

**Conservative Christianity, Sexual Diversity,
and the Strategic Dilemma Facing the
Conservative Party of Canada**

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Preface

In the preparation of this paper, I benefitted substantially from the advice of colleagues in the U of T Political Science department, and especially Jim Farney and Chris Cochrane of the Ph.D. program. I also benefitted immeasurably from two confidential interviews undertaken for this paper in particular. I am grateful to a significant number of legislators, reporters, academics, and activists in Alberta who I interviewed confidentially some years ago, and who helped shape my views about the complex position that Canadian politicians can place them in when they try to appeal simultaneously to neo-liberal and morally-conservative constituencies. That research was undertaken with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Introduction

The high profile acquired by debates over the public recognition of sexual diversity in Canada have exposed tension between and within parties on the right that will not easily disappear. The tensions within the present-day Conservative Party of Canada are typical of right parties in other western industrialized countries. This is especially obvious on issues such as lesbian/gay marriage, in part because of shifts of public opinion towards more inclusive attitudes, though at the core of the dilemma are ideological contradictions between moral conservatism and neo-liberalism.

Such contradictions lay beneath the surface in the Reform Party, a late 1980s western Canada-based breakaway from the Progressive Conservative Party. They are even more evident within the re-configured Conservative party that resulted from the merger of these two forces in 2004. At the federal and provincial levels, Canada's partisan right has been more preoccupied with undercutting the welfare state and reducing state capacity than with moral issues, but it relies on a religious constituency that will not easily allow it to forget a moral agenda.

In the United States, morally and economically conservative constituencies often pull the Republican Party in contrasting directions, but there is greater ideological overlap between the core of the moral and economic right in the U.S. than there is in virtually any western industrialized country, largely as a result of highly individualistic currents in American Protestantism. The sheer numbers of America's religious conservatives also make open electoral pitches to them more attractive electorally than elsewhere.

Religious conservatism has emerged as an important current within Canada's partisan right, with stronger activist networks than ever, and a demonstrated capacity to break away from broad coalitional parties. It is an ideological and activist force, then, that cannot be easily ignored. The Conservative Party leadership has shown strategic skill in "managing" the religiously-conservative minority in Parliament and the electorate, though sexuality issues continue testing the strength of the coalition it has built.

Winning Marriage Rights

Through the 1990s, most of the rights and obligations associated with marriage were extended to de facto same-sex couples, with claimants building on a decades-long extension of such recognition to cohabiting heterosexual couples. These changes occurred in both federal and provincial/territorial law, sometimes by statute, other times by court interpretation (Rayside 2008). There was some unevenness across provinces, but by the early 2000s, all but a few of the legal consequences of marriage applied to lesbian and gay couples, including most of those associated with parenting (not achieved at that time anywhere in northwestern Europe).

Until this time, marriage had been deliberately left off the agendas of major activist networks in Canada, in order to focus on the substantive recognition associated with it. But now the symbolic second-class status associated with marriage loomed even larger, and quickly the issue

moved into higher profile, with court challenges launched in one province after another.¹

In June 2003, an appeal court in Ontario ruled that the exclusion of same-sex couples from civil marriage contravened Section 15 of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms (not the first court in Canada to do so), and then surprised most observers by declaring that its judgement was to take immediate effect.² Knowing it would lose, the federal government chose not to appeal the ruling to the Supreme Court of Canada, and courts across the country opened up civil marriage to same-sex couples. Finally, in 2005, the federal Liberal government secured passage of a bill that redefined marriage explicitly so as to allow for gays and lesbians to marry.

Re-Configuring Canada's Partisan Right

Canada's has distinct party systems at the federal and provincial level, with differentiation between the two levels growing steadily for over the last half-century. At the federal level, the party system has undergone radical change since the 1980s. For much of Canada's post-confederation history, two dominant parties "brokered" regional and other interests. The Liberals and Conservatives (later the Progressive Conservatives) were centrist, each of them centre-right on some policy fronts and centre-left on others. At various times, other "third" parties would successfully contest parliamentary seats – the New Democratic Party taking up this position on the left for most of the post-World War II period.

In the 1980s and early '90s, the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives shifted to the right on economic issues, social spending, and taxation – even if not as radically as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. During most of this period, Brian Mulroney's Conservatives stayed in power by building a coalition anchored by economically moderate or conservative Quebec nationalists and a western-Canadian right marked by both moral conservatism and economic neo-liberalism.

The strains inherent in this coalition spawned two new parties in the late 1980s. One was the Bloc Québécois, a federal counterpart to the sovereigntist Parti Québécois. The other was the western-based Reform Party, founded by Preston Manning, the evangelical son of a former Premier of Alberta. Reform sought a reduced state (especially at the federal level), and opposed "special treatment" for Quebec, cultural and ethnic minorities, Aboriginals, and sexual minorities. The party's leadership and many activists were informed by religious conservatism, and from that came policies opposing abortion and favouring traditional family values. While Manning was regularly frustrated at extremist statements from the party's M.P.s, he expressed no discomfort when his caucus voted with near-unanimity against even modest legislative steps that protected gays and lesbians against discrimination.

On the other hand, the party drew support from other quarters – from western Canadian business leaders, and from a wide array of populists not particularly drawn to moral regulation by the state. Preston Manning had a pragmatic side recognizing the need to rein in those within the party who favoured uncompromising stands on such issues as abortion and homosexuality. Faron Ellis points to continuing tensions in the Reform Party's history, between a ideologically

right wing base and a more pragmatic leadership.

Manning continued to attempt to position the party within what he perceived to be the contemporary currents of public opinion. Reform activists, on the other hand, continued to help keep the party's policy agenda more consistent with their right-of-centre, neo-conservative, populist, anti-political-establishment, and libertarian attitudes (Ellis 2005, 129)

In its first electoral outing, in 1988, the Reform Party won no seats, but it scored a breakthrough in 1993, contributing to the decimation of Progressive Conservative parliamentary ranks in the west. Reform improved on their record slightly in 1997, with victory in sixty seats. However, the party's representation was still confined entirely to the west. This prompted calls for it to unite with others on the right to challenge the governing Liberals more effectively.

The first attempt at uniting the right, in 2000, was the Canadian Alliance. However, the selection of Stockwell Day as leader reinforced the party's association with a narrow electoral base. The former Alberta treasurer, and Pentacostal preacher, had strong and frequently voiced opinions on abortion and gay rights, potentially limiting the Alliance's base even more than Reform's. It won only 25 percent of the national vote in the 2000 election, and its 66 seats included only two outside the west. A decline in popular support following the election helped fuel a revolt against Day, with a few evangelical Christian M.P.s among them, but allied to the more pragmatic Manning side of the party (Flanagan 2007, chap. 1).

Stephen Harper replaced him at the party's helm, and while clearly not as close to the evangelical currents within the party as Day, soon attracted the support of a range of moral conservatives who believed him more able to expand the party's base. These included Political Scientist Tom Flanagan and Ken Boessenkool, a key advisor deeply engaged in his evangelical faith..

Harper spearheaded a second attempt at uniting the right in 2003, and in March of 2004 was elected leader of the new Conservative Party. It was dominated by Reform/Alliance supporters, so there was less and less policy room for representatives of the moderate or "red tory" current within the Progressive Conservative Party. However, the Harper leadership imposed tight discipline on party legislators to ensure that the voices of the moral right were subdued. The lessons of the early Manning years were not lost on Harper.

Liberal Prime Minister Martin announced a federal election for the end of June 2004, and there seemed little doubt that same-sex marriage would be prominent in the campaign. The Conservatives' national campaign was closely scripted to avoid fuelling fears of a "hidden agenda" of moral conservatism, with telling silence on issues like abortion, multiculturalism, capital punishment, and a critique of same-sex marriage focusing less on substance than on the need for Parliament rather than unelected judges making decisions (Flanagan 2007, 156). But as Hugh Segal, campaign co-chair the next time around, observed:

The Harper forces . . . stumbled in 2004 in allowing the same-sex marriage issue to expand from one on which all M.P.s would be allowed a free vote to one on which the

Conservative leader made legislation on the issue his stated priority upon forming a government. This, too, was a case of letting the marginal overtake the substantive, at the expense of the party's broad credibility (2007, 195).

