

The myth of conservative Canada

Much has been made of a purported rightward shift in Canadian values. But research shows that Canadians still want government in their lives, and a majority are not embracing conservative social values.

By Michael Adams
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Examining election results across the country in the past decade, one could certainly get an impression that Canada is becoming a more conservative country. Stephen Harper has now seen off three Liberal leaders and has governed since 2006. His Conservative Party, purged of many of its Progressive Conservative elements, won its coveted majority in 2011 with 39.6 percent of the popular vote.

In the Prime Minister's adoptive homeland of Alberta, long the bastion of provincial Progressive Conservatives, a harder-right strain of conservatism has emerged in the form of the Wildrose Party, resembling more the US Republican Party — with even a hint of the Tea Party — than any other political entity in Canada. In the recent (May 2013) British Columbia election, the incumbent centre-right Liberals prevailed over the New Democrats by stressing pro-business, pro-resource-development credentials. Premier Christy Clark trooped around the province in an assortment of hard hats to show her commitment to putting British Columbians back to work. Conservatives even rule in Toronto, where Rob Ford's right-wing populism is proving resilient as he continues to preside over what is supposedly Canada's great bastion of urban progressives, green roofs and rainbow flags.

Faced with these examples of voters choosing the conservative option, some observers have concluded that Canadian public opinion must be drifting rightward. The Manning Centre argues from its "Barometer" results that "Canadians continue to move — slowly but surely — to the right of the political spectrum." Pollster Darrell Bricker and journalist John Ibbitson contend in *The Big Shift: The Seismic Change in Canadian Politics, Business, and Culture and What It Means for Our Future* that a new force has emerged to supplant the "Laurentian Consensus," the Montreal-Ottawa-Toronto elites who operated an informal consensus that saw fit to sustain Liberal Party (or pale Red Tory imitation) rule throughout much of the 20th century. The new force Bricker and Ibbitson describe is a combination of the familiar conservative players of Old Canada (rural Canadians and the West) and "new Canada": the urban and suburban "multicultural melange" that is defined by immigrants whose numbers and economic clout are growing, and many of whom are seen as sharing Conservative values.

But is it really so? Have Canadians undergone a sea change in their values, adopting new attitudes toward the role of government, and social beliefs that will more often than not deliver power to conservative parties?

The evidence from our polling and social values research at Environics shows the contrary. Canadians are not calling for a dramatic retreat of government from our lives, nor do they show signs of embracing greater conservatism on social issues.

Definitions of conservatism vary, but small government and low taxes are widely accepted as conservative principles. Is distrust of government as an institution, or unwillingness to pay taxes to advance the work of government, widespread among the Canadian public? Are Canadians becoming more like many Americans in seeing government as wasteful and inefficient (if not downright evil), and in believing that to get something done properly — be it prisons or health insurance or education — it's best to leave government out of the picture?

We find little evidence of growing hostility toward government among Canadians. Our Focus Canada 2011 survey showed three-quarters of Canadians believe taxes are generally a positive thing, as opposed to one in five (19 percent) who think taxes are mostly a bad thing. Environics has been tracking this question since 2005 — through the economic crisis of 2008 and the ensuing years of first stimulus and then austerity rhetoric — and the responses to this question have remained more or less stable over that time.

Most Canadians are willing to chip in to the public coffers — in principle. But how confident are they about the way their money is managed once government gets its hands on it? Opinion is mixed on the efficacy of government, but Focus Canada 2011 showed just over half (53 percent) are more likely to agree with the statement “Government often does a better job than people give it credit for” than to believe that “government is almost always wasteful and inefficient” (42 percent). (In 2011, Pew Center research found Americans are markedly more skeptical of government, with 55 percent seeing government as generally wasteful and 39 percent believing government often gets a bad rap.)

Canadians believe governments have a vital role to play in society. A strong majority (68 percent) agree that “governments are essential to finding solutions to the important problems facing the country.” The proportion who might be sympathetic to Ronald Reagan's famous dictum that government is the problem, not the solution, is about a quarter: 27 percent of Canadians believe that “governments are more often than not the cause of important problems facing the country.”

One of the “important problems” Canadians believe the government has a role in addressing is inequality. A large majority (82 percent) agree either strongly (50 percent) or somewhat (32 percent) that “governments in Canada should actively find ways to reduce the gap between wealthy people and those less fortunate.” Majorities in all parties except the Conservative Party agree strongly with this idea, and even 37 percent of those who identify as Conservative supporters agree strongly with what conventional wisdom would see as a leftist aspiration.

