



## How Canada's Christian right was built

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*NOTE: This article has been edited from a previous version that incorrectly stated the non-partisan Canadian Constitution Foundation is a Christian advocacy group.*

From the moment I began this book, I was confronted by skeptics who insist that a truly influential religious right could never take root in Canada. For some, that denial seemed like an exercise in wishful thinking, a refusal to face the possibility that the idea of the country they cherish — liberal, tolerant, and not given to extremes of action or belief — might not be in sync with the changing reality. Others argued that if a Christian right did exist here it would have burst fully formed on to the political scene, a carbon copy of that in the U.S. — raucous and confrontational, openly pulling the strings of the Conservative party and captained by outspoken television preachers with millions of viewers ready to respond to their bidding. But the American movement has had more than three decades to take shape and flourish; by the time scholars and the mainstream media noticed, it had already infiltrated nearly every level of government from school boards to the Senate, often by stealth.

In this country, where the CRTC has kept the reins on religious broadcasting and Catholics make up a larger proportion of the faith community, the emergent Christian right may look and sound different than its American counterpart, but in the five years since the prospect of same-sex marriage propelled evangelicals into political action, it has spawned a coalition of advocacy groups, think tanks and youth lobbies that have changed the national debate. The "sleeping giant" that *Capital Xtra!* magazine had warned against in 2005 is now up and about, organizing with a vengeance that will not be easily reversed. As Faytene Kryskow, leader of Christian youth lobby called 4MYCanada, told a parliamentary reception, "We are here, and we are here to stay."

With funding from a handful of conservative Christian philanthropists and a web of grassroots believers accustomed to tithing in the service of their faith, those organizations have built sophisticated databases and online networks capable of mobilizing their forces behind specific legislation with instant e-mail alerts and updates. Setting up an array of internship programs, they are also training a new generation of activists to be savvier than their secular peers in navigating the corridors of power. Already, their alumni have landed top jobs in the public service, MPs' offices and the PMO, prompting one official from the National House of Prayer

to boast in an unguarded moment, "If the media knew how many Christians there are in the government, they'd go crazy."

In fact, as the movement focuses on taking over the "gateways of influence," one of the portals within its sights is the mainstream media itself. Where once social conservatives regarded the fourth estate as hostile territory from which they had been sidelined, now the heads of religious-right think tanks, such as Dave Quist and Joseph Ben-Ami, have become regular spinmeisters for the social conservative point of view, their numbers on the speed-dial of Ottawa reporters seeking an instant quip or a quote. At the same time, Faytene Kryskow is training her young activists in the art of getting letters to the editor and opinion pieces published — furnishing online examples to copy and a daily index of articles demanding commentary — none of them betraying their links to 4MYCanada. As she crowed to a gathering of MPs, "You are likely reading our words much more often than you realize."

Numerically, the Canadian religious right may still be a fraction of that in the U.S., but as Ottawa communications consultant Dennis Gruending points out, "Groups that are well organized can punch above their weight — particularly in an era of fractured parliaments and minority governments." A former New Democratic Party MP, Gruending laments that "there is little in progressive Ottawa to rival the networks that have been created by the religious and political right."

Moreover, pundits who predicted those networks would vanish in the wake of the same-sex marriage defeat have instead seen them proliferate. Amid the stormy U.S. health-care debate of 2009, most Canadians were stunned to discover that one of their own was the star of a \$2 million television campaign warning Americans about the perils of this country's publicly funded medical system. Shona Holmes, the poster girl for that attack, turned out to be fronting a lawsuit against Ontario's health ministry spearheaded by a Calgary-based advocacy group named the Canadian Constitution Foundation.

And new battle fronts are emerging at a time when the old conflicts have by no means lost their power to inflame. On university campuses across the country, clashes between pro-life clubs and student governments have become more frequent and explosive. Many have been sparked by the Canadian branch of the Center for Bio-Ethical Reform, an American anti-abortion lobby founded by a former member of the Reagan administration, whose "Genocide Awareness" billboards feature montages of mangled fetuses next to photos from Nazi concentration camps. That blatant attempt to raise the emotional temperature in an already volatile debate comes as two U.S. polls show that, for the first time since 1995, opposition to abortion is on the rise while support for it is slipping even more sharply. Some pro-life activists credit advances in medical technology with boosting

their cause in a way that picket lines outside abortion clinics never could — an argument with which Dave Quist of Ottawa's Institute of Marriage and Family Canada concurs. "As we see ultrasounds and microscopic pictures of what goes on in the womb," he told an evangelical conference, "I think science is going to help us a great deal on that issue." The persistence of these moral disputes means that Christian-right organizations such as Quist's will remain players in the political arena for years to come. Asked when he would consider his mission accomplished in Ottawa, he admits he cannot imagine such a time: "There's always going to be a social issue to deal with," he says.

