

# Symbolic Democracy in Canada

## Managing the “Bewildered Herd”

**Morgan Duchesney**

This is an examination of what has been called symbolic democracy or mechanisms of formal freedom. We have a democratic system that is designed to create the impression that the government is accountable to voters. This is a system of government where the desires of the majority of voters are intentionally marginalized and subtly dismissed in favor of the requirements of concentrated economic power like transnational corporations. These anti-democratic tactics have also been called the “manufacture of consent”, a concept created by Walter Lippman, the father of the U.S. public relations industry and popularized by political activist Noam

Chomsky. Consent is manufactured in liberal democracies like Canada and the U.S. because it is not possible to use more direct methods of population control. Overtly despotic regimes like Saudi Arabia, China, Turkmenistan, Zimbabwe and others manufacture consent with public executions and the threat of torture and arbitrary imprisonment. On second thought, the U.S. must now join that list, although they do conduct their executions behind prison walls.

There are numerous examples of the Canadian government’s anti-democratic behav-

ior. While the situation has deteriorated under Stephen Harper, the trend began in earnest under Pierre Trudeau in the 1970s. I refer to ex-

cessive secrecy, concentration of power in the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), the muzzling of MPs and even cabinet ministers, draconian security laws, secret meetings regarding North American integration, the appointment of un-elected persons to cabinet and of course Stephen Harper’s infamous reversal of his nebulous fixed election law. The political watchdog group Democracy Watch is currently challenging Harper’s new law in federal court. Rather than protest Harper’s undemocratic tactics, critics of Democracy Watch’s court

action are instead concerned with the hundreds of millions of dollars wasted by a cancelled election.

Each of these examples is worthy of at least a book length examination but I have chosen as my primary example a comparison between the 2007 Canadian federal budget and the 2004 U.S. federal budget. These budgets starkly illustrate the disconnect between government policy and the expressed desires of the voting public. Before I examine these budgets I will provide some examples of how Canada

*The death of  
democracy is not  
likely to be an  
assassination from  
ambush. It will be  
a slow extinction  
from apathy,  
indifference, and  
undernourishment.*

Robert Hutchins



is actually governed, how others view Canadian democracy, and also a brief history of the creation of the Canadian Conservative party self-described as Canada's New Government. This empty and presumptuous title owes more to the corporate practice of branding than to any genuine interest in fresh thinking or positive reform. Rather, it is an example of the self-regarding attitude of many who reach the apex of political power. Somewhere along the way they become convinced that they and only they hold the key to national salvation and thus any excess is excusable. This pattern has been repeating itself for thousands of years, with predictable results.

### ***The Power Behind the Power – Those Who Govern the Governors***

The Business Council on National Issues (BCNI), formerly called the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, is a good introductory example of the omnipresent influence of concentrated economic power in Canadian politics. This organization represents corporate Canada and routinely exploits its privileged access to Canada's political leadership. This corporate cabal considers the vast majority of Canadians

to be what Lippman called a "bewildered herd." According to Lippman's theory, the general population is useful for things like "Supporting Our Troops", paying taxes and fighting wars, but is unfit to influence important public affairs and thus must be managed by the political, financial and ideological elite. I refer here to elected officials and senior bureaucrats, corporate leaders and, sadly, many journalists and academics. In this model, the electorate is reduced to casting a vote every few years and otherwise trusting the wisdom of the aforementioned elite. Voter apathy has become an integral part of the first-past-the-post electoral process that produces false majority governments by rendering useless the votes of huge blocks of the population who support small parties like the Green Party. It also facilitates the presence in the house of commons of divisive regional parties like the separatist Bloc Quebecois.

One of the key features of Liberal democracies is how they succeed in "...barring the annoying public from serious affairs...the goal is to eliminate public meddling in policy formation." (Chomsky, 1991). It is not unreasonable to assume that this might be the goal of the

Harper government in light of their nearly complete rejection of the people's wishes in their recent 2007 budget priorities. I will provide a more detailed treatment of the undemocratic 2007 federal budget in the article. I will also compare this budget to the 2004 U.S. federal budget, which also basically ignored the polled desires of the majority of American voters. As long as people remain isolated in front of their TV or computer screen, this situation will never improve because "...formal freedom poses no threat to privilege." (*Ibid.*) While we do have formal democratic mechanisms they are largely designed to create the illusion that voters actually have genuine influence over the behaviour of their elected representatives. In the absence of genuine participatory democracy, the average citizen is unlikely to engage in the type of intense political activism required to influence policy makers. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this article but the huge time commitment required for effective political activism tops the list. Protracted and persistent political activism is difficult in a consumption-driven culture that encourages the pursuit of instant gratification. By way of comparison, it has often been said that Third World activists, often facing brutal consequences for their actions, will not ask you what can be done, but will instead describe their ongoing struggles.