The prominence of the issue was amplified when a few of the party's candidates spoke off the leader's script by using starkly homophobic language in voicing their opposition to same sex marriage. Religious right groups were also mobilizing over marriage, and Focus on the Family Canada announced a \$1.5 million campaign – a major sum by Canadian standards. The Liberals won that election, but with a significant reduction of seats (to less than a clear majority in Parliament) – the losses attributed overwhelmingly to the spending scandal. The fact that the government survived at all was partly a result of public fears of the Conservatives moral agenda – fears well stoked by the Liberal use of the marriage issue (with their newly-acquired enthusiasm for lesbian/gay equality).

The Conservatives held their first national policy convention in early 2005, and the Harper leadership made sure that the public face of the party side-stepped as many moral hot buttons as possible. Many delegates would have wanted a resolution calling for an attack on abortion rights, but none reached the floor. The language of other resolutions that might have fuelled fears of an extreme policy agenda was also moderated (Flanagan 2007, 203-05). Only on the issue of gay and lesbian marriage was the door opened to a policy resolution, in part because public opinion seemed more evenly divided on that issue, and more susceptible to conservative campaigning. Indeed, Harper had been using the marriage issue since the turn of the year in order to draw support from “ethnic” communities traditionally voting Liberal – especially Chinese, South Asian, and Italian (Flanagan 2007, 200-01).

The June 2005 passage of legislation re-defining marriage kept that particular issue on the agenda, and when the Liberal government was defeated at year's end, precipitating a January 2006 election, the religious right re-energized its supporters. The Harper team, though, had learned valuable lessons from the last campaign, and this time were determined to downplay moral conservatism. Stephen Harper, early in the campaign, promised to allow for a free (un-whipped) vote on a resolution to re-open the marriage question, and then did not raise the question again (Flanagan 2007, 232). The party's campaign website was silent on the issue, and none of its thirty issue backgrounders dealt with same-sex marriage. The heavily controlled campaign ensured that morally conservative statements were minimized and candidates with particularly strong conservative views on issues like abortion and homosexuality kept away from the media.

That said, there can be no reasonable doubt that party campaigners were actively promoting the party's moral agenda within conservative religious congregations, and encouraging sympathetic clergy to deliver positive messages to their flocks. They were also undoubtedly mobilizing support among ethnic minority populations thought to be conservative on issues like gay marriage. The Liberal campaign was also more than ready to highlight the strong ties that some Conservative candidates had to pro-life and families values groups with uncompromising moral agendas (Flanagan 2007, 264).

The final election results gave the Conservatives fewer seats than expected, given the extent of scandal enmeshing previous Liberal governments, but enough to form a government. Whether the marriage issue helped or hampered the Conservatives was unclear. Reminding social conservative voters of the issue may have increased their turnout at the polls, but this would mostly help in areas where they were already strong. Marriage was generally not a high priority issue for moderates who were uneasy about the party's social policy agenda, and it probably hampered the party's success in the country's largest urban centres.³

This then posed a serious dilemma, the stakes being the prospect of a majority government in the next election – widely expected within eighteen months. Out of this dilemma, and the Conservative government's track record since assuming power, have emerged two distinct understandings of how the party has managed this dilemma. One is that the Harper team remains determined to secure radical change on both moral conservative and neo-liberal fronts, and that this will become much more evident if the party wins a parliamentary majority. The other view is that Harper is steering toward the familiar brokerage model of Canadian parties, on most issue fronts, with a more strongly rightist direction on economic issues and foreign policy. There is fuel for both views.

Moderating Pressures

Several factors pressure even ideologically-driven right wing parties that seek a national mandate toward moderation on moral issues. They include recent shifts in public opinion, the modest number of Canadians who profess conservative versions of their faith, the diversity of constituencies forming the core of the Conservative's support, and the pragmatism (at least on some issue fronts) of Stephen Harper himself.

Public Opinion on Sexual Diversity

Canadian public opinion on the crucial issue of lesbian and gay marriage has shifted significantly toward majority acceptance. During the height of debate between 2003 and 2005, there was some slippage, but polls now show around 55 percent support for same-sex marriage, about 20 percent higher than in the U.S.⁴ An even higher percentage of respondents were resistant to the idea of re-opening debate on the issue once the Conservatives were in office.

There was a sign of this shift in the heartland of the old Reform Party. In the 2000 election, former Progressive Conservative leader Joe Clark and high profile "red tory" was facing a tough battle in his Calgary constituency. He had been regularly identified as moderate or progressive on moral issues, including sexual diversity, and his campaign was visibly backed by LGBT activists and their local press. Opposing him was a strong Reform candidate, backed by Christian right activists. Clark's victory was, as David Laycock points out, a sign of the decline in opposition to gay rights even in this province widely regarded as Canada's most conservative (2002, 154). Support for gay rights was stronger in urban Canada than small town and rural areas, and it was also relatively pronounced in Quebec – precisely the areas where the

Conservatives would have to gain seats if they were ever to gain a parliamentary majority.

The patterns evident on sexual diversity are also evident on other issue fronts associated with moral traditionalism, and are part of an overall shift across North America and Western Europe. Using an index that they label “moral permissiveness” and that includes attitudes toward homosexuality, Chris Cochrane, Neil Nevitte, and Steve White show dramatic shifts away from traditional stances in almost all countries of these regions (2006). In 1980, Canadians were somewhat less “traditional” than Americans, though less “liberal” than the west European average. By 2000, much change had occurred everywhere, but Canadians were now more liberal than the European average, and still more so than Americans. As Cochrane points out, there is no issue where the shift toward more “liberal” views on morals questions was more pronounced than on issues related to homosexuality (see Figure 1).⁵

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

The Role of the Courts

The fact that court rulings have had a prominent role in securing rights for lesbians and gays is another moderating force, one that has facilitated a shift in public opinion. Such decisions have been based on a Charter of Rights that has gained considerable popular respect across the country. Although federal and provincial legislatures can override most sections of the Charter, there has only rarely been much popular support for such a manoeuvre.⁶ In reality, despite occasional complaints about judicial activism, politicians in a variety of parties and at both federal and provincial levels have welcomed opportunities to let courts take a lead on controversial issues.

The response of former Alberta Premier Ralph Klein and his provincial Conservative Party to recognition claims by lesbians and gays from the late 1990s until 2005 is instructive here.⁷ In 1998, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in favour of Delwin Vriend, who had been fired from a Christian college for being gay, and then denied even a hearing from the Alberta Human Rights Commission because the provincial human rights statute did not include sexual orientation. The Supreme Court had already declared that discrimination based on sexual orientation was prohibited by the general language in Section 15 of the Charter, and this time it declared that Alberta’s statutory rights protection language must reflect that. This was obvious enough to the court that it “read in” sexual orientation to the Alberta statute.

Klein was not himself drawn to moral condemnation of homosexuality, but a significant portion of his party’s electorate, and his caucus, was. The lead standard-bearer of that view was cabinet minister Stockwell Day. To assuage those who clamoured for provincial action, Klein dallied with invoking the Charter’s override provision, though there is no evidence that he ever intended to. This then unleashed even more vitriol directed at sexual minorities. Klein then subtly shifted his public message towards a resigned acceptance of the ruling, citing among other things the hatefulness of many of the messages he had received. To further appease moral conservatives, though, he appointed a cabinet committee to supposedly “fence in” the ruling’s impact,

especially in regard to the recognition of same-sex relationships.

In fact, Klein knew that public support for the *Vriend* decision was stronger even in Alberta than the public outcry over it suggested, and that a constitutional override had little public support. In the end, the “fences” committee gradually declined in public visibility, and provincial authorities succumbed (like others across the country) to a variety of court rulings recognizing same-sex relationships (including those by Alberta courts on parenting claims). To save face, they responded to an assertive Supreme Court decision on this subject in 1999 by opening up provincially-regulated relationship recognition to all interdependent couples, not just lesbian and gay couples.