Canadians want government to regulate business. In 2011, 7 in 10 (72 percent) believed either that current levels of government regulation are about right (49 percent) or that the government currently regulates business too little (23 percent). Only one in five (19 percent) believed government currently regulates business too much — down from 26 percent in 2004.

In short, Canadians tend to think government is reasonably effective in how it operates (although many see room for improvement); large majorities think government has an important role to play in addressing society's problems, including inequality and the excesses of the private sector;

and three-quarters are quite happy to fork over some of their own money to make a functioning government possible. These are not attitudes one would expect from a population that is utterly disgusted with public services or interested in burning government institutions to the ground.

Governments by no means have carte blanche from the public to grow in every direction. Asked in the simplest terms whether they prefer a bigger government that provides more services or a smaller government that provides fewer services, Canadians are divided: the proportion favouring bigger government (45 percent) exceeds the smaller-government camp (40 percent) only modestly.

The mid-20th-century heyday of big government is indeed behind us. Canadians do not want the public sector to deliver every service or solve every problem. But nor do Canadians have the kind of deep suspicion of all government endeavours that is evident south of the border. They see that many aspects of government work well, and they are likely to favour moderate reforms oriented toward efficiency over a sweeping privatization of services or drastic paring back of government functions. These attitudes have not changed much during the Harper government's time in power.

When Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird revealed his behind-the-scenes efforts to oppose anti-gay policies signed into law in Russia in June, the socially conservative lobby group REAL Women of Canada condemned him as a "left-wing elitist" who is out of step with "grassroots Canada." Unless "grassroots Canada" excludes the majority of Canadians, REAL Women is mistaken: Minister Baird's work on this file fits quite nicely with public attitudes. Social values research as well as polling indicates that Canadians are becoming more socially liberal; more at ease with diverse family models, diverse sexual orientations and gender identities; and generally more comfortable with sexuality, in real life and in popular culture.

EnviroNics Research Group's social values research differs from standard polling in that instead of tracking attitudes on the issues of the day, it seeks to measure the orientations that underlie those attitudes, such as deeply held convictions about concepts like authority and fairness. Unlike the colloquial use of the term "values" (defining what is inherently good), our methodology defines values more neutrally, as deeply held beliefs about how the world works (for instance, whether violence is accepted as an inevitable part of society). In our values surveys, the value "flexible families" (which tracks openness to a range of family models) has been among the values whose prevalence has grown most. And then, on sexism, saying "Fewer Canadians have scored high on the value Sexism, while more Canadians have scored high on the value Sexual Permissiveness."

Standard polling also offers evidence of growing social liberalism in Canada. Since Canada legalized same-sex marriage, support for the policy has only increased. The last time we tracked this item, in 2010, we found almost 7 in 10 Canadians (68 percent) supported same-sex marriage — with 43 percent expressing strong support, while strong opposition stood at 20 percent, a decline of about 10 points over the past decade. In the United States, the Pew Center found this year that among the one in two Americans who support same-sex marriage, 28 percent have changed their minds to come to their position. Open-ended questions that have asked Americans

to state reasons for this change have found a range of reasons, including that someone close to them had come out, or that they simply stopped feeling that it was a big deal.

Although no data have been gathered on the extent to which Canadians have switched positions on this issue, the pace of change in attitudes on same-sex marriage north of the border has been sufficiently brisk that many Canadians must also have experienced a change of heart. And intergenerational social change continues to move toward support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights: a large majority of young people (79 percent of those aged 18 to 29) are positive about same-sex marriage.

If members of REAL Women think that's bad news, they should see the numbers on abortion rights. Three-quarters of Canadians (74 percent) agree that "any woman who wants to have an abortion should be able to have one," while 22 percent disagree. This proportion has risen considerably since the early 1990s, when a slim majority of the population (55 or 56 percent from 1990 through 1993) agreed and proportions in the high 30s (37 or 38 percent in the same period) disagreed.

Canadians remain the same socially liberal people they have been for the past several decades. Savvy conservative politicians likely recognize this. Stephen Harper has steered well clear of most hot-button social issues, and indeed he has been so committed to this course that his nearest brush with back-bench mutiny arose out of his refusal to permit Langley MP Mark Warawa to introduce a private member's bill on sex-selective abortion. When the time comes to feed the base, Harper is more likely to turn to Senate reform or tough-on-crime measures than to abortion or gay rights. When the Prime Minister does make a policy change suited to the social conservatism of his party's base, it is likely to be in the projection of values abroad. His government's choices of which international health-promotion initiatives to fund appear driven to some extent by moral and/or religious conviction: a maternal health foreign aid initiative was first announced as excluding both contraception and abortion (the government later indicated that contraception would be funded).

