
THE NEW REPUBLIC ONLINE

How Canada became a conservative nation.

North Country

by Gregory Levey

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The day after George W. Bush's reelection in 2004, I found my email inbox flooded with marriage proposals--not all of them in jest. As a Canadian living in New York, I had suddenly become a hot commodity to my despondent Democratic friends, who, along with most Americans, tend to think of their neighbor to the north as a bastion of liberalism. In the movie *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore portrayed Canada as the utopian wonderland long dreamt of by the MoveOn.org crowd, where gay marriage is legal and health care is universal. On the other side of the political spectrum, Pat Buchanan calls it "Soviet Canuckistan."

But, lately anyway, this perspective seems wildly anachronistic. For the past year, Canada has been governed by a Conservative Party whose policies and strategies might have come straight out of a Republican playbook. Stephen Harper, who took office last February, has a deep respect for the Bush administration and has introduced a hawkish foreign policy and a very conservative social and domestic agenda. This is not the Canada of my would-be-wives' fantasies.

In 2003, as the United States went to war against Iraq, Harper--then the Canadian opposition leader--published an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* repudiating the Canadian government's decision not to join the war. "This is a serious mistake," he wrote. "The Canadian Alliance--the official opposition in parliament--supports the American and British position because we share their concerns, their worries about the future if Iraq is left unattended to, and their fundamental vision of civilization and human values." Since taking the helm, his foreign policy has adhered to this worldview, and he has devoted considerable resources to beefing up Canada's military

capabilities in order to further it. This differs sharply with the Liberal governments that preceded him, which steadily eroded the country's military capacity and emphasized "soft power" and moderation in their approaches to conflict zones in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Though Canada has not sent troops to Iraq, in May the Harper government voted to extend and expand Canada's mission in Afghanistan, where an average of about 2000 troops have been deployed since 2001, despite the fact that Canadian soldiers there are being killed in vastly disproportionate numbers and the war is consequently becoming increasingly unpopular in Canada. It has also been far more supportive of Israel than its Liberal predecessors ever were. Harper's Canada was among the first Western countries to cut off aid to the Palestinian Authority after the election of the Hamas government last year. A few weeks ago, he called Hamas "genocidal" and reiterated that Canada would not deal with it. In September he single-handedly blocked a resolution of the Francophonie--the 53-member organization of French-speaking nations--that lamented Lebanese suffering during last summer's war between Israel and Hezbollah without mentioning the hardships endured by Israelis.

Lately, his government has even begun to take on Iran, which Harper has called "the biggest single threat the planet faces." In the fall, Canada sponsored a draft resolution in the United Nations critical of Iran's human-rights record, and Iran responded by attacking Canada's treatment of aboriginal people and immigrants. Since then, Iranian parliamentarians have dubbed the Canadian embassy in Tehran the "Den of Spies" and have accused it--perhaps not totally unreasonably--of acting as a proxy for the United States. On the Israel-Hezbollah war, meanwhile, Canada's foreign minister, Peter MacKay, said that Iran was "certainly behind much of the difficulty that's going on in the region by funding Hezbollah, by supporting them in terms of their activities against Israel. They have a great deal of responsibility and blood on their hands."

But the Harper government doesn't lean to the right only on foreign affairs. Domestically, it enthusiastically supports increasing the production of Canadian oil--over the objections of environmental groups--and has provided tax breaks to Canada's oil companies. It has also said that meeting Canada's obligations to decrease carbon emissions under the Kyoto Protocol would mean devastating the economy. It is no coincidence that a large part of the Conservative Party's electoral base is from the oil-rich West, from which Harper himself hails.

That base is also composed of a strong religious and socially conservative element,

who have never before been vocal in Canadian federal politics, but whose presence can be clearly felt in the government's current domestic agenda. Canada's legalization of gay marriage in 2005 energized this constituency, and they provided critical support to Harper's election bid last year. As if to acknowledge their backing, Harper finishes speeches with the words "God Bless Canada"--a phrase that sounds foreign, even jarring, to the average Canadian. He also surreptitiously appointed a group of social conservatives over the Christmas holiday to an important new committee charged with overseeing controversial medical practices like fertility treatment and stem-cell research. In parliament, the Conservative Party recently launched an effort to reevaluate gay marriage's legality. It is also cutting taxes and continuing its robust opposition to Canada's famously generous social programs, while working to deregulate many sectors of the economy along the libertarian lines favored by the prime minister.

If all this sounds a bit familiar, there is good reason for that. One of the most active conservative groups backing the current government is the Canadian arm of James Dobson's Focus on the Family, which has even featured Dobson in a radio campaign opposing gay marriage. Harper's Conservatives have also openly consulted with prominent Republican pollster and strategist Frank Luntz, who called Harper a "genuine intellectual, brilliant in his understanding of issues."

To be sure, Canada still has a long way to go before it becomes the Kansas of the North. The political divisions in Canada are analogous to those in the United States: While Harper enjoys strong support in rural areas, particularly in Canada's rugged Western provinces, he is less popular in ethnically-diverse cities like Toronto and Vancouver, and in French Canada. The new leader of Canada's Liberal Party, French-Canadian Stéphane Dion, is expected to challenge Harper in the next election--likely to come in the first half of this year--and he currently holds a narrow lead in opinion polls. But Harper still has a very real chance of winning reelection and continuing his conservative revolution. In a poll last summer, Canadians seemed to forget their dovish tendencies, overwhelmingly supporting the Harper government's criticism of Iran and support for Israel in its war with Hezbollah.

After the Democratic victory in the midterm elections and the conservative turn Canada has taken over the last year, I doubt many of my marriage proposals from 2004 are still on the table. But perhaps my inbox will now start to fill with queries

from Republicans.

Gregory Levey was Israel's United Nations speechwriter and senior foreign communications coordinator for Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert. He teaches at Ryerson University and is writing a book, *Shut up, I'm talking!*, about his experience in the Israeli government.

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