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Harper's hard right turn

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It says in all the papers the well has run dry. The commentators keep writing that Canadian conservatism has died on the vine, that four years into his reign of tactical obsession and fiscal profligacy, Stephen Harper has forgotten why he ever went into politics.

"Where's the big, strategic agenda for the next election?" John Ivison quoted a senior Conservative in the National Post. "I haven't found one yet." In the same paper, Terence Corcoran ran a string of columns identifying programs the feds should cut, because Harper seems unwilling to do the work himself. And [Andrew Coyne](#) delivered his annual post-budget verdict of despair and mourning. "Those Conservative faithfuls who have been hanging on all these years, in the hopes that, eventually, someday, with one of these budgets, this government would start to act like conservatives, must now understand that that is not going to happen. Conservatism is not just dead but, it appears, forgotten."

But it's a funny thing. If Canadian conservatism is dead, somebody forgot to tell Canadian conservatives.

Earlier this month, the Crowne Plaza hotel in downtown Ottawa played host to two consecutive conferences, a small one by the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada followed by a big one by the Manning Centre for Building Democracy. Both were well attended by current and former ministers, employees and strategists of the Harper government. Both drew energetic crowds of activists and ordinary people. Both gave free rein to an unabashed social conservatism that is rarely mentioned, and even less frequently championed, by even prominent fiscal conservatives in the big papers and magazines. And the mood at both gatherings was overwhelmingly optimistic, because the kind of conservatism that appeals to these organizations is demonstrably on the march in Ottawa and across Canada.

Look at the victories in only the past few months. At the quasi-governmental agency Rights and Democracy, a Harper-appointed board majority comprising unequivocal supporters of Israel's Likud government and evangelical Christian social activists began firing employees left over from an earlier, more secular regime.

Harper announced, in the vaguest terms, a new plan to make women and children overseas the focus of Canada's development assistance. When Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff insisted that such programs include funding for contraceptives and abortion, as they have consistently done under past Liberal and Conservative governments, Conservative MP Shelly Glover said no such schemes would be funded in the future. Bev Oda, the minister for CIDA, backed her up. When Ignatieff pushed back, he wound up on the front page of the Catholic Register newspaper next to the headline, "Ignatieff Urges Abortion for World's Poor."

In Winnipeg, the Christian charity Youth for Christ managed to secure \$3.2 million in federal infrastructure stimulus funding toward building an \$11.5-million community centre in one of the city's toughest neighbourhoods. Even without provincial support, which is usually sought for these stimulus projects, the Youth for Christ centre looks set to go ahead. NDP MP Pat Martin didn't like the idea of government money going to an organization that seeks converts. "What if this group was called Youth for Allah?" he asked.

(The project seems an odd fit for the Infrastructure Stimulus Fund, whose website says it will prefer "construction-ready" projects that can "be built during the 2009 and 2010 construction seasons." Youth for Christ declined to answer questions from on how quickly construction can begin and when it can be completed. However, a spokesman for John Baird, who is responsible for the infrastructure program, said Youth for Christ is committed to finish by March 31 next year—just inside the fund's final deadline.)

In Vancouver, the Insite safe-injection site for heroin addicts, which was once championed by federal Liberals like Allan Rock and Ken Dryden, learned Harper will appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada in his long-running legal battle to shut the centre down.

And throughout the two-month period of Parliament's prorogation, Justice Minister Rob Nicholson played a running blame game with Liberals over the slow progress of Conservative bills that would toughen penalties for a wide range of offences. Nicholson blamed the Liberals for stalling the bills. Each time, Liberal senators and MPs hurried to the nearest microphone to insist they shared the Conservatives' punitive philosophy and were, in fact, in a greater hurry than the Conservatives to pass the bills. It was an odd dynamic. The Liberals (and often the NDP) were at pains to give the Conservatives free rein to replace rehabilitation with punishment as a cornerstone of Canadian criminal justice.

Taken together, all this news gives heart to Canadian conservatives who vote on other matters besides budget balance. Of course, some of the biggest fights of

old—over abortion, gay marriage, the death penalty—remain far outside the bounds of ordinary political debate in Canada. Social conservatives have had to content themselves with incremental victory. But it had been many years since they could expect even that. Conservatives who vote on faith, family and criminal justice felt so left out by Brian Mulroney's governments that millions of them fled to Reform and smaller groups like the Christian Heritage party. Now they are back, rubbing elbows with power, not always running the show but never ignored. They have not had so much good news from Ottawa in half a century.

