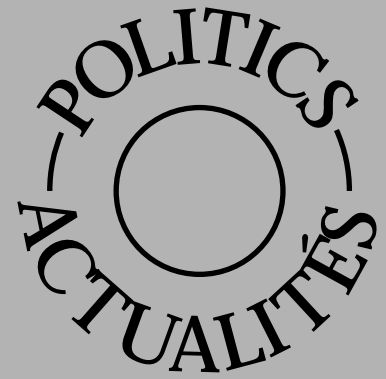


FUNDAMENTALISM ON THE RIGHT: THE ROAD TO ANOTHER DEFEAT

Robin V. Sears



Canadian voters may be yearning for change after four terms of Liberal rule, but are clearly reluctant to elect Stephen Harper and the Conservatives. Urban voters are especially uncomfortable with some of Harper's positions on social issues such as same sex marriage. Traditional Conservative voters have been perplexed by his inability to take ownership of issues like taxation and defence. As Parliament resumes, Robin Sears examines some of the challenges facing Harper as a leader who evidently prefers purity over power, in a country that prefers compromise over conviction.

Autant les électeurs canadiens aspirent au changement après quatre gouvernements libéraux consécutifs, autant ils renâclent à élire les conservateurs de Stephen Harper. Dans les villes surtout, ils s'inquiètent des positions de ce dernier sur des questions sociales comme le mariage homosexuel. Quant aux électeurs traditionnels du Parti conservateur, ils s'interrogent sur l'incapacité de leur chef de miser vraiment sur des enjeux comme la défense et la fiscalité. À l'occasion de la rentrée parlementaire, Robin Sears recense les défis qui attendent Stephen Harper, un leader qui préfère manifestement la pureté au pouvoir, dans un pays qui préfère le compromis aux convictions.

Fundamentalism is birthmother to the most exciting movements in Canadian political history. Western Canadians' early visions of a fundamentalist utopia moved large majorities of voters to challenge the CPR and the hated Toronto banks. French Canadian fundamentalists invented a naïve vision of nationhood, vibrant to many Quebecers still. British Columbian fundamentalists come in every flavour: nudist Doukhobor bombers, bond-burning Social Credit demagogues, even leftie tree-nailers happy to shed human blood to preserve virgin forest.

Those who served God and man were an early and are still a formidable part of Canadian political history, from William Aberhart to Stockwell Day, from Lafontaine to L.E. Maxwell, the infamous Prairie Bible School founder. Who knew that until 1960 there were more than 100 Bible schools serving the fewer than 4 million Canadians west of the Manitoba border?

As much fun as it has always been to watch a foaming, firebreathing fundamentalist orator — whether of the socialist or anti-Sodomite variety — on a sweaty summer night, one truth is sadly universal: In Canadian politics, if not in the God industry, they are always certain and perennial losers. This truth seems to have escaped the hapless Stephen Harper.

This may be because so much has been misconstrued about fundamentalism and its champions in Canadian his-

tory. The pragmatists who led their outraged flocks to calmer shores had always to be careful not to be seen as *ven-dus* or "toadies to Toronto." But it was always the "realistic" faction leader who either led the sect to success or was found out and disowned in the attempt.

Tommy Douglas cheerfully agreed to all the demands the local Social Crediters made of him in the 1935 election, in order that they not field a candidate in Weyburn. He scandalized the young CCF leadership in his willingness to sup with a competing fundamentalist sect. And he won.

René Lévesque enraged the Pierre Bourgaults of the early Quebec independence movement with his heavily watered-down nationalist wine. And he won.

Even tough old J.S. Woodsworth was not opposed to a little racist spice in the fundamentalist socialist stew if that helped keep the flock united. His views on women, Native Canadians and Chinese voters would horrify his fundamentalist great-grandchildren in the Council of Canadians and the NDP.

In more contemporary times, Peter Lougheed and Ralph Klein, Mike Harris and Lucien Bouchard, Brian Mulroney and Gilles Duceppe have all understood that they had to soothe the wilder members of their political tribes, without endorsing their wackiness, behind the curtains only. They maintained the "broad church" face of their governments, stroking the "haters" only in private.

Stephen Harper seems to have reversed this strategy: endorsing his wingnuts' enthusiasms publicly, and failing to soothe his sulking moderates in public or private. One could forgive one or two clangers. But when the pattern of barmy fundamentalism seems to have a monthly rebirth, surely a death spiral has begun.