A few years later, Klein responded in similar ways to the marriage issue. When the federal Liberal government announced that it would introduce legislation to make explicit a definition of marriage that conformed with appeal court rulings in Ontario and then other provinces, the Alberta Premier railed against same-sex marriage and promised a cross country campaign against it. In contrast to his initial public statements after the 1998 *Vriend* decision, this time his opposition was based in part on personal conviction, though also of course on his populist impulse to shore up his morally-conservative electorate.

The promise of a campaign then came to naught. While the marriage bill (C-38) was before Parliament, he delivered a major address before a mostly-business audience in Toronto. This was exactly the time, with ample press presence, to rail against the bill. In the end, nothing was said. Klein’s emphasis was on the dramatic economic growth of his province, the cosmopolitanness of its cities, and the outdatedness of redneck stereotypes. Even he knew that moving from such a message to an attack on gay marriage that would have reminded most of his audience of precisely such stereotypes. It is also hard to avoid the suspicion that business leaders in his native Calgary boom town warned him that a morally conservative message would be counter-productive. When C-38 was passed, Klein was reported as trying to convince his own caucus that there was nothing to be done about it, except to try ensuring that civil marriage commissioners in the province were not forced to conduct same-sex wedding ceremonies.

The Numbers of Religious Conservatives

Another of the most obvious reason for moderating the moral conservatism of the new party’s agenda is the relatively small size of the population for which this is a priority. The proportion of the population that could be counted as religiously conservative, or what some writers refer to as “evangelical,” is between a third and a half of its size in the United States. If responses to survey questions produce estimates that 30 percent of Americans are conservative Christians, the same kinds of responses will yield estimates of 10-12 percent in Canada. Jonathon Malloy surveys a range of estimates suggesting that 8-16 percent of the Canadian population in Canada is evangelical (2007).

Table 1 Religiosity in Canada and the U.S., 2002-05

	U.S.	Canada
Weekly church attendance or more *	42 %	22 %
Religion is very important in my life **	55	28
Bible is actual word of God, to be taken literally ***	34	17
Religion is personal ... separate from gov't ****	55	71

* Reported in Michael Adams, *Fire and Ice* (Toronto: Penguin, 2004), p. 50

** Gallup, 2004 survey, available at www.gallup.org

Religious Fragmentation

Canada's religious conservatives are more fragmented than their American counterparts. There is a much higher proportion of Catholics in Canada than in the U.S., and Catholics who are conservative on issues like abortion and gay rights will not always side with Protestant conservatives on other issues (Appleby 1997). The Roman Catholic Church hierarchy in Canada was as active in opposing same-sex marriage as it had been on any gay rights issue, and more widely so across Canada. On other sexuality issues, for example, Quebec's bishops have intervened more quietly or not at all. This time, the voice of Canadian bishops was loud and unrelenting, issuing public declarations and requiring priests to read letters to parishioners urging them to contact politicians.⁸ But its support of positions taken by conservative Protestant groups on other issue fronts cannot be taken for granted. The same-sex marriage issue, then, may well have represented the high water mark of cross-denominational cooperation in Canada (Malloy 2007).

Sam Reimer surveyed Canadian and American evangelicals in four cities in the late 1990s, finding that only 13 percent (on each side of the border) felt close to Roman Catholics (2003) (In the general populations of both countries, 28 percent responded positively to that same question.) Kurt Bowen draws on a range of surveys from the early and mid-1990s, and displays important differences between Canadian adherents of conservative Protestant denominations and Roman Catholics (2004). The latter are twice as likely as conservative Protestants to agree that their clergy should not speak out on social, economic, and political issues (42 percent in Quebec, 34 percent elsewhere, compared to 19 percent of conservative Protestants). Among Quebec Catholics, 69 percent said that religion wasn't at all important in their political thinking; for Catholics elsewhere 34 percent; and for conservative Protestants only 16 percent.

As with all social movement and partisan activism in Canada, regional differences count heavily. The political importance of regional differences can easily be exaggerated, but there can be no discounting the popular perception of such differences, and the regionally-based patterns of discontent. This is no less true of the faithful, and antipathy toward central Canada may be especially pronounced among western religious conservatives. This may well limit willingness to work toward cross-Canada unity among such conservatives.

Relative Moderation Among Canadian Evangelicals

A close look at Canadian evangelicals reveals important contrasts between them and their American brethren, providing a margin of manoeuvre for right wing parties. Sam Reimer has shown growing commonalities in patterns of religious faith across the border, in his survey of evangelicals (2003, 118-51). However, Canadians were significantly less likely than Americans to identify moral decline as their greatest concern, and less than half as likely to identify family breakdown. Canadian evangelicals may still treat moral issues as politically important, but their concerns are less tied to apocalyptic visions of societal disintegration.

Using more recent large national samples, Reimer found very high levels of moral disapproval of same-sex activity among American and Canadian conservative Protestants, with little difference in degree. But he also found much greater indications of personal animosity in the U.S. (with 33 percent scoring homosexuals zero on a 100-degree thermometer scale) than in Canada (where only 10-12 percent responding “very uneasy” at meeting lesbians or gay men (Reimer 2007).

Reimer’s earlier study (1995) also showed that when asked for their political identification, only 3 percent of Canadian evangelicals responded “strongly conservative” (51 percent moderately conservative), whereas the comparable numbers on the American side were 28 and 54 percent. Through that early period of Reform Party growth, evangelicals in large numbers were still voting for the Liberals, Progressive Conservatives, and New Democrats.

Jim Farney argues that in western Canada, where conservative religiosity has played the most important political role, views about abortion are in fact stronger than those on an issue like same-sex marriage.⁹ There is a libertarian framework to their views that aims primarily to be left alone, and since presumably homosexuals are “outside” their communities, access to abortion matters more. Same-sex marriage is important, but will they ask their political representatives to die on the hill over this issue? Maybe not.

The intensity of U.S. evangelical antipathy may well be strengthened by what several observers have pointed to as a “civil religion” prevalent in that country – a tendency to frame the United States as having a divine national calling (Reimer 2003; McKenzie 2005, Lipset 1990). Homosexuality, therefore, is seen not only as a sign of personal failure or a threat to the family, but as a sign of national decay that has international significance. To the extent that we can find a coherent expression of Canadian nationalism, or of English Canadian and Québécois nationalism, there is no significant equivalent to such a sense of calling.

Clyde Wilcox points out that there are important changes in outlook occurring among American evangelicals, particularly the young (2007) They are more likely to embrace a form of “toleration” of sexual diversity and individual choice on other issues, and less likely to use the kind of extreme language still so frequently marshalled by the leaders of Christian right organizations. Lorna Dueck, an evangelical broadcaster, makes a similar argument for Canadian evangelicals.¹⁰

There is considerable antipathy to homosexuality in as much as a 30 percent of the Canadian public. Religiously-conservative activists, then, and many of the legislators articulating their concerns within the Conservative Party, are no more “extreme” on issues like same-sex marriage than a large segment of the constituencies they represent. But strong inter-generational differences may soon mean that such leadership is out of touch, as Wilcox claims that it is becoming in the U.S. Again, Dueck makes a similar argument about Canadian evangelicals.

Diversity of Support for the Conservative’s Reform Core

There were several important strands of support for the Reform Party, and even more for the Conservatives as they expanded their electoral base beyond 2004. Moral conservatism was a sizeable part of the mix, but only one. David Laycock’s 2002 analysis of the new right in Canada was published before the merger of the Alliance and PCs, so his focus lay with the social, economic, and political forces that were the dominant partners in the Reform and Alliance (2003, chaps 1-2). Even at this time, he emphasizes the pre-eminence of neo-liberal attacks on the welfare state in these parties’ priorities. He admits to paying only modest attention to moral conservatism, but effectively makes the point that the desire to radically reduce the reach of the state, except in respect to law and order, was paramount.