Real political influence is exerted from outside the established system. According to noted economist John Kenneth Galbraith, Nobel Laureate and former advisor to U.S. presidents, "Were it part of our everyday education and comment that the corporation is an instrument for the exercise of power, that it belongs to the process by which we are governed, there would then be debate on how that power is used and how it might be made subordinate to the public will and need. This debate is avoided by propa-

gating the myth that this power does not exist." (Galbraith, 1977) There has been some research conducted into the way private power exerts its influence on elected officials. Concerning this influence, Noam Chomsky comments in *Failed States* on the work of Lawrence Jacob and Benjamin Ford,

*...in a careful analysis of the sources of U.S. foreign policy, Lawrence Jacob and Benjamin Ford find, unsurprisingly, that the major influence is 'internationally-oriented business corporations,' with a secondary effect of experts [academics and journalists] (who, however, may themselves be influenced by business.) Public opinion, on contrast, has little or no significant effect on government officials. As they noted, the results would have been welcome to 'realists' such as Walter Lippman, who considered public opinion to be 'ill-informed and capricious' and 'warned that following public opinion would create a morbid derangement of the true functions of power... (Chomsky, 2006)*

***Those who corrupt  
the public mind are  
just as evil as those  
who steal from the  
public purse.***

Adlai E. Stevenson

The reality of this power and influence has been magnified by the transformation of the multinational corporation to transnational corporation, an economic entity that operates largely unaccountable to the political processes of its home and host countries. In fact, rather than operating as accountable actors on the world stage, these entities are now in a position to pressure government's for "...subsidies, tax privileges and appropriate labor legislation and market support..." (Kierans, 2001). Another device employed by transnational corporations to ensure government compliance is the threat of capital flight or moving money and/or jobs out of the country. Such behaviour is not considered unusual by the current Harper government nor did the previous Martin or Chrétien governments censor it.



### ***The Prime Minister's Office - PMO***

I would be remiss if I ignored the power of the PMO, a cadre of politically reliable partisan zealots tasked with controlling access to the Prime Minister and vetting all government communications, including public announcements from MPs and even cabinet ministers. It is not surprising that Stephen Harper's first communications chief was recruited from the Coca Cola Corporation to help brand the identity of the Harper government and provide ironclad control of government communications. Sandra Buckler's replacement is corporate lawyer Guy Giorno, one of the authors of Mike Harris' so-called Common Sense Revolution. His presence alone speaks volumes about the current government's underlying political philosophy and dedication to the glib, simplistic sloganeering of the previous Ontario conservative government. Mr. Giorino was chief of staff to Mike Harris and it was there that he learned the art of controlling the message. The PMO has interfered in the communication policies of every government department, most notably Environment Canada, whose pronouncements have a great potential for embarrassing the government when their evidence contradicts the government message.

According to author Linda McQuaig writing in the January 2009 issue of *Adbusters* magazine, "...he's projected an image of moderation, even though past statements reveal him to be an unabashed neoconservative in the tradition of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan." (McQuaig, 2008) Harper's supporters dismiss fears about his so-called "hidden agenda" and claim he has none. A careful scan of Harper's past comments and published writing indicates that he has a vision quite out of tune with the majority of Canadians. The fact that he is careful not to discuss this vision does not negate its existence. "The success of the Harper government seems to have less to do with its political positions than with Harper's ability to turn the conservative party into a slick, well-disciplined machine... Harper keeps a tight rein on the party, ensuring that the social conservatism

that still lurks inside it is largely invisible to the Canadian public." (*Ibid.*) Occasionally, the Reformer escapes and we witness the debacle of Harper's recent anti-arts comments and funding cuts. He paid a political price for this lapse in discipline and afforded the nation a glimpse into the heart of social conservatism that beats in Stephen Harper's chest and is the true nature of what he represents.