This is a leader who apparently believes that fundamentalist conviction is the path to victory, and is hostile on the subject of same sex marriage to a degree that made even moderate Tories blush. And yet this does not scan as credible Harperology entirely, for at the same time he has backed and filled on spending, on taxation, and Iraq, and on missile defence in a way that has enraged his own curtain-biters.

Instead of whispering moderate ministrations to his grumbling Red Tories, he flays them in public for their perceived disloyalty. He snarls, insults and hurls threats at Belinda Stronach, his chief rival for the leadership, in front of her and his staff. Then he is amazed when the scorned woman leaves him for another.

A hard-right former Harper supporter in the Ontario Conservative party expressed his despair thusly:

"Is Stephen emotionally tone deaf? Is Stephen incapable of listening to his friends when they tell him he is in danger? Is Stephen so paranoid that he is the worst threat to his own survival?"

"Let me put it this way: If Stephen had one foot over the precipice and was about to step into the abyss, and his best friend warned him he was about to fall to his doom, he'd turn and smile and say, 'You only say that because you just don't understand the plan.'"

The political challenge for even a Nelson Mandela as Canadian Conservative Party leader would be considerable. Less sainted figures need a wide masochistic streak to contemplate the slippery electoral slopes they are asked to climb.

Consider: The Liberal party, whose current chief is arguably the most bewildered Canadian leader since King sought political guidance from his dead dog Pat; whose erstwhile pals Bono and Geldof now insult him as simply "annoying" and "unwelcome"; a party that has just come out of the worst Canadian political scandal since Sir John A. got a somewhat extravagant thank you present from his pals; a scandal whose lurid media coverage small children needed shielding from; a party

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whose minority government had to smile politely while its first and only budget was torn up and rewritten by the smallest and weakest of its opponents is, understandably heading for...defeat?

No, more likely, a slim majority government.

As Richard Gwyn and James Travers have noted with increasing incredulity as this incredible political year has unfolded, it is as if nothing can shake Canadians' aversion to any choice but the natural governing party. As Gwyn observed, following the astonishing bounce back of Liberal popularity in the wake of the Layton-Martin budget, we all get a little queasy at the prospect of voting for anyone else, when the tides appear to be turning, no matter how enraged we may be at the Liberals.

This Liberal default position for most urban English Canadians consigns the NDP to a 15-20 percent ceiling in support, and blocks the Tories only ten points higher. The consequences are dire: small town Western Canadians feel perennially disenfranchised and abused; French Canadians adopt a "middle-aged nihilist" posture and support the Bloc Québécois, a

party that refuses to be part of any decision-making except when it comes to their MPs' salaries, federal grants to their ridings, and demands for greater federal largesse for their voters.

Taking out 50 or so Bloc seats from the 308 Parliamentary total, removing them permanently "from the board," is damaging. That this "salami sliced," Parliament guarantees weak majority and/or minority governments may not be entirely a bad thing. Leaving every government's fate in the hands of an outlier

group of MPs, who never want to govern but only to defeat governments, is insane. (This is also leaving aside the BQ's claimed determination to dismember Canada, a conviction perhaps less ardently promoted among those Blocistes yet to qualify for their MP pension than their elders.)

This scenario of a permanently disabled Parliament is reminiscent of the damage that the Italian Communists did to that country's democracy for nearly half a century. The PCI remained part of the system for its rewards, demanding increasing shares of public expenditure for their protégés and supporters, but refusing always to play a role in government — except when combining with others to defeat one. Italy is still attempting to recover its stability from those years, reeling now from having placed too much power in authoritarian hands as a response to the decades of turmoil.

L'alternance is an essential component of democracy. Even when the new guys turn out to be less competent than the old, it is better and necessary to change governments regularly. One-party democracies are like martial justice, oxymoronic. It is nonsense to claim one is a multi-party democracy if only one party ever participates in government.

Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Malaysia, Singapore all enjoy multi-party democracies by that definition: they've just never had a change in government. Canada risks joining their club, and its members' shaky claim to democracy. It is now seventeen years since the last Conservative government was elected.

It is stunning that the Mulroney government is the only non-Liberal administration to survive two full terms, other than Sir John A.'s second run in office, in all of Canadian history.

