

NEO-CONS AND THEO-CONS

True conservatives — whether in the economic or social camps — must first find common ground if they are to achieve political power

By TOM FLANAGAN and STEPHEN HARPER

Recently we published an essay in *The Next City* magazine outlining the history and evolution of conservatism in Canadian federal politics, including suggestions for possible future cooperation between the Reform and Progressive Conservative parties.

Ted Byfield, publisher of *Alberta Report* and dean of conservative writers in Canada, acknowledged that we were on the right track but suggested that, to make peace on the right, one has to resolve an even bigger problem — the split between economic and social conservatives, or, as Byfield prefers to call them, "neo-cons" and "theo-cons."

In his words: "Conservatism in Canada consists these days of two radically separate groups that are held together not by what they favor but by what they oppose. Neither likes big government. But one lot dislikes it for what it costs, while the other lot dislikes it for what it does."

Byfield's statement contains an obvious element of truth. There are two rather different political philosophies that are commonly referred to as "conservative" in the modern sense.

One, now called "economic conservatism," is really classical or Enlightenment liberalism. Its primary value is individual freedom, and, to that end, it stresses competitive markets, religious toleration, limited government and the rule of law.

The other is Burkean conservatism. Its primary value is social order, and, to that end, it stresses respect for custom and traditions (religious traditions above all), voluntary association and personal self-restraint, reinforced by moral and legal sanctions on behavior.

Two lines of thought

These are two different lines of thought, and if there were no egalitarian, statist left wing in our politics, classical liberalism and traditional conservatism might enter the field against each other as distinct parties and ideologies.

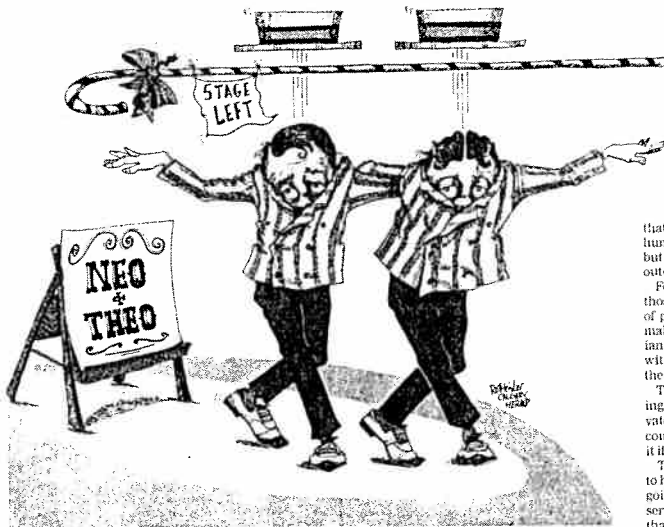
Indeed, before the rise of socialism in the late 19th century, politics in most countries, including Canada, had that configuration.

On one side was a liberal party in the classical sense — rationalist, anti-clerical, free trading, often republican. And on the other side was a conservative party — traditionalist, explicitly or implicitly denominationalist, economically protectionist, usually monarchist.

That configuration has long since been altered in advanced democracies, although, if the current decline of the radical left were to lead to its eventual disappearance as a significant political force, the old alignment might re-emerge.

We believe, however, that this is unlikely in any realistic time frame. There are far too many groups with vested interests in big government and redistributive policies that will continue to propagate and legitimize collectivist values.

The need to oppose the left demonstrates to classical liberals and traditionalist conservatives how much they have in common and makes possi-



When confronting the left, neo-cons and theo-cons realize that they both oppose public ownership, government interventionism, redistribution of wealth and state sponsorship of humanitarian value systems, and that they both favor private property, small government and reliance on civil society, rather than the state, to resolve social dilemmas.

The use of the term "conservative" to describe both economic and social conservatism is more than coincidental. Besides opposing modern state socialism, both brands of conservative thought share a common ethos, as well as a common electorate.

On the one hand, the ethical assumptions of social and religious conservatives — free will, personal responsibility, family values — underpin economic arrangements that emphasize self-reliance, small government and voluntary association. On the other hand, the functioning of a market economy is dependent on the widespread acceptance of certain common values, such as honesty and general social stability, without which economic activity becomes politicized and litigious while transaction costs rise rapidly.

To be sure, the thought-waves of economic and social conservatives are somewhat different. Economic conservatives are likely to criticize the left for waste, inefficiency and limitations on individual freedom, while social conservatives are most afraid of state-sponsored onslaughts upon traditional communities and value systems.

But the purpose of politics is not to obtain pure theoretical agreement; those debates can and should be left to theologians, philosophers, economists and political scientists. The purpose of political action is to create workable coalitions that advance the interests of the coalition partners while preserving civil peace in the larger society.

