



Photo by Don Hall

The Rise of Neoconservatism in Canada

Shadia B. Drury

“**A**ll you have to do is watch CNN for five minutes to make you run out and kiss the ground and thank your lucky stars that you live in Canada.” Canadian rock star Burton Cummings is not alone in expressing this sentiment. It is common among Canadians from the rock star to the conservative icon, George Grant, whose *Lament for a Nation* (1965) bemoaned the integration of Canada into the America sphere of influence. As expressed by the edgy lyrics of the *Guess Who*’s “American Woman”:

*I don't need your war machines
I don't need your ghetto scenes
Colored lights can hypnotize
Sparkle someone else's eyes*

The American juggernaut lost its effort to take over Canada by military means in the War of 1812, and has been sore about it ever since. It seems that Canada has foiled what Americans believed was their Manifest Destiny – to dominate the whole North American continent. It is an achievement that has made generations of Canadians proud. Just by its very existence, Canada has managed to foil the divine plan. Nevertheless, the Americans may still get their wish. Not by military means, which is their general modus operandi, but by a slow and subtle seduction. After all, America has “sparkled” the eyes of Stephen Harper and his gang of neocon-

servatives. These Canadians have long adored the United States and dreamed of remaking Canada in her image. Now that they have the majority of seats in Parliament, their wish may quickly become a reality.

The *National Post* likes to describe the intellectual roots of the new Conservative Party as coming from the “Calgary School.” This has the effect of giving the new party a Canadian flavour. But nothing could be further from the truth. Neoconservatism is a distinctly American brand of conservatism, which has replaced the Canadian conservatism we inherited from the British – a style of conservatism based on community, co-operation, obligation, moderation, caution, and suspicion of radical change. This British/Canadian conservatism is un-American. There is nothing in the self-understanding of the United States that inclines it to a slow, moderate, or cautious approach to social and political change. The distinctively American brand of conservatism is radical, belligerent, and brutally competitive. This makes it an intimate cousin of the American brand of liberalism.

The United States has always adopted a staunchly militant brand of liberalism, unmediated by a conservative spirit. Its history, starting with the American War of Independence, has always been unnecessarily combative. The War of Independence itself was an unnecessary war. We in Canada have managed to acquire freedom, economic opportunities, and representa-

tive institutions by negotiating with the mother country and learning from her long-standing traditions and experience. But in the American revolutionary era, the Protestant Churches beat the drums of war and insisted that America was the new Israel, Americans were the chosen people, the British were the Egyptians, and King George was the Pharaoh. Those who opposed the war were denounced as enemies of God and his chosen people. Contrary to Thomas Paine's belief that America is a refuge for the world, it was no refuge for the Loyalists who remained faithful to Britain. Those Americans who had the sense to realize the war against Britain was a futile and unnecessary affair were driven out and had to leave their homes and settle in what became Canada.

In Canada, a British style of conservatism was allowed to thrive. It eschewed apocalyptic delusions and was wary of political radicalism of every stripe. This classic brand of conservatism was interested in conserving the good while gradually reforming the bad. Part of what was good in the British political tradition was achieved by a series of liberal revolutions that set limits on executive power, insured due process of law, defended individual rights, and developed a Parliamentary system intended to prevent abuses of power. So, despite the absence of a formal division of powers between the executive and the legislative branches of government, as is the case in the American Congressional system, the Parliamentary system developed its own checks on political power. The Parliamentary principle of "responsible government" insured that government is limited by fair election rules, constitutional restraints, and Parliamentary oversight. Parliamentary

committees and Parliamentary officers must be allowed to scrutinize the administrative machinery of government. By stonewalling, secrecy, threats intended to silence Parliamentary officers, and efforts to obstruct the operation of Parliamentary committees, the Conservative

Government, with Harper as Prime Minister, threatened the liberal and democratic principles of the British Parliamentary system.¹ These principles were achieved at great cost over a long period of time.