The Manning Centre's annual networking conference, organized by Reform party founding leader Preston Manning, ran a crowded exhibition hall. Firearms activists from the new Canadian Firearms Institute stood cheek by jowl with representatives of Dr. Charles McVety's Canada Family Action Coalition ("founded in early 1997 with a vision to see Christian principles restored in Canada") and campaign strategy consultancies run by former Conservative campaign officials. One, Responsive Management Group, tells potential clients that it "works exclusively with right-of-centre campaigns to design and execute integrated programs that use direct mail, the telephone and online tools to build relationships that deliver results for our clients." It boasts that it has helped elect over 400 conservative candidates and raised \$75 million for their campaigns. The group's founder, Michael Davis, won a Manning Centre Pyramid Award for Political Technology at the conference.

Earlier at the Institute of Marriage and Family gathering, a few dozen attendees listened to Miriam Grossman, a U.S. physician and author of *You're Teaching My Child What?: A Physician Exposes the Lies of Sex Ed and How They Harm Your Child*. "When sexual freedom reigns, sexual health suffers," she told the audience sternly. (Dave Quist, the institute's executive director and a former federal Conservative candidate, says the organization is the policy branch of the fundamentalist Christian group Focus on the Family Canada. And while Quist's group is notionally secular, it knows what kind of message it likes to hear.)

Then Mike Savage, the burly Liberal MP for Dartmouth-Cole Harbour, N.S., debated Diane Finley, the minister of human resources and skills development, on family policy. Savage is a friendly and plain-spoken fellow whose corny jokes about Sidney Crosby's lost hockey stick drew ready laughter, but he didn't stand a chance debating this issue in front of this crowd. Finley was defending the Universal Child Care Benefit, which delivers taxable \$100 monthly cheques to every Canadian parent to care for each child under 6. Savage was defending some approximation of Paul Martin's 2005 national child care program, which would pay for daycare centres for a smaller number of the nation's children.

A man in the audience asked Savage why parents should pay into such a program through their taxes if they were going to raise their own children at home. "I know a lot of people feel that way," Savage said, helplessly. "A lot of people felt that way

about universal health care in Canada. I think we'll be a stronger society when we have a national system of early learning and child care. And there's no question that it will benefit some families more than others. But that's your choice."

Finley, by contrast, was in her element. She quoted the institute's own research on child-rearing preferences chapter and verse. It's true that \$100 a month doesn't pay for luxury, she said, but sometimes folks just need to buckle down. "You know, parents need to make choices every single day. And we say that, well, they can't afford not to have both work. In some cases that's absolutely true. In other cases it's because parents have chosen a lifestyle." She pronounced the last word the way somebody else might pronounce "pestilence."

"When I grew up, we had one phone in the house, no extensions. It also functioned as the business phone. We had one car, we had one black and white television, no cellphone, no dishwasher, no microwave. No computer, no Internet. A lot of families expect that they should have all of those now. But I've met a lot of people, particularly in my riding, who tell me, 'No, we don't need all of those electronic things. What we need is time with our family.'" The audience applauded warmly.

In the crowd I spotted a fellow who sometimes does strategy work for the Harper Conservatives. I took him aside to ask about the contrast between the ink-stained fiscal conservatives of the press, who see so little to redeem this government, and the social conservative grassroots.

"The days of winning on economic conservatism are over," the Conservative adviser told me. "No real conservative government is going to win without having a significant portion of our agenda on social issues."

An election run on free trade, deficit reduction, tax cuts and productivity is one where any of the major national parties can appeal to voters who care about those issues—certainly the Liberals, under Jean Chrétien, Paul Martin or Michael Ignatieff, perhaps even one day the NDP. "If we have an election about deficits, it's going to be, do we get rid of them in three years or four years? It's not going to be, do we get rid of deficits or not?"

But social conservatism offers Harper what he has always coveted: a sharply divided electorate where he owns a sizable chunk of the voters and the other parties fight over what's left. My interlocutor reminded me that social conservatism is not always, or even often, an explicit appeal to religious values, because Harper sees social conservatism as a set of values that can reach voters across and beyond denominational boundaries, but simply a constant appeal to "education, children's welfare, family—the institutional foundations of our society."

In this context, the debate between Savage and Finley wasn't of merely anecdotal interest, the adviser said. "This is the future of conservatism. This is an absolutely fundamental question: do we take children out of homes so they can be raised by the state, or do we put money into homes so parents can raise them?"

It has been habitual in Liberal campaigns since 2000, when Jean Chrétien shut down the Canadian Alliance under Stockwell Day, to deliver dark warnings about a Conservative "hidden agenda" at odds with Canadian progressive values. This has been getting harder for two reasons. First, very little about what Harper is doing is hidden. Second, much of it is solidly in line with the values of millions of Canadians. Not the ones who used to be in power, to be sure. Just the ones who support this government.