To admit that the expansion of the PMO's power began under Pierre Trudeau in no way excuses the current regime. What these people seem to forget is that the information they are controlling is the property of the Canadian people, held in trust. It ought to be surrendered on demand, with the possible exception of genuine national security data.

### ***Canada's role in Afghanistan – House of Commons Standing Committee on Defense – Official Contempt for Democracy***

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Defense recently expressed its annoyance with the attitude of the Canadian people about Canada's role in the Afghan quagmire. Not surprisingly, the committee reached conclusions entirely sympathetic to the dubious goals of the Harper government. The committee's report is also notable for its blatant contempt for the democratic process. As University of Toronto professor John Duncan wrote about the committee's attitude, "Western [Canadian] tolerance for protracted conflict has become quite limited. Public opinion at home, detached as it is from the reality of the battlefield, can turn on a dime and force governments to bring the troops home, just because citizens feel they have had enough." (*Ottawa Citizen*: Dec. 22, 2008, p. A10) In a classic Lippmanesque statement, the committee has defined the will of the people as an inconvenience to the superior planning of the betters. The committee goes on to suggest, "...that government and the media should conspire to persuade Canadians – alleged impatient, intolerant, ignorant, emotional and selfish – to support objectives we might otherwise not sup-

port.” (*Ibid.*) The House of Commons Standing Committee on Defense must believe that the truest expression of democracy is voters’ mindless support of government policy. In another age it would be called deference to one’s betters.

Perhaps Canadians should be demanding a full explanation of why Canada is involved in Afghanistan in the first place? I offered a fuller explanation in an article that appeared in the autumn, 2008 issue of *Humanist Perspectives* and was designed to challenge the government’s shaky justifications and stimulate debate:

Here are a few reasons for Canada’s presence in Afghanistan whose predictability is matched only by the degree to which their publication is muted and otherwise suppressed. All of the points I make are related to Canadian appeasement of the U.S. government and the transnational business interests they serve:

*-Canada is in Afghanistan rather than Iraq to appease our powerful U.S. allies. The Afghanistan counter-insurgency, with its lower casualty rate and NATO approval, is more politically viable than the Iraq quagmire.*

*-Afghanistan is unfortunately located at the centre of a group of oil and natural gas producers such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Iran. The U.S. government and the transnational corporations they serve must control access to these resources.*

*-Afghanistan itself has considerable natural resources and must not be allowed to control its own resources. Hence, the Afghan people must contend with the government of Karzai who was elected only after being “selected” by the U.S. government because of his public support of NATO forces in Afghanistan*

*-Afghanistan is located at the centre of three nuclear powers: China, Pakistan and India. There is no love between India and Pakistan and the economies of China and India are expanding at a phenomenal pace. The U.S. government*

*must maintain a military presence near its main rival China for a number of reasons that are worth mentioning but are beyond the scope of this article. I refer to the technological, military and economic rivalry between Washington and Beijing.*

*To mask the deeper reasons for its military presence in that unfortunate country, the Canadian government is pretending to believe that the Taliban are a genuine threat to the West. The excellent humanitarian work of Canadian soldiers and aid workers is being used as an emotional smokescreen to discourage dissent and mute critics through a cheap and transparent appeal to emotion. A 2011 withdrawal date for Canadian troops was announced by the Conservative government during the recent election but this date may prove as flexible as the Prime Minister’s generous interpretation of the vaunted new fixed election law.*

### ***The Creation of the Conservative Party of Canada – Political Expediency in Action***

One of the foundations of genuine democracy is ethical and principled leadership. It could be said that a party established by unethical means is doomed to govern unethically for reasons of expediency and convenience or simple apathy. The Conservative Party of Canada is not the first nor will it be the last political entity created by the tactics of betrayal. What is unique in this Canadian example is the ruthlessness of the betrayal and the way the voting public has chosen to ignore it. I am referring to the suppressed story behind the creation of what is currently called the Conservative Party of Canada.