The first of the great liberal revolutions in Europe was the English Civil War of the seventeenth century. Prior to that revolution, Parliament was just an advisory body, summoned and dismissed at the discretion of sovereign kings and queens. But there came a time in the 1640s when Parliament refused to be dismissed and the political question in British politics

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was: who was the supreme sovereign, the monarch or parliament? The matter was decided by the English Civil War between Parliamentarians and Royalists. The war ended with the triumph of the Parliamentary forces, the beheading of Charles I, and the military dictatorship of Oliver Cromwell. After the death of Cromwell, the monarchy was restored, but the principle of parliamentary supremacy became the hallmark of the Westminster Parliamentary system. Inspired by the liberal ideas of John Locke, the Glorious Revolution of 1688 consolidated the liberties of Englishmen (but not Irishmen) in a bloodless coup that put a Protestant monarch on the throne – a monarch willing to accept a Bill of Rights. Also inspired by Locke, the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789 insisted on the protection of individual rights against the abuses of absolute sovereigns

as well as democratic majorities.

In England, the slow and gradual pace of the liberal revolution in defense of equal rights was still incomplete. In 1833 Britain banned the slave trade. In 1954, under the influence of John Stuart Mill, the Wolfenden Report recommended the abolition of laws censuring victimless crimes such as homosexuality, prostitution, drunkenness, and the like. Canadian law reflected the achievements of British liberalism. And far from rejecting these achievements, Canadian conservatism, like British conservatism, welcomed them and vowed to conserve them.

Meanwhile, “in the land of the free and the home of the brave,” slavery was still thriving more than thirty years after it was banished in Britain and its empire. Nor did the bloody Civil War (1861-65) usher in equality before the law. The fourteenth amendment to the Constitution of the United States that replaced slavery with full citizenship and the protection of the law was circumvented by the Jim Crow laws in the South. It was not till the Civil Rights movement (1955-68) that any progress was made toward equality before the law. As to victimless crimes – they remain the subject of endless political acrimony and debate in American politics.

In light of these facts, envy of the United States and the desire to emulate it seem puzzling. Nevertheless, the new Conservative Party of Canada has managed to replace the distinctively Canadian brand of conservatism as represented by the Progressive Conservative Party, with an American brand of conservatism known as neoconservatism. This new Conservative Party has purged almost all the Progressive Conservatives or Tories that were dominant in that party prior to the rise of neoconservatism in Canada.

In contrast to the classic conservatism of the now defunct Tories, neoconservatism is a

creature of the radical right that is not genuinely conservative or moderate. Far from conserving the just achievements of liberalism, neoconservatism vows to turn the clock back. Far from being eager to conserve the government we have inherited from the wisdom of the past, neoconservatives are reckless innovators. Far from being wary of change, neoconservatives are eager for radical change. Stephen Harper put

it best when he said in a CBC interview with Peter Mansbridge that when he is finished with Canada, it will be unrecognizable. This is a shockingly unconservative sentiment. The question is: what is the neoconservative vision that will inspire this radical change?

Neoconservatism was inspired primarily by two European thinkers – Leo Strauss (1899-1973) and

Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992). Both men were saddled with intellectual baggage from their experiences during WWII – they suffered from phobias and delusions that dovetailed with American ideology and propaganda. Hayek had an irrational fear of any socialist scheme as a slippery slope leading to an irrevocable “road to serfdom.” Clearly, many Americans share Hayek’s paranoia over socialism. That dread still echoes in the Republican support for unbridled capitalism. Social programs such as Medicare are denounced by American legislators in both parties as “entitlement programs” which are ravaging the finances of the nation. In contrast, the millions of dollars in bonuses received by CEOs, hedge fund managers, and bankers are no indication of an “entitlement mentality,” but merely the rewards for sobriety and hard work. This irrational fear has fueled delusions about capitalist economics and obscured the injustices of unfettered capitalism.

German Jewish émigré Leo Strauss had his own anguished torments. The liberal and democratic trajectory of Western civilization

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alarmed him². He thought that Hitler represented the liberated masses and that the Nazi holocaust was a direct result of the modern ascendancy of liberalism, democracy, and nihilism. Particularly troublesome was the modern tendency to give priority to liberty over discipline, secularism over religion, and the vulgar masses over the wise few. To avoid the horrors of modernity, Strauss advocated establishing “an aristocracy within democratic mass society.”³ He admired Al-Farabi’s “secret kingship” as a practical modification of Plato’s open rule of the wise without any legal restraints.⁴ What is needed is a wily elite ruling behind the façade of democracy. This devious elite would partner politics with religion; it would engage the masses in a constant struggle against an existential threat to the nation and its god. In this state of existential dread, the democratic masses would be too pre-occupied with the external enemy to turn on their betters as the Athenians did on Socrates and the Nazis on the Jews.



