

NATIONAL POST

Tories tune in as Ron Paul delivers; Abortion, drugs on polarizing hit list

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By Chris Selley

OTTAWA -Ron Paul received a quite rapturous reception at the Manning Networking Conference in Ottawa on Friday morning. It was as though the libertarian wing of the conservative audience was reacquainting itself with its id after seven years of Conservative governance, and was very much enjoying the reunion.

"I don't see people in groups. I don't see rights as designated like women's rights or gay rights or minority rights," Dr. Paul explained. "Everybody has an individual right to their life and they should be treated equally under the law.

"This is not because government says so. My belief is that it's a natural God-given right to your life and your liberty."

That was a big applause line. And whenever Dr. Paul's remarks wandered miles away from Canadian relevance -- the abandonment of central banking, say, or a country without income tax, or the idea that a crippling debt load will eventually make a peaceful small-government "revolution" not just desirable but unavoidable -- he would eventually return to fundamental feel-good principles: Small, frugal government, and individual liberty above all else.

"Ideologue" is an oft-used dirty word in Canadian politics, which is ludicrous because there aren't really any ideologues in Canadian politics. Perhaps that's what makes it so utterly refreshing to see a real ideologue in action. Ron Paul is a conservative and a libertarian who makes other self-described conservatives and libertarians squirm -- not because he's "out there," necessarily, but because he can be so alarmingly consistent.

There was palpable low ebb in audience enthusiasm when Dr. Paul stumped for the once-upon-a-time conservative principle of due process, for example. He lamented that it had all gone to hell after the 9/11 attacks. "When people become fearful, they are more willing to give up their liberties ... This whole idea that our President now believes that he can actually assassinate individuals, and has assassinated Americans, without due process -- that to me is very dangerous," he said.

"These are attacks on civil liberties that cannot persist. And yet people say, 'Well, they're terrorists.' Well they're not terrorists! They're suspects!"

There was no applause whatsoever for that, and in that sense, the audience was on-side with the post-9/11 Conservative/Liberal consensus that freedoms required significant abridgment in the name of security. Later, speaking with reporters, Dr. Paul warned of the perils of mandatory minimum sentences for non-violent offences, and seemed taken aback at the fact that Canada has no abortion law -- a situation that Stephen Harper swears blind he will not alter.

On other issues, though, the reaction to Dr. Paul's speech illustrated that it's the politicians who are off-side a good chunk of the conservative public. His forceful call for an end to laws telling people what they can "put in their mouths and put in their bodies" -- that is, for an immediate end to the War on Drugs -- got hearty applause. And that's hardly surprising. Last year Forum Research found that 59% of Conservative voters supported legalizing or decriminalizing marijuana possession. Yet on this front, the party they support is in absolute thrall to its social-conservative and authoritarian instincts. (In an afternoon panel, an audience member inquired of Tory minister Maxime Bernier, who had just finished preaching small government, why his government is bigger than ever after seven years in power. She was lustily applauded.)

A reporter later asked Reform party founder Preston Manning himself what we should make of a speech that was so well received, and yet so contrary to much of the Conservatives' modern agenda.

"What you should observe from this conference is that conservatives are not afraid of self-examination," he responded. "We don't just have conferences to self-congratulate ourselves on previously established positions."

That sounds nice, although the panel discussions I took in on Friday weren't exactly bursting with controversial ideas or vigorous disagreement. **Social-conservative Andrea Mrozek, of the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, pretty much agreed with libertarian Matt Bufton, of the Institute for Liberal Studies, that the government should keep its tentacles off the Canadian family.** Former Conservative cabinet minister Monte Solberg, a proud conservationist in the Ducks Unlimited mould, found common ground with Ezra Levant, who was billed as an "envirosceptic" but who does not, it turns out, support wanton despoiling of the landscape for its own sake. The Manning Centre's Nicholas Offord, moderating a panel on "breaking up the health-care monopoly," proudly noted that it featured no real contrary voice.

One interesting voice is pointedly absent from this weekend's proceedings, however: that of Tom Flanagan. He was dropped from the program amidst the frantic gang-denouncing that followed his controversial and artless musings over whether simple possession of child pornography was always harmful and proper grounds for incarceration.

Whatever one thinks of them, Mr. Flanagan's remarks hardly transcended the bounds of honest and vigorous intellectual debate; this is what made it so distressing to see the University of Calgary publicly condemn him. It certainly would have been heartening if the Manning Centre, which promises "big ideas for conservatives," had allowed him to speak.

Dr. Paul's well-received and radical positions on personal liberty cast the decision in an even more unflattering light, especially given that his was the keynote address.

As it happens, Dr. Paul himself is something of a heretic, albeit of a different sort, on the very issue that got Mr. Flanagan in trouble: He was one of just two congressmen to vote against the Securing Adolescents from Exploitation Online Act in 2007 (he objected to burdening owners of open wi-finetworks with a duty to report illegal activity), and one of eight (the other seven were Democrats) to vote against the Child Obscenity and Pornography Protection Act (he objected to outlawing "virtual" pornography, which he argued, "by definition, do[es] not involve the abuse or exploitation of children.") If the guest of honour can question a cherished tenet of the tough-on-crime agenda, why can't a legendary Canadian conservative thinker?

Mr. Manning, speaking to reporters, argued that he didn't want Mr. Flanagan's presence to "dominate the discussion." But Mr. Flanagan was to sit on a Friday afternoon panel on aboriginal policy, something he knows an awful lot about, and not anything remotely connected to the controversy. No doubt his uninvitation was for the best of the conservative movement, the promotion of which is, after all, the Manning Centre's *raison d'etre*. But as Ron Paul highlighted so effectively earlier in the day, the Canadian conservative movement has jettisoned more than a few bedrock principles to get where it is today. Hopefully, for the Conservative-supporters in attendance, it was worth it.

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