Even Wildrose Party leader Danielle Smith is careful not to inflame the moderate public by attacking minority groups such as the LGBT community. Instead, Smith has emphasized what she calls the "conscience rights" of public servants who do not wish to perform same-sex marriages because of personal convictions. This approach attempts to cast religious conservatives as an embattled minority, thereby avoiding the unpopular stance of denying full legal rights to same-sex couples. We will never know whether this soft sell of social conservatism would have worked for a plurality of Albertans in 2012, since Wildrose eventually became associated not with Smith's party line but with some of its candidates' harder-edged stances, including one candidate's musing in a blog post that gays and lesbians were headed toward an eternity in the "lake of fire."

The Alberta election gave Wildrose schooling in the realities of contemporary Canadian politics. The social conservatism articulated by its "rogue" candidates reflected a white, Christian conservatism that landed with a thud in an Alberta that is more comfortable and tolerant than its ancient caricature, and which has a popular Muslim mayor in its financial hub. The real question

is whether Canadian conservatism has evolved into a brand that can appeal to an ethnically and religiously diverse and largely urban and suburban electorate.

Canada has one of the highest immigration rates in the world. It has the highest proportion of foreign-born residents of any G8 country, and ranks not far behind Australia in the proportion of its population born elsewhere (20.6 percent of Canadians were born elsewhere, as compared with 26.8 percent of Australians). One of the great successes of Canada's immigration program to date has been the extent to which immigrants have become citizens. Of the world's major immigrant-receiving countries, Canada has traditionally had one of the highest naturalization rates, with large majorities of migrants being motivated — and encouraged — to become full citizens with rights identical to those of any other Canadian. Equipped with voting rights and the ability to run for elected office, immigrants have a large potential impact on the country's politics through their political choices.

Clearly Multiculturalism Minister (and former Citizenship and Immigration minister) Jason Kenney believed there was enough overlap between his party's values and the outlooks of new Canadians that it was worth courting these newcomers, who might once have been assumed to be "natural" Liberals.

Many newcomers to Canada arrive from countries with more socially conservative cultures, where patriarchal authority is more widely assumed, where sexual modesty is more closely observed and where gay rights are nascent at best.

Conventional wisdom also posits that because many people migrate in search of economic opportunity, immigrants to Canada will want to keep the fruits of their hard work, and therefore demand low taxes. As Bricker and Ibbitson put it in *The Big Shift*, immigrants are not so much concerned with "community supports, the environment, and international engagement" — the kinds of mushy things that complacent multigenerational Canadians care about — but rather are looking for more tangible, private goodies: "the suburban dream of a garage, a big back yard and maybe even a swimming pool."

In short, proponents of the emerging Canadian conservatism argue that immigrants lean "conservative," both socially and fiscally. And there are some data to fuel the hypothesis. Qualitative research suggests that newcomers — especially the two largest groups, South Asian and Chinese newcomers — are focused on their children's education, oriented to saving money and attracted to small-business opportunities.

And yet the image of the immigrant "striver" focused solely on economic mobility is outdated. These days, ambitious young Indian or Chinese professionals stand to experience much greater success in their home countries than in Canada. Those who abandon booming Asian economies for a life in Canada are not thinking only of dollars and cents; if they were, they would be more likely to stay at home. Many immigrants may be coming now for other reasons: perhaps they are seeking a lower-stress, less feverishly competitive life for themselves and their children. If immigrants to Canada are increasingly motivated by quality-of-life factors — not just jobs and tax incentives — then traditional Canadian priorities such as "community supports, the environment, and international engagement" might not be such laughable ideas after all.

In April 2013, Environics Research Group conducted research on behalf of the Broadbent Institute to explore the attitudes of the foreign-born and the Canadian-born toward the role of government. The study found remarkable alignment between the two populations. For instance, the survey posed the question “How personally willing would you be to pay slightly higher taxes if that’s what it would take to protect and improve our social programs like health care, pensions and access to post-secondary education?” Six in 10 of those born in Canada (60 percent) say they would be willing to pay higher taxes. Among those born elsewhere, attitudes are identical (61 percent).