Photo © by New York Times

Loe Strauss

Strauss was mistaken on at least three counts. First, even if we concede that fascism is a perennial threat to democratic societies, it does not follow that a secretive elite that circumvents the rule of law is the solution. That simply invites arbitrary power. Second, the pre-occupation with the external enemy is no distraction from the pursuit of internal enemies. On the contrary, whenever a nation is pre-occupied with the threat of an external enemy, it is invariably apprehensive about the infiltration of that enemy into its midst. The Athenians turned on Socrates because they thought he and his aristocratic friends were enemies of the Athenian democracy who were friends of Sparta. The Americans persecuted their own citizens at the height of the Cold War because they feared that they were Communist sympathizers. Today, Muslim Americans are regarded with suspicion

as potential terrorists and enemies of the nation. Third, Strauss is mistaken about the salutary effects of religion on politics. When religion is wedded to politics, moderation and restraint are abandoned.

Interestingly, Strauss was roundly criticized for his elitist and anti-democratic opinions. But his success in America was nevertheless guaranteed by the American proclivity for coupling religion with nationalism. In my view, Strauss is quite right about democracy – it is vulnerable to the rise of fascistic demagogues. But Americans tend to romanticize democracy. North American politics is characterized by hyper-democratic rhetoric – even though our reality is at odds with our rhetoric – but that’s another matter. Our rhetoric tells us that democracy is the best form of government, the only form of government compatible with liberty and justice, the only form

of government fit for self-respecting human beings. So, we are naturally shocked when we encounter staunchly anti-democratic sentiments. When Keith Martin left the Conservative Party, he told CBC's *The Current* that he was disillusioned and stunned by the fact that Stephen Harper was influenced by an obscure anti-democratic philosopher called Leo Strauss who advocated the rule of the few. Stefan Dion made the same claim about the elitist and anti-democratic influence of Strauss on Harper.⁵ In my view, Harper's preoccupation with the military, his inclinations to secrecy, and his tendency to pepper his speeches with "God bless Canada," are all troublesome symptoms of Straussianism. But to criticize Harper (or Strauss) just for being elitist and anti-democratic misses the mark.

The fact is that the American conception of democracy as rule of the people, by the people, in the interest of the people is a fiction. There is no such thing as the will of the people. The people have no single will but a plurality of conflicting interests. Elites rule in every society. In disparaging democracy, Strauss is not saying something that only snooty Europeans would say. He is merely echoing hosts of American political scientists known as Elite Theorists (in some circles they are known as Democratic Theorists) – Joseph Schumpeter, Robert Michels, Vilfredo Pareto, and Gaetano Mosca. According to these theorists, there is in every society an "Iron Law of Oligarchy" that makes the rule of elites unavoidable. As these theorists have rightly argued, we need to scale back our romantic view of democracy and replace it with something more prosaic and attainable. It suffices for the existence of democracy that the people choose

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those who govern and that there is more than one elite competing for power so that the people can replace the elite that has abused its power with another elite that may serve them better. This definition is too minimalist for most people. It is certainly too minimalist for my liking. I would insist that a democracy be governed by a constitution of laws protecting individual and minority rights – i.e., a *liberal* constitution. But it is precisely the *liberal* elements of democracy that neocons, with their faux populism, are indifferent to.

Ever since John Stuart Mill, the liberal tradition has been wary of democracy and its potential for the tyranny of the majority and the oppression of individuals or minorities. As I have argued at length, what is disturbing about Strauss is that his cures for the ills of democracy exacerbate its fascist hazards. Encouraging a secretive elite to justify all

manner of dirty tricks, lies, deceptions, and an assortment of unethical and illegal tactics cannot "save" the world from the dangers of democracy. Equally misguided is the promotion of a religious and nationalist militancy.