The range of constituencies drawn to Reform may indeed have had some degree of common resentment of the federal government, and even of government in general, but they certainly did not all share a commitment to moral traditionalism (Flanagan 2005). Calgary-based business interests were one example, especially as they depended more than ever on being able to recruit highly educated talent from across the country. Many of Reform’s voters who resented state taxes; farmers angry about government regulation, opponents of gun control; anglophones resentful of perceived cow-towing to Quebec; law-and-order advocates; caucasians concerned about new and largely non-white waves of immigration; westerners in general resentful of central Canadian dominance in national politics; voters tired of the accommodations and compromises in traditional party politics – cared little about abortion and homosexuality and were drifting toward more libertarian positions.

The 2005 World Values Survey indicated that only 30 percent of the Conservative supporters of the day attended church at least once per week – and this was at the height of the marriage controversy in Canada. The Liberal Party, by then firmly supporting gay marriage, were still attracting 27 percent, about the same as they had in the previous fifteen years. Chris Cochrane and Neil Nevitte use a 2006 World Values Survey to assess responses to “market value” and “moral value” questions by supporters of Canada’s political parties (2007). Conservatives were much more adherent to free-market views than supporters of other parties, and among those with higher levels of education, beliefs were more to the right and more consistent. Conservatives were also to the right of other partisans on moral values, but this time, the more educated among them were markedly closer to the centre (even if still significantly to the right of the Canadian average). Moderation, then, was much more widespread on issues like homosexuality, abortion, divorce, euthanasia, and prostitution than issue related to income inequality and the role of the

state with each step up the educational ladder.

Contradictions Between Moral Conservatism and Neo-Liberalism

Nelson Wiseman argues that the mixture of moral conservatism and neo-liberal individualism makes of Alberta the most “American” of Canadian provinces (2007). He also points to the strength of evangelical Christianity in Alberta, not of the “social gospel” sort that has fed progressive and socialist movements in neighbouring Saskatchewan and other parts of English Canada, but of a more individualistic and right-populist character suspicious of state authority. This came in part as a result of the prominence of rural Americans in the formative waves of immigration at the turn into the 20th century, but of the continuing importance of American capital in the province’s economic growth.

However, as we have already seen, individual Albertans are no more likely to combine moral conservatism and pro-market economic individualism than other Canadians, even if both currents are more widely held in that province than elsewhere. Ralph Klein led the province’s government for years, and he knew the dangers of combining two quite distinct value systems. His message to convention delegates contemplated a united right in 1999 was basically that a de-regulative approach to the economy is inconsistent with a “nanny-state” view of moral regulation. “To be consistent, those who promote individual choice in the market should at least permit individual choice in the setting of moral compasses” (Laycock 2003, 170). He was essentially arguing on pragmatic grounds, too, that if you really want a reduced state and lower taxes (which he and most right wing politicians in Canada did), you had to give a little on other issue fronts. Only in the U.S. is there widespread belief that these two ideological currents fit naturally together, and even there strains are recurrently evident.

That was a course obviously being pursued by Ontario’s fiercely neo-liberal provincial government, led by Conservative Mike Harris. In office at the time, it was generally avoiding issues dearest to the heart of moral conservatives. When forced to enact legislation widely recognizing same-sex relationships in the wake of the Supreme Court’s decision in *M. v. H.*, it did so grudgingly, but in a lightening-quick fashion that all but eliminated the room for morally conservative voices within his own party.

Outside the U.S., parties that effect an ideological merger between neo-liberalism and moral conservatism are rare. Christian democratic parties in Europe have usually reflected Roman Catholic positions on such issues as divorce, abortion, and homosexuality, though sometimes they waged war on such issues less intensely than the Church hierarchy would have preferred, hoping that a lower key will not alienate them excessively from voters unwedded to official church doctrine. Spain’s Popular Party has certainly opposed same-sex marriage, but with a voice noticeably more muted than those of Catholic bishops, its leadership recognizing that sixty percent or more of the electorate supports such marriage.

Catholic doctrine also does not lead to full and uncritical acceptance of the free market. Christian Democratic parties have certainly been supporters of private ownership, and uneasy about what

they may regard as excessive state regulation, but they provided crucial support for expansive welfare state regimes in the period following World War II, and have not shifted nearly as far to the neo-liberal right as British Conservatives or U.S. Republicans.

Newer parties of the right, some of them on the extreme, are also unlikely to combine full-fledged moral conservatism with neo-liberalism. Parties like France's National Front, Austria's Freedom Party, and Belgium's Vlaamse Blok are anti-immigrant, and sometimes explicitly racist. They are also in favour of retaining or restoring some elements of traditional culture, but by and large they do not seek a return to prohibitions on abortion or criminalization of homosexual activity.¹¹

In western Europe, too, there is an important shift away from moral traditionalism even among the faithful. Chris Cochrane and his colleagues, using World Values Surveys, point to a striking decline in the correlation between religiosity and "moral traditionalism" across virtually all western Europe (Cochrane, Nevitte, and White 2006). So even those parties aiming to represent a political voice for the faithful, opinion on issues related to homosexuality can no longer be assumed. The opposite trend is apparent in the U.S., where the correlation between religiosity and moral traditionalism has increased.

Cochrane and Nevitte's analysis of mid-2000s World Values Surveys indicates that by and large Canadians on the moral right do not share the economic views of those on the neo-liberal right. As they point out, this poses the dilemma that "adopting positions on the 'moral right' risks alienating supporters on the 'market right'" (Cochrane and Nevitte 2007, 15). Adopting positions on the market right poses modest risk in alienating moral right supports, but only because moral issues are more important to them.

Cochrane then points out that the low correlation between morally conservative beliefs and neo-liberals applies even in Alberta. Overall, the correlation is close to zero, but among those on the right there is even a slightly negative correlation. Moral conservatives are not especially drawn to free market liberalism, and neo-liberals are not especially drawn to moral traditionalism. "In this respect," he argues, "Alberta is actually more like the rest of Canada and less like the United States."¹²

Sam Reimer also shows evidence that attachment to neo-liberalism is less widespread among Canadian evangelicals than among American. His 1995 survey showed Canadians to be much more likely than Americans to identify poverty and unemployment as priorities, and to support environmental legislation (2003, 126-28). Dennis Hoover agrees, citing greater willingness among Canadian religious conservatives to support various forms of government intervention, and express more concern about economic inequality (Hoover 1997; Hoover, et al. 2000) Chris McKenzie has a similar view based on his analysis of pro-family party politics in British Columbia, seeing less amalgamation between traditional morality and antipathy to the state than he sees among American counterparts to the activists he surveys (McKenzie 2005, 243-44)

Stephen Harper's Beliefs and Public Profile

If Conservative leader Stephen Harper had to choose between moral conservatism and neo-liberalism, there is little doubt about his priority. Before gaining the leadership of the Alliance and the Conservative Party, Stephen Harper's political agenda seemed focussed overwhelmingly on cutting taxes, reducing the welfare state, and cutting back on what he argued were federal intrusions on provincial jurisdiction. He headed the right wing National Citizens Coalition, devoted to a radical free market ideology. As David Laycock observed in 2002, "Harper appears less interested in 'uniting the right,' whether within the Alliance or beyond it, than in delivering high-profile pro-market policy advice to the Canadian public" (2002, 182).

Harper had not cut a major public profile on moral issues; neither did he seem devoted to the kind of populist direct democracy articulated by Preston Manning and Stockwell Day. In all this he seemed more like former Ontario Premier Mike Harris than the bulk of Reform and Alliance party supporters. The strongest parties on the right in British Columbia and Quebec, (both Liberal Parties) have also emphasized neo-liberalism while in government and remained largely or completely silent on issues of concern to the moral right. For Harper, if moderating his party's stance was likely to enhance his chance of effecting radical change on the role of the state in Canada, and in particular of the federal government, there has never seemed reason to doubt that he would do precisely that.