Coalitions can work

Experience shows that the two kinds of conservatives are capable of sustaining workable coalitions in modern politics. It has happened in Britain under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher and John Major; in the United States under Ronald Reagan and George Bush; and in many places in North America at the regional level. At present, Progressive Conservative provincial parties, based on precisely this type of coalition, are governing Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario and doing yeoman's service in trimming back the excesses of the welfare state.

We cannot think of a single example of a modern conservative party that has disintegrated be-

arguments — what else would you expect in politics? — but the coalitions have managed to stick together.

In contrast, the unresolved constitutional and regional questions unique to Canada's national political culture literally tore apart Brian Mulroney's coalition, leaving the Reform party, PCs, and Bloc Quebecois as political fragments.

Reform and PCs include economic and social conservatives (and some who are neither); the main lines of division between the two parties involve issues such as bilingualism, distinct society and direct democracy. The evidence suggests these differences must be overcome if conservatives are to come to power in Canada.

Four prerequisites

The differences between economic and social conservatives can be managed as long as intelligence and good will prevails on both sides. We think there are four prerequisites to such political management.

First, and most important, the two sides have to recognize that they need each other. Of the two groups, there are fewer social conservatives, and religious conservatives — the true "theo-cons" — are an even smaller element, at least in Canada; they can never win an election on their own.

Social conservatives will be permanently excluded from any share of power if they do not come to terms with economic conservatives.

On the other hand, if social conservatives were to migrate in numbers to a party such as Christian Heritage, they could probably deny victory to a purely economic conservative party.

Hence the economic conservatives also need the social conservatives.

Since the two sides need each other, elementary prudence suggests focusing discussion on areas of common interest. Constant emphasis on differences is counter-productive. If we dwell on them long and loud enough, we just might convert manageable differences into an irreconcilable split.

Both sides should avoid inaccurate stereotyping of the other. Byfield, for example, is clearly wrong to write that "many (economic) conservatives would be happy" if big government "did the same thing for a whole lot less money." This might be an accurate description of pragmatic liberals such as Paul Martin and Bill Clinton, but it does not apply to economic conservatives. They dislike big government not just because it is expensive, but because it is economically inefficient and erodes the sense of personal responsibility on which the market order depends.

of traditional morality.

A second major prerequisite for maintaining a coalition is that both social and economic conservatives have to be moderate in their objectives.

Social conservatives who are also Christians have to remember that politics is fundamentally about establishing civil peace; it is not the means for bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth.

Economic conservatives have to remember that the market economy is a widely successfully human arrangement for meeting human needs, but it is not a utopian plan that will produce ideal outcomes in all circumstances.

Fortunately, Canadian politics offers outlets for those few conservatives with a purist conception of politics. Social conservatives unwilling to make compromises can work through the Christian Heritage Party, and economic conservatives with a purist conception of the market can join the Libertarian Party.

These parties function like safety valves, offering a respectable political home to highly motivated activists who oppose the idea of a broader conservative coalition and who would destabilize it if they tried to remain within it.

Third, economic and social conservatives need to hear certain things from each other if they are going to maintain mutual trust. Economic conservatives need to hear social conservatives say that they accept market economies and will not pursue judicial activism, such as the prohibition of taking interest on loans.

Even more important, economic conservatives need to hear that social conservatives accept freedom of the individual conscience as the foundation of the moral order.

Social conservatives are justified to demand that the civil order not make it impossible to live out a vision of Judeo-Christian morality, but that is different from legislating that vision for all.

Social conservatives need to hear from economic conservatives that the latter do not intend to unleash government, in the name of individual freedom, against the right of voluntary association or any concept of community values.

Social conservatives — rightly, in our view — are keenly aware that society does not consist simply of individuals contracting with one another. Society includes the natural association of the family, as well as all sorts of voluntary associations, such as churches, private schools and charitable endeavors.

A disturbing tendency of our time is for governments, in the name of individual choice, to dictate to these associations.

Social conservatives also need to know that economic conservatives do not favor using government as an agent of propaganda in favor of secularized moral relativism, for instance, through the teaching of sexual ethics in the public schools.

Hedonism and amoral libertarianism can always be found in a free society, but they are not its purpose. Indeed, any sensible person recognizes that when the exercise of freedom becomes widely irresponsible, a free society will not long endure.

Finally, economic and social conservatives have to stop proposing simplistic litmus tests to each other for qualifying as a "true conservative."

Human beings are too diverse not to have individual differences of opinion. Many people whose views, by any reasonable definition, are generally conservative doubt the wisdom of direct democracy, or question whether a human embryo can have enforceable legal rights from the moment of conception, or wonder whether it is better to legalize or outlaw psychoactive drugs. Politics is the art of managing such differences, of finding the common ground that will permit an admittedly imperfect resolution of conflict. Until Canadian conservatives master this art, they will not deserve to govern.

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