We live in the shadow of American democratic evangelism. Far from dampening America's crusading spirit, neoconservatives have radicalized, revived, and revitalized the myth of American Exceptionalism. After the debacle in Vietnam, the advent of the hippy counter-culture of peace and love, and the demise of the "evil empire", neoconservatives feared that faith in America's mission might be waning. But their fears were unfounded. Americans believe as staunchly as ever that it is their world historical destiny to save the world by the gift of American democracy. Once all of humanity

has been blessed with that gift, the world will be born again in America's image. When the world shares the same global culture, watches the same reality shows, listens to the same music, and worships the one and only God, then what will there be to fight about? That's the picture that neoconservatives such as Francis Fukuyama have painted for frenzied American imaginations.

With the outcome of American global dominance painted in such utopian shades, the stakes become astronomical. No sacrifice on the part of America or the world is too great. If they have to bomb countries and kill hundreds of thousands of innocent people to bring about "regime change," as they did in Iraq and Afghanistan, they are ready to do it. After all, the evils they inflict on the world are not real evils. They are merely "collateral damage" – a price worth paying for the priceless gift these nations will receive.

What seems paradoxical about neoconservatism is that it encourages America's rabid, crusading foreign policy in the name of democratic ideals, while rejecting democracy as a seriously flawed form of government. It is important to note that the Strauss-infected neoconservatives were the main architects of the American invasion of Iraq. No one was more enthusiastic about the war than Paul Wolfowitz, the self-proclaimed Straussian who was Deputy Secretary of Defense under Donald Rumsfeld. Abram Shulsky, a student and admirer of Strauss, was the Director of the Office of Special Plans, and was responsible for finding trumped up "intelligence" to help make the case for war. William Kristol, student of Harvey Mansfield, a famous Straussian at Harvard, was founder and editor of the *Weekly Standard*, and chairman of "The Project for the New American Century" where the madly belligerent neoconservative foreign policy was most clearly outlined. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and long before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the document provided a chilling vision of America's global dominance in a unipolar world. The key ingredients included a monopoly over weapons of mass destruction, regime

change for the undemocratic and un-American, unmanned aerial vehicles, and control of space as a "theater" of war. The document was signed by America's most famous neocons, including Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, William Bennett, Jeb Bush, Norman Podhoretz, Midge Decter, Donald Kagan, Dan Quayle, Francis Fukuyama, and others. Unhappily, neocon foreign policy is still alive and well in the age of Barack Obama.

The perplexing matter is this. If some of the neocons were influenced by anti-democratic ideas, then why would they push America's democratic mythology to exaggerated heights of catastrophe? The answer is that neoconservatives, even if they have not been directly influenced by Strauss, share his faith in the importance of religion, nationalism, and war for the health and well-being of political society. Supposedly, a nation beloved by God – a nation whose interests are identical with truth and justice – binds society into a unified whole, provides the magic elixir that makes a plurality of conflicting interests melt into a primal soup of oneness, and furnishes the cure for all that ails liberal society. Supposedly, liberal society invites a life of ease, laxity, licentiousness, drugs, children out of wedlock, and rampant crime. The primacy of Harper's crime bill is intended as an anti-dote to liberal laxity. In a dangerous world with a proliferation of terrifying and murderous enemies, society must be disciplined, battle-ready and ever vigilant. Religion, nationalism and the looming menace of an existential enemy are the key neoconservative ingredients in the war against liberal laxity and weakness. Moreover, liberal niceties such as the rule of law, insistence on due process, and the limitations on executive power, can be formidable obstacles in the effort to defend society against unpredictable hazards. So we can be sure that Canada's Anti-terrorism Act, which allows "preventive arrests" to avert potential terrorist attacks, will continue to be upheld by the Conservative Party, even though it flies in the face of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

What is puzzling is that a political ideology that fuels American militancy and its democratic

evangelism has managed to gain a foothold in Canada, and has even acquired the majority of seats in Parliament. What motivates Canadians to become neoconservatives? What makes a politician such as Stephen Harper pursue the “deep integration” of Canada with the United States? Why would anyone wish to make Canada into a miniature version of the US? Why would anyone trade Canadian freedom, individuality, skepticism, and a healthy balance between capitalism and socialism, for American religiosity, mindless faith, perpetual war, and unfettered capitalism? Why trade Canadian sobriety for a toxic concoction of American imperialism?