For many years, Harris Decima pollster Allan Gregg has asked respondents whether they consider themselves conservatives, liberals or centrists, and he's also asked them how they vote. In recent years, he told the Manning Centre conference, the number of self-identified conservatives has been growing. But what's almost more interesting is that the political allegiance of self-identified centrists has shifted, too. In 1997, 41 per cent of centrists voted for the Chrétien Liberals. In 2008, 48 per cent voted for the Harper Conservatives. Two things have happened. As the population ages and is buffeted by polarizing events like the struggle against international terrorism, the centre has shifted rightward. And the Harper Conservatives have pushed the Liberals, sometimes with their hearty co-operation, off-centre.

Gregg found that 89 per cent of respondents, nearly everyone, agrees that "nothing is more important than family." Sixty-seven per cent agree that "marriage is, by definition, between a man and a woman," 60 per cent that "abortion is morally wrong."

For as long as he's been observing politics, many of them as a pollster for Progressive Conservative leaders Joe Clark and Brian Mulroney, Gregg has watched conservatives argue about whether to satisfy an activist base or reach out to a broader, less partisan coalition. Clark and Mulroney opted for the latter and their party did not long survive the fragmentation that ensued. The former strategy has its dangers, too: Conservatives could "set a ceiling on their support," a real concern to Harper as he consistently falls short of electoral majorities. But while the debate has been going on, "the centre has moved to become more conservative," Gregg said. So a strategy of explicit appeal to social conservatives is "much more available than it used to be."

You know who has provided the most elaborate analysis of that phenomenon? Stephen Harper. He delivered it in private, at a closed-door meeting of the conservative social group Civitas in April 2003, but a month later he published it in the now-defunct Citizens Centre Report magazine. Rereading it in the context of current politics is an uncanny experience.

Speaking as the new leader of a Canadian Alliance that had not yet merged with Peter Mackay's Progressive Conservatives, Harper argued that "on a wide range of public policy questions—including foreign affairs and defence, criminal justice and corrections, family and child care, and health care and social services—social values are increasingly the really big issues."

First, he said, "Conservatives have to give much higher place to confronting threats posed by modern liberals" to the family, a "building block of our society." That meant Conservatives must push hard on such issues as "banning child pornography, raising the age of sexual consent, providing choice in education and strengthening the institution of marriage."

Harper then laid out guidelines for choosing issues to fight on. First, the issues "should not be denominational, but should unite social conservatives of different denominations and even different faiths. It also helps when social conservative concerns overlap those of people with a more libertarian orientation."

Second, gains would have to be slow and incremental. Third, "rebalancing means there will be changes to the composition of the conservative coalition." "Old Conservatives" like Joe Clark might leave, as Clark soon did. But "many traditional Liberal voters, especially those from key ethnic and immigrant communities, will be attracted to a party with strong traditional views of values and family. This is similar to the phenomenon of the 'Reagan Democrats' in the United States." It is no coincidence—it is a keystone of Harper's strategy—that perhaps his closest cabinet ally is Jason Kenney, a devout Catholic and former federal Liberal in his student days who has been responsible for ethnic outreach since long before he became immigration minister.

Because it is incremental, Harper's social project is not close to being done. For next steps, many conservatives are turning to *Fearful Symmetry: The Fall and Rise of Canada's Founding Values*, a new book by Brian Lee Crowley, an economist and founder of the new Macdonald-Laurier Institute. Crowley does not regard himself as a social conservative. But many who do see themselves that way like what he's saying.

To caricature a complex argument, Crowley says the modern welfare state has overextended itself, is unsustainable, and causes more harm than good to institutions like the family. These trends will only get worse when an aging population sharply increases the cost of delivering most social programs. One size can no longer fit all. Social services will have to be narrowly aimed at those who need them most, and delivered only as long as recipients are willing to improve their behaviour by attending to their family, keeping or seeking a job, and so on. Government is no good at any of that and, in the opinion of most, shouldn't try.

"It is precisely for this reason, in my view, that we have seen in both the United States and the United Kingdom a growing use of the private sector, including the not-for-profit and so-called faith-based charities, for the delivery of social services," Crowley writes. "Such private agencies may be more demanding of their clientele and expect more in the way of improvements in behaviour."

Crowley's book was published last autumn. It seems to have been barely one step ahead of the news. This month's Throne Speech contained a single line saying the government "will look to innovative charities and forward-thinking private-sector companies to partner on new approaches to many social challenges."

Such charities and companies were much in evidence at the Manning Centre conference. The changes Crowley anticipates are expected and embraced by social conservatives. Meanwhile, the federal Liberals are still defending policies from five years ago, policies Harper has taken pains to ensure future federal governments won't be able to afford, with his GST cuts and his massive cash transfers to the provinces. If the Liberals cannot begin to make a case for a return to larger, more activist—and more expensive—state-run social welfare, then Stephen Harper's social conservative revolution will only accelerate.