



Stephen Harper, “Rediscovering The Right Agenda,” remarks to the Civitas meeting, Toronto, 25 April 2003

The Canadian Alliance wrapped up its leadership race a little over one year ago. At the time, the chattering classes told us the race was about the so-called “unity” issue — the question of whether we should have one “conservative” party or two. But I asked the 100,000-plus members of our party a different question: do we actually stand for something, or don’t we?

I posed this question because what Alliance members feared most was seeing our agenda slipping away. Simply put, our members worried less about having two so-called “conservative parties” than about having no conservative party at all.

I believe the majority of members supported my leadership bid for approaching the debate in these terms. My mandate as leader is therefore to ensure that the Alliance remains a strong and principled voice for conservatism in national politics.

OUR HISTORY AND THE OPTIONS TODAY

There are two ways conservatives can respond to the challenges faced at the national level. Our party has explored both over the years, in two important phases. These two phases were not “Reform” and “Alliance”: they were not about name or organizational changes.

Rather, our party underwent one period in which it was policy-driven, and another period in which it was process-driven. In the policy-driven phase, the party emphasized what it stood for. It took stands on a litany of issues, from its fight against the Meech Lake/Charlottetown constitutional agenda, to the battle for deficit reduction, lower taxes and fiscal responsibility. This was the period in which the party grew from nothing to become an important electoral and parliamentary force.

However, for the past half-decade or so, the party moved into a phase in which it emphasized process. Specifically, the party focused its energies on a process by which it could garner greater electoral success. This was called “coalition building.” In practice, it involved disassembling the party’s institutional

structures in order to bring in new supporters from other entities. In terms of policy, conferences were held to create and sell a new “vision.” In practice, this amounted largely to making existing policy stands vague or simply invisible. Whatever the electoral potential of this approach promised by the polls, the results were clearly going in the opposite direction.

Those two options still confront us today. One option is to work within an existing political party to create a conservative “coalition.” In my judgment this option is the way to go, and the best vehicle to do it is the Canadian Alliance.

I also believe that a combination of existing political parties, such as the Alliance and the PCs, could potentially be an ever better vehicle. But that is not Joe Clark’s opinion. It appears not to be Peter MacKay’s. In fact, there is no guarantee or likelihood it will ever be the opinion of a federal PC leader. They seem to prefer to use the PC Party to build their own coalition.

While I may disagree with the Tories choice, it certainly makes more sense than the other option — to work outside both entities and, in the name of “uniting the right,” to promote their mutual failure. To use George W. Bush’s phrase, whatever your political objective or party, electoral success requires a “coalition of the willing” and nothing less.

THE CONSERVATIVE COALITION

Whatever attraction a coalition of parties may have, we need to concentrate on what is actually doable. That is, we need to form a coalition of voters and, to attract them, a coalition of ideas.

What is the “conservative coalition” of ideas? Actually, conservatism and conservative parties, as we've known them over the decades, have always been coalitions. Though these coalitions are complex and continually shifting, two distinctive elements have long been identifiable.

Ted Byfield labelled these factions “neo-con” and “theo-con.” More commonly, they are known simply as economic conservatives and social conservatives. Properly speaking, they are called classical or enlightenment liberalism and classical or Burkean conservatism.

The one called “economic conservatism” does indeed come from classical liberalism. Its primary value is individual freedom, and to that end it stresses private enterprise, free trade, religious toleration, limited government and the rule of law.

The other philosophy is Burkean conservatism. Its primary value is social order. It stresses respect for customs and traditions (religious traditions above all), voluntary association, and personal self-restraint reinforced by moral and legal sanctions on behaviour.

The essence of this conservatism is, according to Russell Kirk, “the preservation of the ancient moral traditions of humanity. Conservatives respect the wisdom of their ancestors: they are dubious of wholesale alteration. They think society is a spiritual reality, possessing an eternal life but a delicate constitution: it cannot be scrapped and recast as if it were a machine.”

