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With smaller government, there'd be less to squabble over

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Abstract (summary)

Then there is Gay Pride. Everyone loves a good costume party, even if the dress code is leather chaps and Stetsons for Calgary cowboys and leather hot pants and feather boas for Toronto gays. But why should the federal government subsidize any of this? The government was right to cut off the Toronto Gay Pride parade, but it should also have cut off the Calgary Stampede and all other regional festivals without some demonstrable intellectual or artistic value.

Full Text

Professor of political science at the University of Calgary, former Conservative campaign manager

Rahim Jaffer, abortion, the Toronto Gay Pride parade - these three issues have recently involved the Conservative government in heated debate. There is a common thread to these seemingly unrelated issues. They all illustrate what happens to a conservative government when it increases, rather than decreases, the size of the state.

Attention on Mr. Jaffer has focused on whether he violated the regulations for lobbying when he attempted to find subsidies for "green" businesses. But that question has little practical importance, given that he did not facilitate any grants and did not make any money. The much more important question is why has a conservative government created a \$1-billion Green Infrastructure Fund? Such discretionary granting programs are an irresistible attraction to would-be middlemen of all types. Indeed, advisers and representatives are indispensable if ordinary businessmen are to find their way through the maze of government rules.

In the 2004 election campaign, the Conservatives opposed government grants to business. Abandoning that position was perhaps part of what made it possible for them to win the 2006 election. As a one-time campaign manager, I am in favour of winning, but campaign positions can't change economic reality. Subsidies to business remain economically counterproductive, and conservatives should work to decrease,

not increase them.

The abortion issue arose when Prime Minister Stephen Harper chose to make the health of mothers and children in the Third World his signature issue as chair of the G8 and G20 summits but also chose not to include abortion in the package of health measures to be promoted. The suppressed question here is not whether abortion should be included, but why is a conservative government promoting government-to-government foreign aid? From Lord Peter Bauer's *Dissent on Development* to Dambisa Moyo's *Dead Aid*, scholars have found that government-to-government foreign aid, except for short-term disaster relief, actually impedes economic growth and good governance in the Third World.

There was no imperative for the government to seize on this issue. It would make more sense for Canada to steer the G8 and G20 into areas where we have already shown leadership, such as the management of the financial system, as indeed the Prime Minister is now doing. Maternal health may be a motherhood issue (pun intended) that everyone can support, but approaching it in terms of government-to-government foreign aid will mainly help international bureaucrats and Third World politicians. A better course would be to raise the standard of living in Third World countries by reducing trade barriers and encouraging foreign investment.

And then there is Gay Pride. Everyone loves a good costume party, even if the dress code is leather chaps and Stetsons for Calgary cowboys and leather hot pants and feather boas for Toronto gays. But why should the federal government subsidize any of this? The government was right to cut off the Toronto Gay Pride parade, but it should also have cut off the Calgary Stampede and all other regional festivals without some demonstrable intellectual or artistic value. To its credit, the government did indeed reduce this year's Stampede subsidy, but not enough to make Torontonians forgive the slight.

Again, the basic issue is government subsidies to festivals in the name of economic stimulus. This program is supposed to be temporary, so let's hope it really does disappear. In the meantime, however, cutting Gay Pride while continuing to support other festivals, even on a reduced scale, allows the government's opponents to paint it as homophobic.

Mr. Harper used to argue that the Conservative Party had to contain both fiscal conservative and social conservative wings, and that the key to holding them together was to reduce the role of government. With smaller government, fiscal conservatives would applaud lower taxes and less regulation, while social conservatives would have less reason to fear that government was bent on destabilizing the natural family and traditional morality. Mr. Harper's analysis was correct, as shown by these political difficulties his government has faced.

In any case, reality is about to take over in our new era of soaring deficits. Some may see it as bad news that there won't be any federal money for regional festivals or grandiose foreign-aid initiatives or uneconomic green projects. But the good news is that there will be fewer contrived issues to fight over.

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