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MPs flounder in policy vacuum: Radical ideas fill void in Reform's social policy: [FINAL Edition]

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Abstract (summary)

Art Hanger announced a trip to Singapore to study the caning of prisoners. Jim Silye and Jan Brown told the media they think this creates an extremist image. The Reform caucus beat up on Silye and Brown behind closed doors until they staggered out and apologized for talking too much.

Meanwhile, leader Preston Manning said caning is not party policy but Hanger is free to study it and the party's grassroots will decide. Finally, Hanger said maybe he won't go to Singapore after all.

Moreover, to adopt flogging as a policy would consign Reform to the margins of Canadian politics, regarded by most voters as too irresponsible to govern. And in any case, flogging has no chance of being adopted by the Canadian prison system; Singapore-style caning would certainly violate the prohibition of ``cruel and unusual treatment or punishment" in section 12 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Full Text

Tom Flanagan is professor of political science at the University of Calgary and former Reform party strategist. William Gold's column returns next week.

Calgary's Reform MPs had quite a week last week.

Art Hanger announced a trip to Singapore to study the caning of prisoners. Jim Silye and Jan Brown told the media they think this creates an extremist image. The Reform caucus beat up on Silye and Brown behind closed doors until they staggered out and apologized for talking too much.

Meanwhile, leader Preston Manning said caning is not party policy but Hanger is free to study it and the party's grassroots will decide. Finally, Hanger said maybe he won't go to Singapore after all.

Hanger is a good, hard-working MP, but he has latched on to a bad idea. It has taken 250 years for Western society to renounce the torture of prisoners, and it would be a dreadful mistake to start back down that road.

Moreover, to adopt flogging as a policy would consign Reform to the margins of Canadian politics, regarded by most voters as too irresponsible to govern. And in any case, flogging has no chance of being adopted by the Canadian prison system; Singapore-style caning would certainly violate the prohibition of ``cruel and unusual treatment or punishment" in section 12 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Let's hope Hanger cancels his trip to Singapore, drops the flogging idea, and gets back to his other ideas on criminal justice, such as ``truth in sentencing" and reform of parole. If he does, the punishment that Reform has inflicted on itself in the last week need not be too severe in the long run.

Nonetheless, it is disconcerting to see the party discussing flogging at a time when it should be presenting the nation with badly needed alternatives to Paul Martin's recent budget. What are Reform's proposals on pensions, on tax changes for divorced couples, on transfers to the provinces for health care and advanced education? Answers to these questions are what the electorate expects from a party that wants to be the official Opposition.

How did the party slide into such a mess? At least part of the explanation lies in long-term neglect of social issues. From the beginning, Manning wanted to keep the emphasis on three main topics -- constitutional, fiscal, and political reform. He worked hard and engaged his prestige as leader to develop policy in these domains.

Not everyone will agree with these policies, but it is clear what the party stands for: Triple-E Senate, equality of the provinces, balanced budgets, direct democracy, and so on. If you don't like these policies, you should take your vote elsewhere.

By comparison, only a few social policies (bilingualism, multiculturalism, immigration) are really well developed. On many other issues, such as human rights, employment equity, pay equity, divorce and family law, and pornography and censorship, policy remains rudimentary and parameters are unclear.

In combination with Reform's populism, this policy vacuum is a dangerous standing invitation to extreme ideas. Stephen Harper saw the danger as early as 1989, when he wrote, ``The key is to emphasize moderate, conservative social values consistent with the traditional family, the market economy and patriotism."'

Reform needs to put up ideological fences to protect its social flank, as it has already protected its constitutional, fiscal and political flanks. As of now, the party seems to be open for anything in too many areas of social policy.

If Manning is to shake Reform's extremist image, he has to fill the social-policy void. Politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum.

The best way to prevent extreme ideas from crowding in is to lead the party towards a coherent and moderate articulation of traditional Canadian moral values. By all means, continue to emphasize the Constitution and public finance. But don't leave the party vulnerable on social issues.

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Illustration

PHOTO: HANGER: SHOULD DROP CANING IDEA

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