In the 19th century, these two political philosophies, classical liberalism and Burkean conservatism, formed the basis for distinct political parties that opposed one another. On the one side was a liberal party in the classical sense — rationalist, anticlerical but not anti-religious, free-trading, often republican and usually internationalist. On the other side was an older conservative party — traditionalist, explicitly or implicitly denominational, economically protectionist, usually monarchist, and nationalistic.

In the 20th century, these opposing forces came together as a result of two different forces: resistance to a common enemy, and commitment to ideas widely shared.

The common enemy was the rise of radical socialism in its various forms. In this context, Burkean conservatives and classical liberals discovered a commitment to a core of common ideas. Both groups favoured private property, small government and reliance on civil society rather than the state to resolve social dilemmas and to create social process. Domestically, both groups resisted those who stood for public ownership, government interventionism, egalitarian redistribution and state sponsorship of secular humanist values. Internationally, they stood unequivocally against external enemies — fascism, communism and socialist totalitarianism in all its forms.

THE VICTORY AND DECLINE OF CONSERVATISM

For decades, conservative parties were successful, often dominant, coalitions in western democracies. But conservatism has been in trouble in recent years. Partisan success has been much less common. In some countries, the traditional conservative coalition even appears to have broken down.

The irony is that these hard times have fallen on the heels of perhaps the most successful period in democratic conservatism's history — the Reagan and Thatcher revolutions. I believe that it is this very success that is at the heart of the current difficulties.

The Reagan-Thatcher revolution was so successful that it permanently undermined the traditional social-democratic/left-liberal consensus in a number of democratic countries. It worked domestically to undermine the left-liberal or social-democratic consensus, causing those parties to simply stop fighting and adopt much of the winning conservative agenda. Socialists and liberals began to stand for balanced budgeting, the superiority of markets, welfare reversal, free trade and some privatization. At the same time, the fall of the Berlin Wall signalled the collapse of Soviet Communism as a driving world force, depriving conservatives of all shares of a common external enemy.

It is critical we realize that this breakdown is not a fundamental incompatibility between “neo-cons” and “theo-cons,” between economic and social conservatism. Even in the worst-case example, Canada's Mulroney coalition did not break up because of divisions between these groups. Rather, it broke up over regional and constitutional questions, and the abandonment of both forms of conservatism. In fact, the strongest economic and social conservatives both found homes within the Reform and Canadian Alliance parties.

The truth is that strong economic and social conservatives are more often than not the same people, and not without reason. Except at the extremes of libertarianism and theocracy, the philosophical fusion has become deep and wide-spread. Social conservatives more often than not demand the government stop intervening in individual decisions, just as classical liberals often point to the religious roots of their focus on the individual. As the American humourist P.J. O'Rourke observed, “the great religions teach salvation as an individual matter. There are no group discounts in the ten commandments, Christ was not a committee, and Allah does not welcome believers into paradise saying, ‘you weren't much good yourself, but you were standing near some good people.’”

O'Rourke also summarized the moral and civilizing importance of markets by reminding us that “the rise of private enterprise and trade provided a means of achieving wealth and autonomy other than by killing people with broadswords.” Private enterprise and trade, as Adam Smith pointed out, can turn individual

selfishness into useful social outcomes. In fact, the founder of classical liberal economics came to his theories as much by his study of moral philosophy as anything else.

A NEW CHALLENGE AND A NEW RESPONSE

What this means for conservatives today is that we must rediscover the common cause and orient our coalition to the nature of the post–Cold-War world.

The real enemy is no longer socialism. Socialism as a true economic program and motivating faith is dead. Yes, there are still lots of statist economic policies and people dependent on big government. But the modern left-liberal economic philosophy has become corporatism. Corporatism is the use of private ownership and markets for state-directed objectives. Its tools are subsidization, public/private partnerships and state investment funds. It is often bad policy, but it is less clearly different from conventional conservative economics than any genuine socialism.