At a New Brunswick press conference in the midst of the 2008 election campaign, Stephen Harper staked out his political legacy, arguing that under his government, the Canadian public had already become more conservative. Although he seemed to be referring to fiscal attitudes, social conservatives like Joseph Ben-Ami did not disagree. "In the real world, you measure success not so much on whether you won or lost but where the centre of gravity is," Ben-Ami says. "And I think in this country, it has shifted somewhat to the right."

When Harper came to office, he adopted an electoral script crafted by his ideological soulmates in the Republican Party, nurturing a religious-right constituency that had never before enjoyed such attention or access to government. But unlike George W. Bush's evangelical base, Harper's theo-conservative constituency is not large enough to guarantee him a clear majority. He cannot win without it, but he cannot win with theo-cons alone. That conundrum leaves him, in some ways, a prisoner of his own electoral calculations, consigned to tread an uneasy tightrope between the social- and economic-conservative wings of his party. In scrambling to present policies that appeal to both camps, he has often ended up pleasing neither.

For those hard-core believers who expected him to roll back same-sex marriage and enshrine fetal rights, he has been a major disappointment. Even the Evangelical Fellowship has noted the "lack of policy gains" on his watch. More importantly, because those measures he did proffer seemed born of calculation, not conviction, many came across as awkward and opportunistic, executed under a veil of secrecy and withdrawn at the first sign they might exact too high a price at the voting booth.

What he has accomplished, however, may be less obvious and more lasting. Without putting forth a single piece of provocative legislation, he has used the enormous patronage powers of his office to shift the ideological leanings of key institutions, from the federal courts to federal regulatory agencies, toward a more socially conservative worldview. At the same time, he has eliminated many of the forces that opposed such a policy drift. With the stroke of a budgetary pen, he has defunded agencies such as the Status of Women Canada and the Court Challenges

Program, leaving both feminists and gay activists without resources to take on hostile government policies, while his cutbacks to scholarly granting bodies have helped silence environmental critics in academia and science.

Even arm's-length agencies have not been safe from his reach. At Montreal's Rights and Democracy organization, which had okayed three grants to the Palestinian cause, two Harper appointees — chairman Aurel Braun, a militantly pro-Israel political science professor, and vice-chairman Jacques Gauthier, the lawyer for the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem — engineered a coup that has been blamed for driving out respected international board members.

In a 2003 speech to the secretive conservative organization Civitas, Harper called for a foreign policy based on morality — a criterion that he equated with unflinching support for Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East. That shift not only altered the nation's image as an even-handed power-broker on the world stage, it tied Canadian diplomacy to a less idealistic objective: sewing up both the Jewish and Christian Zionist vote for the Conservatives. Those same domestic considerations appear to have guided Harper's belated trips to two emerging economic superpowers to which he had offered a cold shoulder, India and China, a vivid reminder that morality itself can be an elastic concept. On a visit to India aimed at selling nuclear reactors and uranium to a country that has already used Candu technology to build its own bomb — and still refuses to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty — Harper took pains to tour two sites representing only tiny fractions of the Indian population. Those sites, however, are sacred to key elements in his theo-conservative constituency back home: the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the holiest of shrines to Canada's nearly three hundred thousand Sikhs, and the Chabad-Lubavitch outreach centre in Mumbai, a symbol of Judaism attacked by Islamic terrorists.

For years, Harper and the Conservative Party had refused to consort with China, lambasting its human rights record. To social conservatives like Stockwell Day, who became the leading cheerleader for its island rival Taiwan, the mainland republic of Mao represented a twofold cause for concern: like the former Soviet Union, it was officially godless, and it had viciously persecuted Christians. That strategy left Canada at a marked disadvantage as China became a global powerhouse that controlled America's financial fate in the wake of the 2008 economic meltdown. When free-trade treaties with the U.S. proved no bulwark against congressional Buy America bills, a parade of Conservative heavyweights, led by Day — by then Harper's minister of international trade — began shuttling to Beijing in search of new markets. In 2009 alone, seven ministerial missions visited China, almost as many as in all of the previous four years.