To its defenders, the Liberal Party's dominance is proof of its competence, its dynamic ability to revitalize itself once a generation, and its responsiveness to a demanding electorate. To an increasingly frustrated chorus of observers, however, it is more proof of the incompetence of their opposition, the inbuilt inequity of the electoral system, and a sophisticated use of patronage and polling to guarantee the survival

of a regime devoted to little more than power and personal enrichment.

In recent years, the truth appears to be sliding in the direction of the skeptics.

The Chrétien years were a sleep walk through NAFTA prosperity and post-Cold War drift. Productivity vis-à-vis the United States continued to fall, innovation as measured by patents and successful research-based startups was embarrassing, and regional income inequities grew despite billions in patronage disbursements to the Canadian hinterland.

Post-Gomery poll numbers whacked English Canada into a recognition that not only was separatism not dead, it was hardly napping. The prospect of a whole new sovereignist generation, as likely to be of Haitian or Greek ethnicity, as *pur laine* Québécois, was a stunning denunciation of the somnolent Chrétien years.

Given the Liberals' failure over more than forty years to reverse the con-

tempt in which they are held nearly everywhere west of Winnipeg, combined with their failure to command a majority of votes among French Canadians over two decades, their claim to "national party" status is credible only in comparison to their competitors' even more appalling performance.

As Jeffrey Simpson and others have observed, the Liberals' lock on Catholic, urban and new Canadian votes has enabled them, through the miracle of our "first-past-the-vote" counting system to squeak out a plurality of seats, over and over.

Conservative apologists claimed — post-Mulroney, Meech and Manning — that "no divided right could be expected to compete." The poll ranking of the newly minted Conservative coalition having slumped below the total of the predecessor parties makes that claim seem increasingly shallow. New Democrats liked to blame the hatred of the cack-handed Rae government in



The Gazette, Montreal

On his summer tour, Stephen Harper attends a Montreal parade marking the 58th anniversary of India's independence, and strikes up a conversation with seven-year-old Shivangi Patel. The late-August stop was part of Harper's summer-long charm offensive.

Ontario, then the thuggery of the Clark regime in BC as the source of their federal weakness. Bob Rae graduated into elder statesmanship a decade ago, and Clark into quiet ignominy two federal campaigns ago.

The despair that this combination of opposition failure and Liberal monopoly has created in many quarters has given new life to the call for “electoral reform.” Canadians, by some strange combination of genes and history, seem to default to constitutional amendment and structural reform as an elixir capable of curing all national woes.

Previous Canadian experience, and that of other democracies, makes this a doubtful antidote to national narcolepsy. Changing the rules of any game is always full of unintended consequence, whether it is the width of a goalie pad or the way you count the votes in a democracy. Scottish nationalism has drifted into weaker opposition, two elections after proportional representation was enacted, in part to stimulate “more representative government.” The collapse of the Italian party structure in the last decade took place in one of the “purest PR” democracies in the world. Voter contempt for the failure of their political leaders in that system was clearly not attenuated by their “more democratic” electoral system. Israel’s efforts to force more stability on their PR system by permitting a direct vote for prime minister similarly failed to effect either greater voter enthusiasm, or governmental stability.

The evidence is that voters who hold their politicians in some esteem, and who treasure their franchise, are happy to participate in a wide variety of voting systems. Those who regard their political elites with contempt, and see their freedom to vote as trivial, are not energized or empowered by a change in the counting method.

What seems to have been forgotten in a time of greater ideological conviction on the right, as it was

trashed by an earlier generation of fundamentalists on the left, is that the great democracies were always led best by political parties able to broker regional, class and sectarian interests.

From Disraeli to the Roosevelts, from Sir John A. to Mackenzie King, the universal strategy of the successful statesman is to mute the demands of one’s partisans, to constrain the demands of the “ins” and to marry them to the hopes of the “outs,” to shave political differences carefully, not to inflate them artificially.

To the Stephen Harpers of this world, these are evidently the wicked compromisers of politics, the sophists and the sleazy fixers of political life. To them, the purity of political conviction

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tion will one day be recognized by an awakened faithful and a government of integrity and ideological clarity will be triumphant.

Well, maybe in another life, in another place, but not soon in Canada.

This battle between conviction and compromise, between the movement and the coalition brokers is as old as democracy, of course. But the movement zealots only move into contention at times of disaster, national disgrace, corruption, or decay at a level where only insiders can be winners. Weimar Germany, Depression-era Alberta, post-Tito Yugoslavia qualify, 21st century Canada doesn’t.