According to former Progressive Conservative leadership candidate David Orchard, the ruling Conservative Party was founded “...in a blatantly fraudulent manner.” (*Ottawa Citizen*: Dec. 10, 2004. p. A14) Mr. Orchard claimed that he had been betrayed by rival leadership candidate Peter MacKay on the advice of current Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Mr. Orchard and Mr. Mackay were the 2003 Pro-

gressive conservative leadership candidates with the largest blocks of delegates. Mr. Orchard and his delegates decided to support Mr. Mackay as leader of the Progressive Conservative party. Orchard and MacKay agreed upon a deal in writing and signed it. "Point number one of our agreement was no merger or joint candidates with the Canadian Alliance." (*Ibid.*) Mr. Harper, the leader of the Canadian Alliance party, "...urged him [Mackay] to abandon his commitments to the membership of the PC Party and his agreement with me [Orchard], and to merge the party into the Canadian Alliance." (*Ibid.*) Mr. Mackay accomplished this surprise merger by subsequently allowing "...tens of thousands of Alliance members to join the PC party to overwhelm our existing membership..." (*Ibid.*) It seems evident that the Conservative Party believes that victory itself justifies any tactics because of the importance of their assuming the mantle of power. This is a self-centered belief that they and only they are fit to lead. Such delusions of grandeur are common enough.

The Harper government's general disdain for genuine participatory democracy is not surprising if one considers Harper's disregard for the will of large numbers of Progressive Conservative delegates and for signed agreements. Ironically, the Conservative party of Canada is actually true to the original spirit of Athenian democracy. Those noble inventors of the democratic tradition also practiced a secretive and exclusionary form of government that catered to the whims of the wealthy and powerful.

***The 2007 Canadian Federal Budget and the 2004 U.S. Federal Budget – Both Ignore Voters' Expressed Desires***

The remainder of this article will be dedicated to a comparative analysis of the 2007

Canadian federal budget and the 2004 U.S. federal budget. I will provide evidence of my belief that the government of Stephen Harper actually has little interest in the desires of working Canadians unless those desires are in accords with the pre-determined goals of the government and its powerful backers. This scenario is common to every Western democracy and the previous Liberal/Conservative governments in Canada behaved in precisely the same fashion. "The Liberal Party abandoned the principles of reform

and social liberalism and has become, instead, just another piece of political machinery in the service of corporatism." (Kierans, 2001) It is interesting to note, though, that the people's expressed desires are now temporarily important to Stephen Harper since the country is in election mode. The contempt will return soon enough. A common device employed to create the impression of con-

cerned and responsive government is the publicly funded survey. The results of these expensive exercises in populism provide an accurate tool of comparison for determining the degree to which government policy is aligned with the public's desires.

*As Finance Minister Jim Flaherty honed his budget last February, Canadians were expressing heightened alarm about the rising price of oil, the loss of manufacturing jobs and global warming. As well, according to an \$82,500 pre-budget survey [Corporate Research Associates] commissioned by the Department of Finance, they identified health care, environmental issues and crime as top priorities for government action.*

(Ottawa Citizen: July 30, 2008 p. A10.)

Flaherty then proceeded to create a budget that mainly ignored these concerns or placed the greatest emphasis on the public's lowest priorities. The 2004 U.S. federal budget follows

***The urge to save  
humanity is  
almost always a  
false front for the  
urge to rule.***

H.L. Mencken

the same pattern. A 2004 study by the Program on International Policy attitudes (PIPA) "...revealed that popular attitudes are virtually the inverse of policy: with considerable consistency, where the budget was to increase, the public wanted it to decline; where it was to decline, the public wanted it to increase." (Chomsky, 2006) On the issue of tax cuts in Canada, despite the fact that Canadians expressed little interest in tax cuts, tax cuts were promised at both the individual and corporate level for a total of \$24 billion. The U.S. situation was more extreme in that,

*...a clear majority (63%) favored rolling back the tax cuts for people with incomes over \$200,000. Nevertheless, the Bush administration insisted that funding for the victims of Hurricane Katrina must come from social spending, because, 'the continuing support for tax cuts, including those aimed at the wealthiest Americans', the press reported. 'Tax cuts remain sacrosanct, much like privatized health care. In contrast, government programs, lack 'political support', only enjoying public support. (Ibid.)*

The support President Bush refers to above is political support, as opposed to public support. The important message here is unspoken because a public explanation would be dangerous to the established order. Political support comes from concentrated economic power and can never be ignored. Public support, on the other hand, is only required at election time or when predictable survey results are required.