When he first sought party leadership, journalist Chantal Hebert described him as coming to the scene without any "social conservative baggage." "Indeed, by choosing him so decisively, the Alliance membership has signalled its willingness to ditch the party's social conservative credo." (Quoted without comment in Flanagan 2007, 62). Tom Flanagan was one of Harper's key mentors, served him as chief of staff, and helped run the 2004 election campaign, and he is not at all close to the religious right. He was a key figure in the early years of the Reform Party, and close to Preston Manning, but angered moral conservatives when he suggested that the central issues for the party to pursue were federalism and the budget, and that other issues should be taken off the table.¹³ For the 2006 election, Harper chose Hugh Segal and Marjorie LeBreton to head the campaign team. Both are from the Progressive Conservative side of the new party, and both are clearly averse to prioritizing moral conservatism (Segal 2007). LeBreton belonged to "Tories for Choice" when abortion was up for debate during the Brian Mulroney Prime Ministership.¹⁴

To the extent that Harper's moral conservatism is revealed by the denomination of the church he attends in Ottawa, Jim Farney points out, his approach is moderate by comparison to most evangelicals.¹⁵ The Christian Missionary Alliance was formed to bring a variety of evangelical communities together, so is not as doctrinaire as churches in other conservative currents. Farney also points out that in the mid-1990s, when gay rights were very much before Parliament, Harper advocated a recognition of civil unions for same-sex couples to his Reform colleagues. Some insiders believe that Harper is essentially pro-choice, but even if he is not he has not spoken out unequivocally on the pro-life side of the abortion debate.

According to one close observer of Christian intervention in politics, Harper also came to his evangelical faith in his 20s, after many of his core political principles were formed.¹⁶ He had not grown up in an evangelical sub-culture, as many Christian activists have. His wife also does not share his particular faith, and may also feel alienated from some versions of Protestant conservatism as a result of earlier experience. When Harper emphasizes the separation between his role as public policy maker and his own faith, at times to the extent of suggesting that faith was in the private realm, he may well be reflecting his particular family background.

On such questions, according to such observers as Hugh Segal and Tom Flanagan, Harper is above all a pragmatist. After the 2004 election he was told on the inside that emphasizing same-sex marriage was one of the mistakes that cost him votes.¹⁷ He may also have believed that he could not ignore the issue altogether, but he knew that focussing on that or similar questions, before, during, or after the next election would be risky. In 2006, he knew how important it was to increase his standing among Quebeckers, and women in general, and playing up such issues would not help on those fronts. The enunciation of five policy priorities during the 2006 campaign was partly a product of highly rational calculation about what issues would attract the various currents of the coalition he needed for government, avoiding those issues that different elements of the coalition disagreed on. Harper always knew that abortion was one of those; he now knew that same-sex marriage was too.

Harper is portrayed by more than one Conservative insider as a coldly calculating strategist, organizing his team so that everyone reports to him individually. He is described as recognizing the need to respond to morally conservative and religious supporters, but wanting to pick and choose the issues and moments in ways that will help him most and hurt him least. He is wary of too close a public association with evangelical group leaders on the grounds of the harmful optics that may provide, but he is also aware that they do not always have the power to deliver votes to the extent that they claim. Jim Farney, for example, argues that Christian right groups have lost some standing with the party leadership, since their commitment to bring large numbers of “ethnic” voters to the party bore little fruit.¹⁸

Recent Electoral and Governmental Experience

Recent electoral history must have reinforced perceptions that uncompromising arguments grounded in religious conservatism are very risky. The Harper leadership knew that when shaping their first policy convention’s resolutions, and in the tight controls they imposed on parliamentary candidates normally eager to talk about such issues during two election campaigns. And as the national gay rights group Egale pointed out after the 2006 election, only 10 of 34 non-incumbent Conservative candidates with strongly rightist views on gay marriage and other social issues were elected (2006). Polls were also showing that over 60 percent of Canadians did not want to revive the same-sex marriage issue – precisely what the moral conservatives in the party most wanted. Support for same-sex marriage itself was now significantly higher than 50 percent (and 47 percent among Conservative supporters).¹⁹

The Conservative experience in controlling a minority government has reinforced caution on at

least some issues associated with religious conservatism. Harper promised a parliamentary resolution to re-visit the marriage issue, but did not repeat the commitment. The party's web site was silent on the issue through that campaign. Once in power, having at first anticipated a vote on the marriage resolution early in the mandate, Harper then procrastinated, recognizing its increasing unpopularity in the public.²⁰ A number of conservative legislators known to be opposed to gay marriage now realized that the issue could harm their chances of re-election – a prospect they were expecting within eighteen months. When two RCMP constables announced in May 2006 that they were getting married, the Prime Minister's office told Conservative M.P.s not to comment on the story.

The government responded to these conflicting pressures by scheduling a truncated parliamentary debate shortly before the Christmas recess, and heavily scripted their caucus member speeches to avoid inflammatory remarks. The House of Commons, as expected, then voted down the motion on December 7th, with a convincing 175-123 majority. Among the “no's” were thirteen Conservatives, including fully six cabinet ministers. When meeting reporters afterwards, something Harper was normally loath to do on exiting the House of Commons, Harper announced “I don't see reopening this question in the future” (Galloway 2006) And then just to make sure that no one missed the message, he repeated himself in French! There was discontent among the leading activists in Christian right groups, and undoubtedly among some Conservative M.P.s, but Harper had obviously concluded that he needed to send a signal that this would not be an election issue for his party.

Polarizing Pressures

There has never been much doubt that there has been a strong current of conservative moral values in the leaders of the Reform Party, the Canadian Alliance, and the post-merger Conservative Party. Preston Manning and Stockwell Day were born-again Christians, and made it clear that their faith was important in their political lives.²¹ Day was more widely seen as being more uncompromising in his morally conservative views, but both he and Manning were seen as strong allies by Canada's major Christian right organizations. The Reform and Alliance parties firmly opposed every bill introduced to Parliament implying public recognition of sexual diversity, and even on “free” votes consistently voted with near-unanimity.

Moral Conservatism in the Parliamentary Party

Whatever clamps were placed on the Conservative caucus after the merger, there was never any doubt about where most of its members stood. When the Conservatives were faced with a vote on re-defining marriage, in June 2005, only a paltry three of the party's M.P.s supported the Liberal government's bill. And this was after an election that dramatically increased the party's parliamentary contingent, significantly beyond the Reform/Alliance western base. So intense was the feeling on that side of the House of Commons that the Conservatives promised to revisit the issue, despite the strategic risk of laying themselves open, once again, to Liberal charges that they had an extremist moral agenda.

The 2006 election produced a dramatically enlarged Conservative caucus, with significant representation in central and eastern Canada. Its occupational make-up, however, suggests an unusually traditional outlook. There were half as many lawyers as the governing Liberals' caucus prior to the election, twice as many small business owners, and many more farmers. Marci McDonald estimates that 70 of the Conservatives' 124 Members of Parliament are evangelical Christians (2006). There is also an additional number who are intimidated by the number or prominence of religious conservatives in their constituencies, and inclined to support policy concessions to retain their loyalty.

When Harper formed his first government, two of the most prominent representatives of religious conservatism in that caucus were appointed to cabinet. Vice Toews was named to the crucial Justice portfolio, and even if he is a "lapsed" evangelical, he has been one of the party's extreme voices in opposing gay rights. Stockwell Day was appointed to Public Safety, and while Jason Kenney was not named to the cabinet, he was made parliamentary secretary to the Prime Minister, and a contact point with religious right groups (McDonald 2006). In the 2008 cabinet, there are about six evangelical Protestant members (including the Prime Minister), plus four morally conservative Catholics, making for a total of about one-third of the cabinet. There are also key advisers in the Prime Minister's Office who are Christian conservative. Ken Boessenkool, once a Day supporter and co-chair of the 2004 Conservative campaign under Harper, is very influential, and someone for whom evangelical faith is central. Mark Cameron is policy director, and a key figure in drafting the 2004 election platform, is another.

What about Harper himself? He was never a darling of religious conservatives in Reform and Alliance circles, but he is a born-again Christian, and seen as an ally by major Canadian Christian right organizations. McDonald points out that he had once been in the mainstream and relatively progressive United Church of Canada, and that his father had moved away from that church at roughly the time that it decided to approve the ordination of homosexuals (McDonald 2006). Even if he repeatedly talks of the separation of faith from public policy, he never once dissented from the Reform and Alliance caucus positions utterly rejecting any recognition of rights for lesbians and gay men. Until he realized that it cost him votes, he did not hesitate to prioritize his opposition to same-sex marriage in the 2005 election.