As with all political movements, the reasons are complex and the motivations are diverse. I will mention three possibilities. First, there are some Canadians who genuinely believe that, since the events of September 11, 2001, liberal principles such as the rule of law, respect for individual rights, insistence on due process, and strict limitations on executive power, are unsustainable. Joining fortress America is the only prudent thing to do. In my view, these people forget that America’s injudicious wars and extra-judicial killings in response to the terrorist attacks have made her less secure and more vulnerable. Meanwhile, the terrorists enjoy a credibility that was previously denied to them in the Muslim world. With their new-found prestige, it has become easier than ever to find new recruits willing to martyr themselves for nothing. The killing of Osama bin Laden has done nothing to diminish the threat, quite the contrary.

Second, for Biblically minded Canadians, the ubiquity of pornography on the internet is probably enough to convince them that the neoconservatives are right – liberty invites licentiousness and debauchery. For them, virtue provides a more solid foundation for society. In my view, these Canadians forget that liberty also inspires

culture, art, and creativity. They forget that allowing the state to define virtue is an invitation to totalitarianism. They forget that the governments of Iran and Saudi Arabia are paradigmatic of those who make virtue, not liberty, the cornerstone of their polity. They forget that virtue can only be admirable if it is rooted in freedom and self-restraint, not coercion.

Finally, the third group of Canadians who are attracted to neoconservatism are those who suffer from Western alienation. For them, neoconservatism is an opportunity to achieve revenge for the long-standing domination of Eastern Canada – they might at long last stop feeling poor and unworthy. In their pursuit of self-respect and self-

aggrandizement, they define the East as effete and effeminate, with the Nanny State (i.e., the social welfare state) as its chief legacy. In contrast, the West exudes a wild and untamed masculinity. The hope is that the destruction of the Nanny State will bring about the flowering of this fiercely Western manliness. At the very least, it will endow the West with a deserved recognition. Perhaps the whole country might learn to pull itself up by its own bootstraps and leave the dependency of the Nanny State behind. Unfortunately, these manly Canadians conveniently forget that real men do not emerge from the womb fully grown. They forget that there are no self-made individuals. We all owe our accomplishments to the love and care of our parents and the opportunities and education provided by our society. It is a debt we repay when we pay taxes to support those who, through no fault of their own, suffer the indignities of unemployment, disease, and disability.

These are three reasons that may lead Canadians to embrace neoconservatism. Far from being mutually exclusive, they are overlapping. Indeed, our PM probably shares all three. In his victory speech the night of the election of 2011, Harper made it clear that his Canada will

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adopt America's wars as her own. He portrayed Canadians as he hopes they will become under his tutelage. He described them as "compassionate neighbours and courageous warriors." Supposedly, our compassion will enable us to regard the threats that America invites as our own. Liberated from the debilitating effects of the Nanny State, we will become "courageous warriors" ready to stand toe to toe with our American neighbours in their battle against the forces of evil. It is no wonder that Harper's fixation on the F-35 jets has been non-negotiable. They are essential, no matter what the cost. Equally essential to the war effort is defunding Planned Parenthood and introducing income splitting. These measures will encourage women to stay at home and have more babies. In this way, they will serve the nation as factories for the production of the soldiers needed to make Canada a junior partner in America's quest for empire. So far, there is every indication that Harper will keep his promise that Canada will be unrecognizable once he is done.

Notes:

1. See John D. Whyte, "Pillars of Democracy Wobble," Toronto Star, April 2, 2011. See also Lawrence Martin *Harperland* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2010).
2. Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), ch.2.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
4. Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1952), p. 17.
5. Lawrence Martin, *Harperland*, p. 123.
6. Shadia B. Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), "The Populist Ploy" in ch. 5, and "Fake Populism," in *Humanist Perspectives* (Winter 2010-11), No. 175.
7. Shadia B. Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, Updated Edition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005).

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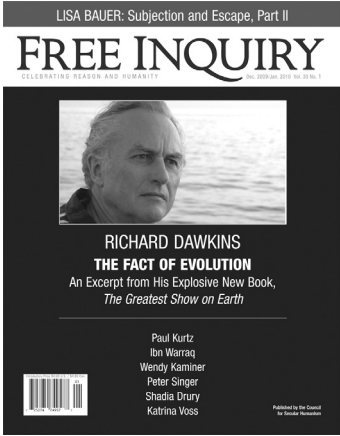
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