This notion of political support versus public support is a succinct way of explaining the way in which concentrated private power exerts its powerful influence on elected officials and the execution of public business. In the U.S. PIPA example, '...the public called for the deepest cuts in the programs that are most

rapidly increasing, and for substantial spending increases in areas that are shortchanged. Once again, these results provide very significant information for the population of a functioning democracy. (Ibid.) In example after example, it becomes clear that the government's pretence of interest in voters' desires is an exercise in symbolic democracy designed to create the impression that the expressed interests of the population are a government priority.

*There is considerable evidence to suggest that the expressed views of the voting public are of little interest to government elites and their corporate partners.*

In Canada, the 2007 federal budget made no mention of reducing wait times despite clearly identified public support for reduced wait times for health care. The same holds true for action on greenhouse gas emissions. Not only did the government ignore these desires, they did so in spite of the fact that the Corporate Research Associates survey showed "...[Canadians] expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the government's performance." (Ibid) This is all good news for those who support the expansion of private health care in Canada, in spite of the overwhelming negative U.S. experience.

On the subject of defense spending the pattern continues in both Canada and the U.S. The Canadian budget "...trumpeted new spending on defense – rated rock bottom by Canadians on a list of 18 priorities – and unveiled policies designed to protect and secure sovereignty in the north, ranked second last." (Ibid) According to PIPA in the U.S., "The deepest cut called for by the public was in the defense budget, on average 31%; second largest was cuts in supplemental for Iraq and Afghanistan." (Chomsky 2006) On the subject of Afghanistan, Stephen Harper has recently announced Canada's exit from that troubled country, quite possibly to appease Quebec voters in his attempt to secure a majority government. Prior to the announcement of the October 14<sup>th</sup> election, Stephen Harper was full of macho rhetoric about Canada upholding



its international responsibilities in Afghanistan. The durability of his government's support for the NATO (U.S.) assault on Afghanistan is typical in its expedient flexibility.

It does not take extraordinary intelligence or superior powers of observation to conclude that Canada and the U.S. are governed largely by a system of false or symbolic democracy where the population is encouraged in the belief that their views matter. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the expressed views of the voting public are of little interest to government elites and their corporate partners. This state of affairs can be changed. Many nations in South America have taken the dramatic step of electing governments that actually respond to voters' expressed desires with some degree of consistency. What a dangerous concept.

#### References

Butler, D. (2008, July 30). "Tory budget ignored public concerns". *Ottawa Citizen*, p. A10.

Chomsky, N. (2006). *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Chomsky, N. (1991). *Deterring Democracy*. London: Verso.

Duchesney, M. (2008). "The Political Economy of Afghanistan: Unthinkable thoughts and unprintable words". *Humanist Perspectives*, 41 (3), pp. 19-23.

Galbraith, J. K. (1977). *The Age of Uncertainty*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Kierans, E. with Stewart, W. (2001). *Remembering*. Toronto: Stoddart.

McQuaig, L. (2009, Jan/Feb) "Only in Canada". *Adbusters*, 81 (17) ,1, pp. 68-69.

Orchard, D. (2004, Dec.14). "The beginning of the end". *Ottawa Citizen*, p. A14.

*Morgan Duchesney is an Ottawa writer and martial arts instructor with an interest in social justice and international affairs. He holds an MA in Political Economy from Carleton University.*

## Beliefs for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: a Humanist-Evolutionist Creed?

**Denys Ford**

**O**ur universe birthed in the Big Bang 12-15 billion years ago and our earth some 4 billion years ago. The multitude of galaxies, each with millions of stars, suggests that many star planets might permit other 'life forms.'

About 3 billion years ago inorganic chemical substances reacted under the influence of heat, irradiation or electrical discharges to produce complicated organic compounds that achieved the capacity for self-reproduction (replication). This took place over millions of years either at surface water or adjacent to volcanic vents on the ocean floor. Organic com-

pounds may have also been derived from meteorites. Replication depended on the properties of nucleic acids, primarily DNA, but also RNA, which form the basis of 'life' on earth. DNA is a billion-long string of four substances, the sequential order of which determines "digital" information for the production of proteins which are the working-components of the cells of all organisms. The specific sequences determining the production of the individual amino acid components of proteins are known as the genetic code which is uniform for all living organisms. In fact, humans share most of their DNA with worms and snails and 99% with the apes. Currently, we cannot precisely define "life" or a