The Essential Role of the Conservatives' Religious Constituency

The Conservative leadership knows that religious conservatives are an important electoral constituency, that they fuel a great deal of electoral activism, and that they provide an important component of their fundraising success. In previous elections evangelical Christians had been more likely than others to vote for the Conservatives, and the Alliance and Reform parties before that, but a majority still voted for other parties. In 2006, however, one post-election poll showed that 64 percent of weekly church-attending Protestants (most of them evangelical) voted Conservative, 24 percent more than two years earlier.²² And even if moral issues did not feature prominently among the priorities of most voters, 40 percent of these church-goers reported that issues like abortion and same-sex marriage mattered most in deciding which party to support. The same poll showed that more Roman Catholics weekly church-goers voted Conservative (42

percent) than Liberal (40 percent), for the first time in a long time.

Amy Langstaff points to evidence that there is a strong minority of about one-third of the population that rejects homosexuality on moral grounds and strongly opposes its public recognition through rights (2007). A significant portion of that population has now shifted towards the Conservative Party, solidifying the electoral core that sent so many moral conservatives to the former Reform Party caucus, and is still sending significant numbers of them from the west and rural areas of other provinces. Between 1987 and 2004, “disapproval” of homosexuality dropped significantly among Liberal supporters (57 to 36 percent) and NDPers (50 to 18). But as recently as 2004, 56 percent of Conservative supporters expressed such disapproval. Many M.P.s who are not themselves conservative on such issues are all-too-aware of the views of their religiously-conservative constituents.

The party’s 2004 policy convention was steered away from taking stances on most moral issues, but the overwhelming support provided for a resolution on same-sex marriage left little doubt about the strength of feeling at the party’s base. At a time when most parties in Canada (and many other countries in the industrialized world) are facing declining membership and grassroots energy, the Conservatives need the energy contributed by religious conservatives. The party has built up a very large base of relatively small-scale donors (averaging less than \$100 each), and it is reasonable to guess that an unusually high number of these come from this core constituency.

The religious base needs motivating, or significant numbers may well stop voting, or contributing energy and money. Worse, an important core of the old Reform constituency might actually break away to form a new party. Western supporters of the former Progressive Conservative Party, including many religious conservatives, already demonstrated their willingness to abandon their traditional party home in favour of Reform in the late 1980s and through the ‘90s. The end result was a radical transformation of federal party politics in English Canada. The commitment to core principles among Reform Party members was strong enough that many of them resisted morphing into the Canadian Alliance, despite the apparent impossibility of expanding much beyond their current electoral base. Then when the new party was launched, they elected Stockwell Day as their standard bearer – someone doomed to narrow their electoral constituency further but less likely to compromise on the core principles that had driven them to Reform in the first place (Carty, Cross, and Young 2000, chap. 3).

The “exit” option is still very available, and discontent with the Conservatives’ record in office has already been substantial enough to have stimulated visible dissent from among core western constituents (Galloway 2007). Not all of this discontent dwells on the government’s record on moral issues, but some of it has been, particularly in the wake of the Prime Minister’s announcement that the defeat of the resolution to re-open the marriage question closed the book on that issue. Their anger is no doubt being intensified by signs that the Conservative party in government is showing signs of behaving just like the traditional parties they rejected.

Populist disdain for what was seen as the partisan politics of unseemly brokerage is still an important current of the party’s base, particularly in the west. So is western resentment at the traditional economic and political dominance of central Canada. The Harper Conservatives’

determination to expand their base enough to secure a parliamentary majority, and the leadership's iron grip on M.P.s, and even cabinet ministers, would rankle many within the party, enhancing the likelihood of open dissent or exit.

There is no question that the Conservatives pay very close attention to the role that "values" play in voter minds. After the 2004 election, the party commissioned a huge poll (sample of about 10,000) to explore popular beliefs, and have updated it since. They recognize the critical role of moral conservatives among the electorates they need to court or retain, and have armoured themselves with nuanced information to do so strategically.

Focussing on Building Loyal Electoral Blocs?

With four parties having significant representation in the House of Commons, and a fifth (the Greens) gaining a significant following, a majority government may be elusive for the foreseeable future. One insider suggests the possibility that Stephen Harper and other leading Conservatives no longer envisage winning a majority, and do not see the Liberals gaining one either.²³ If appealing to a wider political middle is perceived as unlikely to yield the Holy Grail of a majority, then the priority is maximize the size of the minority of seats you win by solidifying the loyalty of your existing supporters. You write off the urban centres of Toronto and Vancouver and possibly Montreal, and make sure that your supporters are given enough reason to vote for you next time.

This requires "narrow-casting" messages to specific constituencies, including white conservative Christians, and conservatives of non-European minorities. In the 2006 election, the national campaign (and many local campaigns) were tightly scripted to avoid touching on hot button issues like abortion and gay marriage (apart from the Harper commitment on a marriage resolution early in the campaign). But they pitched conservative messages on gay marriage to several ethnic minority groups thought to be in synch with the party's position, but traditionally voting Liberal. There can be no reasonable doubt, too, that party operatives were counting on Protestant clergy exhorting their congregations to vote for candidates whose positions came closest to theirs, or working in concert with them to do just that.

The kind of "narrow-casting" of electoral pitches to distinct constituencies is relatively easy in the case of religious conservatives, precisely because they gather at least weekly in a place of worship, and adhere to a version of faith that seeks a translation of their beliefs into public policy. This is even easier to carry off in Canada than in the U.S., since there are no large or well-resourced groups with a mission to monitor the religious right. The capacity to campaign to particular constituencies underneath the radar screen is enhanced by the Canadian media's tendency to cover election campaigns superficially, focussing overwhelmingly on the national leaders' tours, and by the widespread unfamiliarity among journalists with conservative religious congregations, and with questions of faith more generally.

One intriguing sign of the Conservatives' shift toward a focus on their existing constituencies is their method of tracking media trends. Once in power, the Conservatives abandoned an age-long

pattern of cabinet ministers and the Prime Minister's Office being provided daily clippings from the mainstream press. Instead, they re-deployed resources to monitoring "talk radio," a vehicle much more critical for gauging their existing core supporters than for winning over a middle ground.²⁴

Another sign of the party's willingness to focus on its existing supporters and ignore critics outside its existing coalition is Harper's decision to avoid appearing at the major international AIDS conference held in Toronto during August 2006. Despite almost universal condemnation in the mainstream media, that disgraceful act is still held up as legitimate and proper by Conservative insiders.

Sending Policy Signals

Justice Minister Vic Toews lost little time in providing comfort to moral conservatives, and undoubtedly did so with Harper's blessing. The age of consent for sexual activity would be raised from fourteen to sixteen.²⁵ There was a gay angle to this question, since the relatively low age of consent had become more of a contentious issue, particularly among religious conservatives, when the threshold for heterosexual and homosexual sex was harmonized in the 1980s.²⁶ Toews also announced a number of law and order initiatives that had especially strong support among moral conservatives. The appointment of Stockwell Day as Minister of Public Safety reinforced the government's image as "tough on crime," and signalled that law-and-order initiatives would be one of the principal vehicles for catering to the moral right.

Another would be judicial appointments, which are prerogatives of the federal "crown," and therefore within the purview of the Prime Minister. The government delayed filling vacancies, including one on the Supreme Court of Canada, and in late 2006 started making clear that it would seek out candidates for appointment with relatively restrictive interpretations of the Charter, and tougher views on crime. The composition of committees responsible for developing short lists of candidates for judicial appointment was also shifted to give the government of the day more appointment power, and provide police forces a more explicit voice. There was little chance of Harper appointing the kinds of extreme conservatives that were put forward by recent Republican presidents in the U.S., but a shift toward appointments viewed favourably by moral conservatives was clearly evident. And even in a minority government, opposition parties have virtually no capacity to slow down or obstruct such appointments.