Since the Second World War, the most sharply contested battles between these competing threads of democracy took place in West Germany in the 1980s. *Die Grunen*, the Greens, grew out of disgust with the compromises of the German Social Democrats in power, the Vietnam War, and the excesses of Germany’s economic miracle. The careful, semi-corrupt compromises of an affluent but apparently valueless Federal Republic galvanized a generation of young environmentalists, pacifists, anarchists, and lapsed communists into political action.

Not the achievement of peace with the Soviet Union over 30 years, nor an economic boom unlike any seen previously, nor even the success of the European Community in spreading wealth and democracy were sufficient to the Greens. All of these policy icons of post-war Europe were dismissed as vacuous, even wicked achievements, given their cost to the environment and to the poor of the Third World.

The strange brew that was Green politics was personified by the charismatic Petra Kelly. American-educated, she was a combination of tough political operative, blonde beauty, German demagoguery and Anglo-American political sophistication.

The party swept into the European spotlight at a time of great disillusionment. “Euro-sclerosis” and the “European disease” were terms of abuse used to describe the combination of inflation, unemployment, and ennui that afflicted many countries and their leadership elites. *Die Grunen* stunned the German establishment, winning one of five votes in several provincial elections, in a democracy where the traditional parties’ support rarely shifted by more than 5 percent.

They became, and remain, the most successful environmentally based party in the world.

The success of this revolution had a predictable end: frustration, tears — and after eating its young — conformity. Unlike their many fascist and

Leninist forerunners though, the hardliners, *Die Fundamentalisten*, lost. Pragmatism, as the price of power, won. After several bloody party conferences during which Ms. Kelly was regularly excoriated by the “*fundis*,” she quit politics in disgust. (In a tragic ending, out of revolutionary fable, she was murdered by her political and life partner soon after.)

The triumph of the “realistic faction,” the “*realos*,” paved the way for a most improbable sight: a former 1968

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street-fighter, Oskar Fischer, as German foreign minister. Fischer had migrated from student nihilism to the Greens, and in the new realism of the party leadership, agreed to serve an SPD government as one of its senior ministers. It was hard to decide who frothed more furiously at this political changeling, the German far right or aging Green “*fundis*.”

To anyone who has followed the erratic course of the Canadian right in past two decades, there are eerie parallels, except that here the discarded leaders survive in a political netherworld, and so far the Canadian *fundis* have won.

And Canadian conservatism is now further from power than at any time since Diefenbaker’s declining years.

Part of this is no doubt due to the influence of American political thinking on Conservative *fundis* from Alberta. But part of this fascination with “purity over power” is clearly Canadian. New Democrats, with the notable exception of the Saskatchewan cousins, regularly choose insane political stances for a party nominally inter-

ested in popular approval and power. The purity of the party’s stance from the mid-90s in equating Palestinian and Israeli “terrorism,” for example, served only to enrage even its own base.

William Aberhart deliberately risked losing power, and even claimed to happily face prison, to defend a nutty social credit monetary scheme. Jacques Parizeau regularly jettisons PQ hopes of being seen as a mature and responsible political voice by attacking those with money (in most cultures, including

Quebec, thinly veiled anti-Semitism), those with different ethnic backgrounds (unveiled racism), and compromisers within his own movement for its electoral failures. He remains popular among PQ militants, despite having done more damage to its electoral prospects than any partisan enemy.

As a yin to the clichéd Canadian yang — that compromise is always best — this curiously self-defeating fundamentalism has been a durable, resilient thread through our political history. That Liberals rarely succumb to it — the Lloyd Axworthys and Carolyn Parrishs being the exception that proves the rule — is central to their hold on power. That Tories and social democrats and separatists can rarely resist its siren call is the source of their perennial disappointments.

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ment — Canadians will not vote for an American Republican agenda.

So what was that same sex marriage crusade all about? What was Harper thinking when he appeared to endorse missile defence, only to have to beat an inevitable retreat? How stupid an oil-rich Albertan would one have to be to ever expect to win Atlantic Canadian votes attacking equalization or economic development expenditures?

It is surely, once again, this same addictive appeal of being “right” — if defeated — that has permitted so many generations of Liberals to snicker in their sleeves at their “esteemed opponents.”

