

## Marrying social and fiscal conservatism

*Our Tories should look to England for an example of a strong, workable social justice message*

By Andrea Mrozek

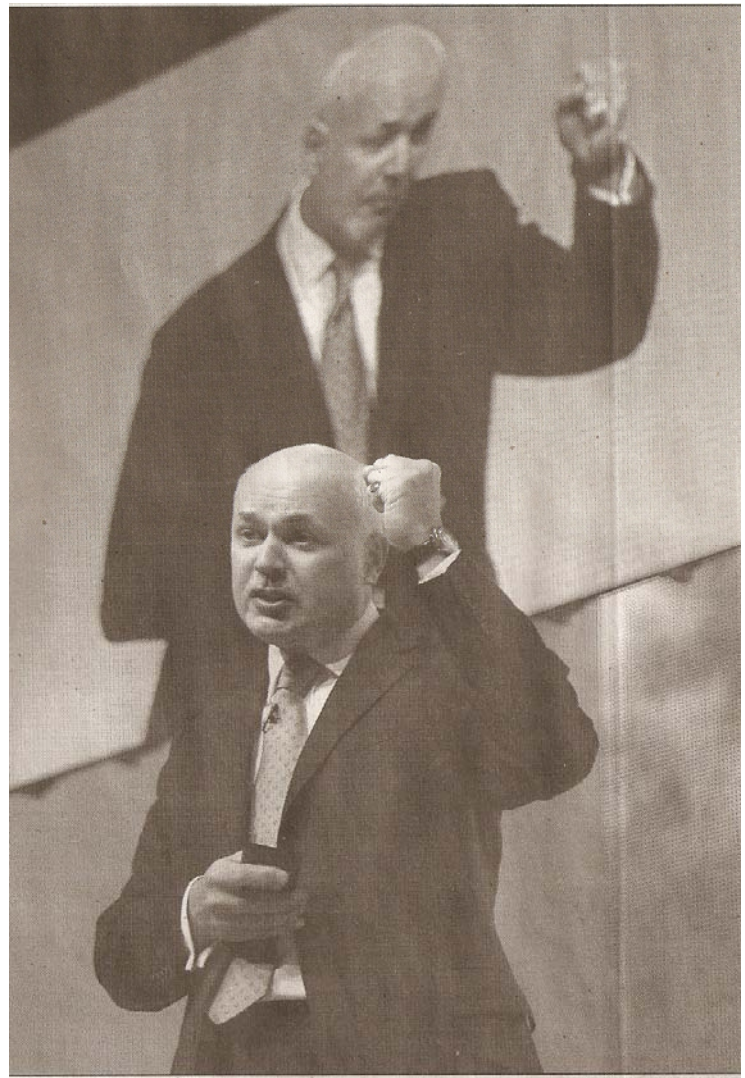
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When the Canadian political right finally united in 2003, the unspoken concern was how to merge sophisticated fiscal conservatives with their knuckle-dragging social conservative cousins.

The elegant solution was that smaller government and a strong economy should supercede social issues. Yet post Budget 2009, it's no longer quite clear that fiscal responsibility is a top priority either, leaving a vision void for many in Canada's Conservative government. Perhaps they might consider looking to England, where Conservatives are pioneering an approach that is fiscally responsible—precisely because it is socially responsible.

Tories in the United Kingdom have made social justice a constant cause, emphasizing poverty reduction through small community-based initiatives and education that starts with families and parents, not caregivers, counsellors and expensive entitlement programs. This rebranding is due in no small part to the efforts of the former leader of the Conservative party, Iain Duncan Smith.

Now it's true that the Conservatives in Canada never held the monopoly on fiscal restraint. They fund programs differently,



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but they still fund with abandon—plus Canadians will recall it was the Liberals who slashed the deficit and reduced the debt under then-prime minister Jean Chrétien (albeit at the prodding of the Reformers). But Conservatives also can't compete on the compassion file; for some

reason, people who prefer pouring money into a big open hole of social programs are believed to be nicer folks than right-wingers, regardless of how ineffective most of the current social programs are at actually relieving poverty.

All this to say, now is a fine time for Conservatives to rebrand themselves by pitching a strong, workable social justice message to Canadians.

They could begin by truly identifying the real problems and their causes, as Duncan Smith did when he started the Centre for Social Justice in 2004. Social problems abound on both sides of the pond—Canada has daytime gang shootings in Vancouver and Toronto; England's most recent desperate case hit the international media when a 13-year-old boy allegedly became a father with his 15-year-old girlfriend.

Not immediately evident is that the two—children who become parents, and gang shootings—are related. Root causes point to similar problems: for example, kids who are themselves raised without parents. Marriage matters, too. If one compares two low-income families—but one has married parents, the other a lone parent, the child in the low-income married parent family will fare better on numerous outcomes.

This is not a popular message, yet it's one that Duncan Smith has pushed with passion. The Labour Party has discussed taking on 17 of his centre's policies, the Conservatives, 52. These ideas include removing the tax penalty on couples who raise children together, more flexible working hours for parents, additional support to families where one partner stays home to look after children, the

encouragement of private and voluntary—not universal—daycare programs, and raising taxes on alcohol in an effort to combat alcohol abuse.

To be clear, the solutions Duncan Smith and the Centre for Social Justice offer are not quick fixes. But so far, it has been the Conservatives who have raised the problems of homelessness, poverty, drug abuse, gang violence and generational welfare in the public square and have started addressing it.

The bottom line is that big government solutions have failed those they purport to help. "What has happened over the years, I think, is the failure of successive governments to recognize that poverty isn't just the absence of money," says Duncan Smith. "You need to look at what causes people to fall into poverty."

As a bonus, measures like the ones implemented in the U.K. also make sense financially. One recent U.K. study estimates the financial cost of family breakdown there is about \$66 billion (Canadian) annually. Helping the poor and less privileged while saving precious public dollars ought to appeal to most Canadians.

The vision presented by Duncan Smith and his fellow U.K. Conservatives is one for a better community. There's an opportunity here for Canada's Conservatives—understanding that strong families are the way toward a smaller government, and greater freedom. Who knew social issues (properly understood) were the way toward fiscal responsibility?

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