There were policy initiatives in other portfolios that would also have garnered strong support among conservative Protestants, and especially of the activist leadership giving voice to its concerns. One was a radically new child care proposal, moving sharply away from any thought of funding accessible child care facilities and opting instead to transfer a monthly allowance directly to parents with children. Another was a shift towards unequivocal support for Israeli policy and action in the Middle East, a policy that would appeal not only to Canadian Jews, but to major currents of evangelical Christianity.

Between November 2007 and the spring of 2008, there was a cluster of policy developments that

may well have been designed to signal moral conservatives that the government was attentive to them. New regulations were issued on organ donation that increased the impediments for gay men – on the face of it a technical change but one likely approved by Conservative policy makers unconcerned about reinforcing the health stigma so widely associated with homosexuality among evangelical Christians.

Bill C-10, allowing for the denial of tax credits for films deemed incompatible with public policy, is more obviously designed to send a signal to moral conservatives (even if many do not treat this as a priority). Charles McVety, a very public evangelical, was at first eager to take credit for having lobbied Stockwell Day and the Prime Minister's Office on the measure, quoted on the front page of the *Globe and Mail* arguing that films promoting homosexuality, graphic sex, or violence should not be supported by tax benefits (Curry and MacDonald 2008). Even if many evangelicals keep their distance from McVety, head of the Canada Family Action Coalition, and do not regard film censorship as a priority, the government has held firmly to its commitment to enact the measure, citing it as a confidence measure.

Bill C-484 is another. This is a private members bill, introduced in November by Conservative Edmonton M.P Ken Epp, who is affiliated with the Campaign Life Coalition. It seeks to add extra criminal sanctions in the event of the death of a fetus during an assault or murder directed at the mother (Arthur 2008). The measure was introduced as a result of the “lottery” for private members bills, but it is obvious that it would not have gotten into second reading without the Conservatives' support. As some opposition members noted, this would be the first legislative measure to recognize the full human status of the fetus, and is thereby treated as highly significant by many evangelicals. If final passage is secured, this would obviously provide a convenient vehicle through which the government could signal its attention to an issue that is otherwise highly explosive.

Strength of Christian Right Organizing

As we shall see below, conservative Christians constitute less than half of the proportion of the population that their counterparts represent in the U.S. Even at their best organized, therefore, they could never match the strength of the American Christian Right. Nevertheless, the battles over lesbian/gay rights, particularly from the mid-1980s on, and even more so from the mid-2000s, very much energized the political voices of conservative Christianity – Protestant and Catholic. The capacity of the Christian right to mobilize constituents, largely through the willingness of clerics to encourage followers to contact politicians, has no real parallel in other social movements, and can provide a wave of public response intimidating to politicians of various stripes.

In the mid- and late 1980s, abortion liberalization and gay rights advances had raised the political stakes for such Christians, and increased the profile of political activism for both churches and organizations representing them. The anti-feminist group REAL Women of Canada had come out of almost total obscurity at mid-decade when the federal Conservative government appeared to be open to adding sexual orientation to the Canadian Human Rights Act (something not done

for another decade, under a Liberal government). The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC), the largest grouping of evangelicals in Canada, moved into high-energy political campaigning in 1986 when the issue of adding sexual orientation to Ontario's Human Rights Code was under debate (Rayside 1988, 1998).

The real strength of Christian mobilizing at this time was the capacity and willingness of local church leaders, particularly on the Protestant side, to mobilize a religious flock that met weekly in worship. At the federal and provincial level, they were able to mobilize letters, petitions, phone calls, and personal visits to politicians in unprecedented numbers.

From the mid-1990s on, the rapid shift in law and public policy toward recognizing same-sex couples energized the Christian right more than ever, and they were increasingly able to benefit from intense mobilizing by the American religious right on the marriage issue. Evangelical broadcasting was spreading in Canada, and many Canadian listeners had direct access to American preachers who regularly railed against homosexuality. Writers closely tied to Canada's Christian right were more often cited by the Canadian media when debate over gay rights flared, and were more frequently appearing on the op-ed pages of major newspapers.

The same-sex marriage issue was a particularly important spark in the mid-2000s. In 2003, only the EFC had a staffed office in Ottawa; by 2006 so did the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada (formed by the Canadian branch of the U.S.-based Focus on the Family), the Canada Family Action Coalition, and the Institute for Canadian Values (Dreher 2006).²⁷ The EFC and FOTFCanada had at least twenty staff each, and even if most of their work was not explicitly political, this created the capacity for more professionalized lobbying, and a steady supply of commentaries on a wide range of policy issues. Focus on the Family Canada was boasting an annual budget of \$11 million dollars – extremely large by Canadian social movement standards. The Institute of Marriage and Family Canada was showing much of the same skill in mainstreaming its message as the most skillful of its U.S. counterparts. All such resources would be used to keep the Conservatives' feet to the fire on the issues mattering most to its activists during and after the next election.

These organizations have grown significantly not only in the resources they can marshal for applying political pressure, but also in the sophistication of their approach. In a parliamentary system, they recognize the huge significance of having a government in power that is open to their concerns. If another party would be in control of the federal government, they realize full well that they would have no useful access, and almost no capacity for excising political influence. This is in stark contrast to the American system, where social movement groups always have access to at least some levers of influence, in a permeable system with much less disciplined parties.

Most Christian right groups, then, are prepared to give the Conservatives some slack, recognizing the complexity of pressures on the Prime Minister and the constraints operating on a minority government.²⁸ That said, they will apply continuous pressure on the government on a growing range of issues, and expect some response. Expectations would be especially high if the

party were to win a majority government.

There are clear links between some of the prominent Christian right groups and the Conservative government (McDonald 2006) Dave Quist, the executive director of the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, an offshoot of Focus on the Family Canada, ran for the Conservatives in 2004 and was a Harper aide after that. Darrel Reid, former head of FOFC, was once head of staff for Reform leader Preston Manning. Charles McVety, head of a Christian college and two Christian Right lobby groups – Canada Family Action Coalition and Defend Marriage Coalition – was close enough to the Harper government that he was called upon to help sell the new child care plan. Ken Boessenkool is not as obviously linked to such groups, but the strength of his faith and his closeness to the evangelical sub-culture would give him an intense close-up view of their priorities.²⁹

Weighing Pressures and Signals

It is tempting to regard the Conservative Party's religious constituency as the "cheap date" in its electoral coalition. It has nowhere else to go, and therefore needs little in the way of care or concessions. The Party has more important partners seeking reduced taxation and a weakened welfare state, objectives closer to the heart of the leadership.

Clyde Wilcox has a similar view of the administration of George W. Bush, the U.S. president most influenced by conservative evangelical Christianity. Bush has done much less for the religious right than his rhetoric would suggest, but has very much done the bidding of those who favour reduced taxes and other neo-liberal priorities (Wilcox 2007) The Christian right provided indispensable electoral support but received only modest policy concessions. True enough – conservative religious voters would be pleased with the judicial appointments of the Bush administration, with the budgetary largesse showered on abstinence-only educational initiatives, and with a foreign policy that echoes the Christian rights antipathy to abortion. But Republicans in Washington have not been as forceful on such critical issues as same-sex marriage as Christian right groups have wanted them to be.

Some observers of Canadian politics would push this argument even further, by pointing to a wide range of policy areas in which the Harper government has shown signs of adopting the compromising brokerage party approach. There have indeed been signs of the Conservatives trying to broaden their electoral base by dampening issue positions that gave the Reform Party its early fire, on democratic reform, the treatment of Quebec, government spending – all this in addition to same-sex marriage.