For both Jack Layton and Stephen Harper there are playbooks developed by others waiting to be stolen and adapted for Canadian use. In Layton’s case the alternative is blindingly obvious. Sadly, surrounded as he has chosen to be by a combination of municipal peace campaigners, aging left academics and today’s very young and very innocent leftie *fundis*, the power of a Canadian Tony Blair is dismissed with derision. Blinded by Blair’s tough approach to security policy at home and abroad, they choose to ignore the pioneering work of Blair and his chancellor of the exchequer, Gordon Brown, in reforming public sector productivity, performance and even popularity.

For Harper the choices are more nuanced, the menus from which to choose more varied, and the combinations less clear. They might be summed up in three words, however: the flag, the family and the fisc.

A return to the healthy, if naïve, English Canadian nationalism of John Diefenbaker would sit with Canada’s natural conservatives a lot more easily than appearing to volunteer as a Bushie satrap.

A commitment to “family” that was modern and inclusive, focused on children’s early education, the challenge of child poverty, the special needs of new immigrant families, and

the increasing burden of university for a majority of Canadian parents, would all be in a “one-nation” Disraeli or Bill Davis tradition of conservatism.

And then there is international and security policy. This should always be a Tory freebie! Not only do Conservatives have a natural constituency for those who care about Canada’s international and security credibility, the Liberals’ disgraceful abuse of CIDA, the Canadian Forces, and our international reputation over

natural home for conservative politicians, the Canadian Conservatives have ceded this ground not only to the Liberals, but unbelievably, to Jack Layton. Prattling on about the need for “massive tax cuts,” while promising to match Liberal spending, special interest by special interest, and province by province, has not even persuaded the *National Post* editorial board.

Where is the Harper agenda on reversing sliding Canadian productivity, innovation, and advanced technology

- a big commitment to P3 partnerships in infrastructure
- a commitment to regional equity, while attacking current policy failures
- fighting for and rewarding productivity gains in both the public and private sector

Such a package would turn many “blue Grits” a bilious green.

It was our greatest Conservative prime minister who proposed, and then roundly defeated several times the Liberal antagonists of, the greatest explosion of public spending in Canadian history — the CPR. This was a Conservative public/private economic development extravagance that nearly bankrupted the nation.

After a summer locked into that grim Canadian political ritual of endless backyard barbecues, there were hints that Harper was beginning to get the ingredients of success. He shook up his personal staff, bringing in some younger, more pragmatic heads. He avoided stirring up his knuckle-draggers over the appointment of Michaëlle Jean. And he starred in a series of cleverly conceived new party TV commercials.

three decades gives a credible Conservative the opportunity of a “double whammy.” The political potential here is obvious, but let me only suggest two possible pledges:

- Canada will not fall below the top quartile in either military or development expenditure of the non-US NATO average, assessed on a rolling three-year basis. (This is a fancy way of saying Canada will pull its weight not simply in tons of rhetoric, but in real performance internationally.)
- A Canadian Security Council, an agency of Parliament, will be established, with members expert in the relevant fields. Nominated by government, approved by Parliament, it will advise and monitor government’s performance on all the dossiers important to the nation’s overall national security (a more accountable Canadian version of the British PM’s security “wise men” and the American National Security Council).

But it is the arena of economic policy competition that is the most humiliating for federal Conservatives. Second only to security policy as the

job creation? What is the Conservative message for increasingly squeezed Canadian middle-class families? The days when a Mike Harris or a Ralph Klein could promise tax cuts made up only of “wasted government spending” are long gone. Canadian voters know that spending cuts follow tax cuts, don’t insult them. Defend the cuts you would make.

Like New Democrats’ imitation of Carl Sagan’s “billyons and billyons” of lost corporate tax revenues, Conservatives’ claim to “slice the billions of dollars of government waste and corruption” as a source of new revenue causes most voters to simply shake their heads in disbelief.

Where is the Conservative commitment to a new Canadian economy based on:

- support for entrepreneurial export achievement
- performance-audited R&D spending
- tax reform focused on simplification and equity
- “Korean” levels and speeds of broadband access for all Canadians
- unified direct taxation — taxes on sales and consumption, not on income
- massive tax incentive to educational and health philanthropy

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The messages were mainstream — the struggle of working families for access to child care, health care and decent incomes. Sadly, the execution was painfully amateurish. That’s easy to fix, however. Professionalism in political communication only means you have to spend more: buy better talent and better production values.

If he can resist backsliding into childish “gotcha” slanging, if he can stay fixed in the centre right lane of the highway, perhaps, before the end of this strange political year, we will see a renascent Conservative leader and party.

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