Some in the Christian right have also been agitating for another, more contentious shift in foreign policy, which has already found a champion in a Conservative



backbencher. Only a few months after Obama ended George Bush's ban on congressional funding for overseas aid groups that counsel abortion, Saskatchewan MP Brad Trost circulated a petition among religious-right groups to drum up support for a move in the opposite direction — one that may be a sign of things to come. In the letter, signed by thirty like-minded MPs, Trost demanded that the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) end its \$18 million in annual grants to overseas programs run by the International Planned Parenthood Federation. That initiative may be useful to keep in mind in the wake of Harper's proposal to the Group of Eight to focus on maternal health care.

Even Harper's supporters fault him for producing few social Conservative policy victories, but he has changed the nation in far more profound ways, aligning it increasingly with the United States. A population that once basked in its image as an international peacekeeper now glories in a more muscular militarism, and Harper has been happy to trade the diplomatic independence of a middle power to walk in loyal lockstep with Washington on almost all matters of national security. But in keeping with that increasing Americanization, Harper has also altered the terms and tone of the debate, thrusting God into the centre of the national conversation. Whether signing off his throne speeches with a blessing or lavishing invitations on the leaders of the Christian right, he has brought religion out of the closet and into the public square for the first time in recent memory. "We're talking about things in a different way than we did three years ago," says Brian Rushfeldt, Harper's old ally from the Canada Family Action Coalition.

Much of that new spiritual consciousness comes from the increasing presence of conservative Christians in the capital. As Harper has gradually unmuzzled his evangelical Christian MPs, allowing them a higher profile and letting them test public sentiments with private members' bills, he has emboldened the religious right as a whole. "They're more brazen and confident," says Joyce Arthur, director of the Abortion Rights Coalition. "That's the big change. Being in power has given them legitimacy."

On talk radio and in the pages of the *National Post*, the best source of news on the religious right, a new stridency has emerged: critics of the government's efforts to pander to its theo-conservative constituency are dismissed as god-hating secular zealots and opponents of its pro-Israel policy are routinely branded anti-Semites. In the blogosphere, the rhetoric has become even more shrill, fuelling an angry strain of faith-based intolerance. Scarcely three decades after Brian Stiller, of the Evangelical Fellowship, recoiled at the mix of religiosity and righteous patriotism spouted by Falwell and his fellow televangelists in the U.S., the Prime Minister now sends his public blessings to prayer rallies where Christian nationalists brandishing Canadian flags are calling for a Bible-based theocracy.

However delighted they might seem by Harper's attentions and Governance — part of their credo is to honour those in authority — they are not likely to be mollified by his plodding incrementalism or cautious tweaks of the bureaucracy. Aggressive and insistent, they are driven by a fierce imperative to reconstruct Canada in a biblical mould. Waving their bright flags on the lawns of the Parliament Buildings, extolling the country's Christian roots to a compelling soft-rock beat, they might seem to offer a refreshing recipe for morality and national pride, but their agenda—while outwardly inclusive and multi-racial — is ultimately exclusionary. In their idealized Christian nation, non-believers — atheists, non-Christians and even Christian secularists — have no place, and those in violation of biblical law, notably homosexuals and adulterers, would merit severe punishment and the sort of shunning that once characterized a society where suspected witches were burned. Theirs is a dark and dangerous vision, one that brooks no dissent and requires the dismantling of key democratic institutions. A preview is on display south of the border, where decades of religious-right triumphs have left a nation bitterly splintered along lines of faith and ideology, trapped in the hysteria of overcharged rhetoric and resentment.

For this new wave of Christian nationalists, united across the continent by the charismatic renewal movement, the signs and portents of the end-times are unmistakable, apparent in each new earthquake report or tremor of the global financial system, and they feel they have no time to waste. Their mission is to prepare God's dominion on Earth, and they are unlikely to rest until they see their perceived scriptural prophecies fulfilled in Ottawa and Jerusalem alike. As Faytene Kryskow underlines in her book, *Marked*, she and her fellow revivalists are no longer content to agitate for policy crumbs. They have "a take-over mentality," she writes: "They are convinced that God has called them to take over the world!"

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