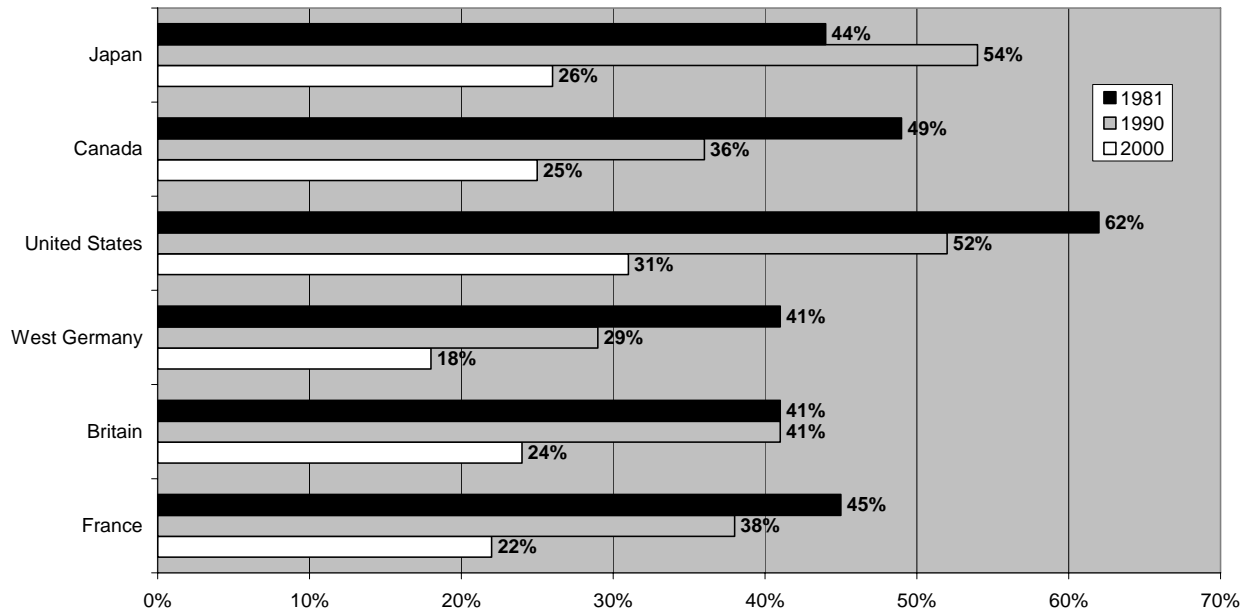
On the other hand, there can be little doubt about the determination of the Harper leadership to pursue a radical neo-liberal agenda, aimed at reducing as much as possible the federal government's contribution to the welfare state. This was an important core principle for the Reform Party, and it remains a preoccupation of the Prime Minister.

There is also no doubt that the Conservatives will have to pay attention to their religious

constituency, and its allies on moral issues. In a country where voting turnout is never high, and where conservative westerners in particular have demonstrated their willingness to defect to new parties, even a Conservative party preoccupied with other issues cannot afford to take Christian right support for granted. The book has been firmly and publicly closed on same-sex marriage, and it is hard to imagine any major attempt to roll back gains by gay/lesbian rights advocates. Nor is it imaginable that the issue of abortion would be moved to the front burners of the federal policy agenda. But there will be other issue less high in profile on which action may be taken to provide assurances to that crucial core of supporters. Censorship is one; sexual offences; transgender rights; assisted reproduction may well be others. Sexual diversity may not be the named target of any of these initiatives, but LGBT visibility will be read as one of the problems being addressed by more restrictive policy on such fronts.

The Conservative Party, like parties of the right in several European countries, are faced with a continuing dilemma, and we are likely to see oscillation between brokerage styles on the one hand, and appeals to core religious supporters on the other. The party will likely continue its pattern of communicating electoral messages to religious conservatives under the radar, relying on the pragmatism of Christian right political groups to convince supporters that keeping even a constrained Conservative Party in power is infinitely preferable to the alternatives.

Figure 1: Cross-National Comparison of Attitudes Toward Homosexuality, 1981-2000
 (% "Never Justified" in World Values Surveys)



Notes

1. Court challenges made strong sense in this domain, since the heterosexual exclusiveness of marriage in Canada had been established in common law, not by statute. Jurisdiction over the definition of marriage (and divorce) lies with the federal government, and over the administration of marriage and most other aspects of family law with the provinces.
2. The marriages that then took place were the first in the world to have no explicit restrictions on parenting rights, as was the case with Dutch marriage, enacted before this, and Belgian marriage, enacted also in 2003.
3. Analysis of data from the 2004 election study suggests that same-sex marriage was not an important issue, and neither was abortion. If that was true in 2004, the argument would be even stronger for 2006. However, the marriage issue would seem to me to have acted as a symbolic marker of the Conservatives' willingness to defend "traditional values," and have a subtle influence on morally conservative voters even when they regarded issues like health as much more important. See Elisabeth Gidengil, et al. (2006).
4. This is not true of all issues related to sexual diversity. On protecting gays and lesbians against discrimination in work and housing, Americans and Canadians are not much different. They are also not very distinct from one another in being evenly divided on the question of same-sex adoption, even though adoption rights are (in law) almost entirely extended to same-sex couples in Canada, and only spottedly in the U.S.
5. In 2000 World Values Surveys, the proportion of the population responding that homosexuality was "never justified" dropped to half of what it had been in 1980 in Canada, the U.S., Western Germany, and France. Data sent to author in August 2007.
6. This is through the "notwithstanding" provisions in Section 33 of the Charter, allowing a legislature to act in contravention of the Charter if it explicitly declares a bill as doing just that. Legislative approval must be renewed every five years.
7. This commentary is based in part on extensive confidential interviews with representatives of all Alberta's provincial parties, journalists, lawyers, and activists between 1998 and 2000.
8. There was of course reticence or avoidance among many priests, though the ferocity of the Vatican's attack on gay marriage narrowed the room for dissidence.
9. In the Ph.D. program at the University of Toronto, Farney has been exploring conservatism in Canada and the U.S. Interviewed for this paper on 3 August 2007.
10. This was in a presentation made to a class of mine in "Religion and Politics," March 2008.

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11. This is a point made by David Laycock in comparing Reform/Alliance with what might be construed as similar European parties of protest. See *The New Right and Democracy in Canada*, chap. 7.
 12. Personal correspondence, August 2007.
 13. Farney interview, 3 August 2007.
 14. This point comes from Farney, Interview, 3 August 2007.
 15. Interview, 3 August 2007.
 16. Confidential interview, May 2008.
 17. This is a view obviously shared by Hugh Segal (2007), but also comes from a Conservative insider, interviewed confidentially, August 2007.
 18. Interview, 3 August 2007.
 19. An Environics poll in the spring of 2006 showed that 62 percent did not want the issue re-raised. On the substantive question, 59 percent supported lesbian/gay marriage, and only 24 percent strongly opposed. (Polling from 25 May to 2 June).
 20. An Environics poll in the spring of 2006 showed that 66 percent did not want the issue re-raised. “Environics/CBC 2006 Federal Election Survey.” (Online at: http://erg.environics.net/media_room/default.asp?aID=598. – accessed May 11, 2007.) On the substantive question, 59 percent supported lesbian/gay marriage, and only 24 percent strongly opposed. (Environics Research Group, “Canadians for Equal Marriage,” online at: http://erg.environics.net/media_room/default.asp?aID=609. – accessed, May 10, 2007.)
 21. Manning has frequently talked about how strongly Canadian political (and parliamentary) culture mitigates against professing faith in political life, but making the point that such constraint is inappropriate.
 22. An Ipsos-Reid poll, 2006.
 23. Confidential interview, July 2007.
 24. Confidential interview, August 2007.
 25. For many conservatives, this had only become an issue when homosexual activity was decriminalized (1969) and when courts in the 1980s and ‘90s made clear that discrimination based on sexual orientation were unconstitutional. There was a remaining discriminatory

provision on the statute books criminalizing anal sex for those under eighteen. Even though it had been ruled unconstitutional in two provinces, the Conservative government resisted any amendment to their bill to remove that anomalous provision.

26. It was not harmonized for anal sex, for which the age of consent was set at 18. Even though that discriminatory provision has been ruled unconstitutional by courts in two provinces, the anomalous wording remains in the statute books. Although the issue was raised during debate over the Conservative bill to raise the overall age of consent to 16, there is no chance that the Conservatives would accept such an amendment.

27. Focus on the Family already had a foundation in Canada before the creation of its branch plant and Ottawa-based family institute. James Dobson's radio program, for example, is heard on 130 Canadian radio stations.

28. Confidential interview, July 2007.

29. His family's faith is strong enough that their four children have been home schooled.**Error! Main Document Only.**Rayside, "Conservative Christianity . . ."

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