Immigrants also seem to have drunk the Canadian Kool-Aid on publicly funded universal health care. Asked if they would prefer “a system based on people paying lower taxes but having to buy some of their own private health insurance” or “a system based on people paying higher taxes but having access to universal public health insurance,” 69 percent of immigrants chose the high-tax public option. The proportion of the Canadian-born who expressed the same preference is just three points higher (72 percent).

On social issues, differences between the Canadian-born and the foreign-born are somewhat greater. On questions about same-sex marriage, abortion and marijuana use, the gaps in rates of agreement among the Canadian-born and the foreign-born range from 10 to 15 points, with the greatest difference over abortion.

Yet attitudes begin to converge as migrants spend more time in Canada. For instance, 63 percent of those born in Canada agree strongly that “if a woman wants to have an abortion, the decision should be between her and her doctor.” (An additional 2 in 10 agreed somewhat.) Among those born elsewhere, strong agreement with this statement is considerably lower but still a substantial 48 percent. Much of that gap, however, can be accounted for by those who have been in Canada for 10 years or less: just 37 percent of those people believe strongly that abortion is a choice between a woman and her doctor. Among those who have been in Canada 11 years or more, 55 percent hold this conviction strongly. That is a majority, and just eight percentage points off the rate of strong agreement among those born in Canada.

Recent immigrants — and especially those from more conservative societies — do seem to hold more conservative attitudes when they first arrive in Canada. But their conservatism is neither so strong nor so durable that they are likely to exert a strong rightward pull on Canadian politics over the long term.

There is no doubt the federal Conservatives have made impressive inroads with immigrant and ethno-cultural minority populations over the past several years, broadening their tent and steering clear of any hint of racism or xenophobia, and they are being rewarded with some suburban ridings with large concentrations of newcomers.

The Conservatives have been deft. Is there any other country in the world in which the most right-wing candidate on offer would embrace immigration and affirm a commitment to multiculturalism, as Stephen Harper has? Led by Jason Kenney, the Conservatives have not only

avoided xenophobia, they have done their homework and made targeted appeals to ethnic communities.

But in addition to being rewarded for their outreach efforts, Conservatives get a boost simply from being the party in power when immigrants arrive, just as the Liberals once benefited from incumbency among newcomer groups. To consolidate the gains they have made among immigrants and minority groups, the Conservatives will need more than a Canadian-born point person like Kenney selling smart policies; they will also need more first-class candidates from all ethnic groups.

Canada's immigrant landscape is too large and too complex to be seen as an easy slam-dunk for any one party. The youngish, highly educated, globally connected people our immigration program attracts do not always fit the stereotype of the immigrant striver or the conservative patriarch trying to maintain control over his family in a land of loose morals and low necklines. Many immigrants are even attracted to Canada because they like our moderately progressive political culture and our commitment to autonomy and diversity; for these people, making Canada more conservative and religious so it feels more like their country of origin is the precise opposite of their objective in coming here.

So if Canadians are so fiscally moderate and socially progressive, why are we getting electoral signals from across the country that seem to indicate a greater openness to conservative policies and ideas? Our answer: right-wing parties govern from the centre. The federal Conservatives, first elected largely to punish Liberal arrogance and corruption (not Liberal policies), have kept the more extreme instincts of their right-wing base under wraps. Harper has largely avoided sensitive social issues and has instead trumpeted his credentials on economic leadership.

And even on fiscal matters, the government has been moderate. Instead of drastically reducing spending, it has shuffled Ottawa's spending priorities and introduced changes that will make it more difficult for government to grow in the future, such as the reduction of the GST by two points. Its attacks on things like the census, research-focused NGOs and environmental monitoring have troubled those who care about evidence-based policy-making. But these things do not keep most Canadians up at night. To the extent that the government has touched social programs, it has often described its changes in terms like "closing loopholes" and "preventing abuse," positioning its changes as pragmatic, not programmatic.

Yet even with these nods to moderation, the percentage of voters who support the federal Conservatives appears to have topped out in the high 30s. Stephen Harper may harbour ambitions of a new conservative era for Canadian politics. But he won his majority thanks to studied moderation, astute strategy and tactics, and the mathematical contribution of a persistently fragmented centre-left. The Conservative Party was not propelled to power or kept in government because of a sea change in Canadian values or attitudes. The Canadian electorate remains largely attached to the values that have shaped the country. It is this still largely progressive Canadian electorate that is holding conservative governments to the centre.

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