The real challenge is therefore not economic, but the social agenda of the modern Left. Its system of moral relativism, moral neutrality and moral equivalency is beginning to dominate its intellectual debate and public-policy objectives.

The clearest recent evidence of this phenomenon is seen in international affairs in the emerging post–Cold-War world — most obviously in the response of modern liberals to the war on terrorism. There is no doubt about the technical capacity of our society to fight this war. What is evident is the lack of desire of the modern liberals to fight, and even more, the striking hope on the Left that we actually lose.

You can see this if you pay close attention to the response to the war in Iraq from our own federal Liberals and their cheerleaders in the media and the universities. They argue one day that there are no weapons of mass destruction, yet warn that such weapons might be used. They tell us the war was immoral, then moral but impractical, then practical but unjustified. They argue simultaneously that the war can't be won, that it is too easy for the coalition to win and that victory cannot be sustained anyway. Most striking was their obvious glumness at the fall of Baghdad. But even previous to that were the dark suggestions on the anniversary of September 11 (hinted at even by our own prime minister) that “we deserved it.”

This is particularly striking given the nature of the enemy here, the bin Ladens and the Husseins, individuals who embody in the extreme everything the Left purports to oppose — fundamentalism, fascistic nationalism, misogyny, bigotry.

Conservatives need to reassess our understanding of the modern Left. It has moved beyond old socialistic morality or even moral relativism to something much darker. It has become a moral nihilism — the rejection of any tradition or convention of morality, a post-Marxism with deep resentments, even hatreds of the norms of free and democratic western civilization.

This descent into nihilism should not be surprising because moral relativism simply cannot be sustained as a guiding philosophy. It leads to silliness such as moral neutrality on the use of marijuana or harder drugs mixed with its random moral crusades on tobacco. It explains the lack of moral censure on personal foibles of all kinds, extenuating even criminal behaviour with moral outrage at bourgeois society, which is then tangentially blamed for deviant behaviour. On the moral standing of the person, it leads to views ranging from radical responsibility-free individualism, to tribalism in the form of group rights.

Conservatives have focused on the inconsistency in all of this. Yet it is actually disturbingly consistent. It is a rebellion against all forms of social norm and moral tradition in every aspect of life. The logical end of this thinking is the actual banning of conservative views, which some legislators and “rights” commissions openly contemplate.

In this environment, serious conservative parties simply cannot shy away from values questions. On a wide range of public-policy questions, including foreign affairs and defence, criminal justice and corrections, family and child care, and healthcare and social services, social values are increasingly the really big issues.

Take taxation, for example. There are real limits to tax-cutting if conservatives cannot dispute anything about how or why a government actually does what it does. If conservatives accept all legislated social liberalism with balanced budgets and corporate grants - as do some in the business community - then there really are no differences between a conservative and a Paul Martin.

There is, of course, much more to be done in economic policy. We do need deeper and broader tax cuts, further reductions in debt, further deregulation and privatization, and especially the elimination of corporate subsidies and industrial-development schemes. In large measure, however, the public arguments for doing so have already been won. Conservatives have to move more than modern liberals in a hurry.

The truth of the matter is that the real agenda and the defining issues have shifted from economic issues to social values, so conservatives must do the same.

REVISING THE AGENDA

This is not as difficult as it sounds. It does not require a radical redefinition of conservatism, but rather a shifting of the balance between the economic and social conservative sides that have always been there.

In particular, Canadian conservatives need to rediscover the virtues of Burkean conservatism as a key component of that balance. Rediscovering this agenda, to paraphrase Ted Byfield, means not just worrying about what the state costs, but also worrying about what the state values.

For example, we need to rediscover Burkean or social conservatism because a growing body of evidence points to the damage the welfare state is having on our most important institutions, particularly the family. Conservatives have to give much higher place to confronting threats posed by modern liberals to this building block of our society.

