

# We need our political shorthand

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After last week's COMPAS poll found that many Canadians are unclear about the terms "left" and "right," commentators rushed to their word processors to proclaim the end of ideology. But despite all the babble, "left" and "right" remain meaningful words, which is why people continue to use them when they talk about politics.

The left-right terminology arose in the early days of the French Revolution, when the republicans in the National Assembly were seated to the left, and the monarchists to the right of the Speaker. That accident of location gave rise to a political vocabulary because it could be mapped onto the underlying dimension of difference containing the political positions of the day. There were radical innovators — the republicans — as well as traditionalist defenders of the *ancien régime* — the royalists — while between them stood the advocates of a limited, constitutional monarchy, attempting to combine features of old and new. Left, right, and centre were obvious metaphors to describe the relative positioning.

In the 19th century, the political struggle over constitutionalism continued to rage in the Western world but was also overlaid by an economic struggle over capitalism and socialism. In this new context, the radical innovators — socialists or communists, as they were interchangeably called — wanted full public ownership and control of the economy, while conservatives defended private property and the marketplace. There was also an intermediate position, held by reforming liberals and social democrats, who wanted state interventionism in the economy but not full-fledged socialism. Again, left, right, and centre seemed like appropriate metaphors for the different positions.

However, the coexistence of two dimensions of difference — political and economic — opened up the possibility that people might be left on one dimension but right on the other. For example, the more radical socialists, such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, were on the left economically. They also professed to be democrats but didn't really believe in constitutionalism, the rule of law and political freedom, so on the political dimension they had more in common with pre-Revolutionary absolutists than with constitutional republicans.

The culture wars of the late 20th century complicated things further. On the new cultural dimension of difference, forms of radical individualism, such as the feminist and gay rights movements, seemed to be on the left; proponents of traditional morality seemed to occupy the right; and of course there were intermediate positions in the centre.

Again, this raised problems of consistency. In conservative circles, everyone agrees that taxes are too high and the economy is over-regulated; but there are never-ending arguments about cultural issues such as abortion, euthanasia and drugs. Some, often calling themselves libertarians, think these should be treated as matters of personal choice in which government has no role; others, sometimes calling themselves social conservatives, see these as areas where government must enforce aspects of morality essential to social cohesion.

Liberals have their own in-house squabbles. They all endorse the redistributive welfare state; but some, whose passion for equality overrides love of freedom, want government to enforce speech codes and prohibitions of hate propaganda, while others (the civil liberties crowd), think freedom of speech is a higher value.

Cynics coin epigrams like "What's left of the right?" And it's true that, with three different dimensions in play, not everyone is going to be consistently positioned on the left or right. But does that mean we should abandon the terminology?

No, as long as we can keep attention focused on a single dimension. For example, if we are talking about economic issues, it is evident that the left is more redistributive and interventionist, while the right is more market-oriented. In that context, left, right, and centre become handy shorthand labels for complex sets of ideas. In ordinary discussion, it is more vivid and effective to say "We have to move this party to the left (or right)" than to launch into a long harangue about policy positions.

Serious problems of oversimplification arise, however, with global descriptions. Consider today's *bête noire* of right-thinking people (pun intended) — Jean-Marie Le Pen. While usually depicted as being on the extreme right, he advocates an interventionist economic program of protection and subsidies for declining industries that he himself describes as leftist and that would be worthy of the NDP.

Thomas Hobbes said it all in 1651: "Words are wise men's counters, they do but reckon by them; but they are the money of fools."

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