Take, for example, the debate over the rights of parents to discipline their children — the so-called spanking debate. Of course, there are legitimate limits to the use of force by parents — limits outlined in the Criminal Code. Yet the most recent Liberal Throne Speech, as part of its “children’s agenda,” hinted at more government interference in the family. We saw the capacity for this abuse of power in the events that took place in Aylmer, Ont. Children there were seized for no reason other than the state disagreed with the religious views of their parents. No conservative can support this kind of intrusion, and conservatives have an obligation to speak forcefully against such acts.

This same argument applies equally to a range of issues involving the family (all omitted from the Throne Speech), such as banning child pornography, raising the age of sexual consent, providing choice in education and strengthening the institution of marriage. All of these items are key to a conservative agenda.

We also need to rediscover Burkean conservatism because the emerging debates on foreign affairs should be fought on moral grounds. Current challenges in dealing with terrorism and its sponsors, as well as the emerging debate on the goals of the U.S. as the sole superpower, will be well served by conservative insights on preserving historic values and moral insights on right and wrong. As we have seen in recent months, these are debates where modern liberals (with the exception of Tony Blair) have no answers: they are trapped in their framework of moral neutrality, moral relativism and moral equivalence.

But conservatives should have answers. We understand, however imperfectly, the concept of morality, the notion that moral rules form a chain of right and duty, and that politics is a moral affair. We understand that the great geopolitical battles against modern tyrants and threats are battles over values. We can disagree vehemently with the values of our civilization's opponents, but that does not deny the validity of the cause in their eyes. Without clear values ourselves, our side has no purpose, no meaning, no chance of success.

Conservatives must take the moral stand, with our allies, in favour of the fundamental values of our society, including democracy, free enterprise and individual freedom. This moral stand should not just give us the right to stand with our allies, but the duty to do so and the responsibility to put “hard power” behind our international commitments.

SOME CAUTIONS FOR POLITICAL SUCCESS

Rebalancing the conservative agenda will require careful political judgment. First, the issues must be chosen carefully. For example, the social conservative issues we choose 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, we must realize that real gains are inevitably incremental. This, in my experience, is harder for social conservatives than for economic conservatives. The explicitly moral orientation of social conservatives makes it difficult for many to accept the incremental approach. Yet, in democratic politics, any other approach will certainly fail. We should never accept the standard of just being “better than the Liberals” — people who advocate that standard seldom achieve it — but conservatives should be satisfied if the agenda is moving in the right direction, even if slowly.

Third, rebalancing means there will be changes to the composition of the conservative coalition. We may not have all the same people we have had in the past. The new liberal corporatist agenda will appeal to some in the business community. We may lose some old “conservatives,” Red Tories like the David Orchards or the Joe Clarks.

This is not all bad. A more coherent coalition can take strong positions it wouldn't otherwise be able to take — as the Alliance alone was able to do during the Iraq war. More importantly, a new approach can draw in new people. 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, who were so important in the development of that conservative coalition.

CONCLUSION

To be successful as a conservative party — indeed, to have any success at all — the Canadian Alliance must be driven primarily by policy, not by process. I have written many times that the Reform Party and Canadian Alliance made gains in the past by taking principled conservative stands on the issues of the day. I believe our party has been doing that under my leadership on a range of issues — from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to defence and foreign policy, taxes and spending, childcare and criminal justice, healthcare reform, and even on environmental matters like the Kyoto accord.

The rediscovery of the conservative agenda requires us to maintain the coalition of ideas that is the heritage of enlightenment liberalism and Burkean conservatism. Yet contemporary reality requires us to re-emphasize the Burkean tradition as a key part of our conservative agenda. In other words, while retaining a focus on economic issues, we must give greater place to social values and social conservatism, broadly defined and properly understood.

Eight years ago, I wrote that the Reform Party had to become the principal force in the democratic Right in Canadian politics by adapting contemporary issues to a new conservatism. This remains the essential task of the Canadian Alliance — to unify conservatives in a broad coalition of conservative ideas.

...