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Religion in Canadian Right-wing Parties

Abstract

Canada has a long tradition of religious leaders taking part in politics. However, Canadians are becoming increasingly uneasy about mixing religion and politics. With the election of Stephen Harper's Conservative government in January 2006, religion could be creeping into Canada's normally strictly secular politics. The Canadian institutional system nonetheless sets some limits on laws supported evangelical or fundamentalist Christians.

Résumé

Le Canada a une longue tradition de figures religieuses s'impliquant en politique. Cependant, les Canadiens sont de plus en plus mal à l'aise quant au mélange politique et religion. Et pourtant, avec l'élection du gouvernement Conservateur de Stephen Harper en janvier 2006, la religion pourrait bien s'infiltrer dans la politique canadienne pourtant strictement séculaire. Néanmoins, le système des institutions politiques au Canada impose des limites aux lois soutenues par les Chrétiens évangéliques ou fondamentalistes.

In January 2006, Stephen Harper became the Prime Minister of Canada and formed a minority Conservative Government after 13 years of Liberal power.¹ Since President Bush and the Republican Party had had close links with fundamentalist organizations, the victory of Stephen Harper's Conservative Party raised questions regarding potential relations with evangelical movements and their consequences on the newly-elected government. However, despite the sudden attention from the media, such a situation was not entirely new. Indeed, on both sides of the political spectrum, Canada has had a long tradition of political leaders who were or are still deeply involved in religious matters.

How has the attitude of the leaders of Canadian right-wing parties on religion evolved over the years? To what extent has religion influenced their political positions and decision-making? What can explain the differences between the role played by fundamentalists and/or evangelicals in American and Canadian politics?

During most of its early history, Canada was driven by religious conflict, with the English-speaking Protestant majority battling the mainly French-speaking Catholics. Then, religion

1) Jean Chrétien was Prime Minister from 1993 to 2003 and Paul Martin from 2003 to 2003.

was gradually excluded from the public discourse by a combination of political compromise, Western secularism and the need to make immigrants feel welcome.

Despite this trend, religion has never been very far away from the political sphere: Canada has a long tradition of leaders on the right who have not hidden their faith at all (Campbell, 2006)². It was the case of the Social Credit, the Reform Party and the Canadian Alliance. However, does it necessarily mean that the religious ideas of those leaders had an impact on their political decisions?

We will first look at the the Social Credit which was founded in the 1930s in Alberta by William Aberhart, a staunch evangelist who shared Puritan ideals: for example, playing cards, drinking, smoking, dancing or going to the theatre were activities invented by the devil and were to be banned. Before getting involved in politics, Aberhart started offering religious activities at the Calgary Prophetic Institute, described as a fundamentalist organization: his meetings used to start with “O God Our Help in Ages Past”, an expression he continued to use in his political discourses. When he started promoting the ideas of the Social Credit in the early 1930s and became the leader of this political movement, his headquarters remained the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute (Irving, 1959, 41). For most of the early members of this political organization, it was unconceivable to go to heaven holding a Bible while having foreclosed the neighbours’ houses. In other words, the early members of the Social Credit in Alberta believed that economic improvement could only take place if people resorted to God and put into practice their religious principles. Those strong religious links can also be epitomized in the nicknames that were given to Aberhart: “Our Great Prophet”, “That Man of God”, “The Last Hope of Mankind”, “That Heaven-Sent Saviour” (Irving, 1959, 241). However, despite this deeply entrenched religious background, none of the measures supported by the Social Credit had a clear and direct religious orientation including after Aberhart’s election as Premier in 1935: they wanted to reform the monetary system, solve issues related to mortgages and high interest rates, offer more economic opportunities for the youth and protect farmers who had to face economic challenges at the end of the 1930s. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the attitude of Ernest Manning who succeeded William Aberhart at the head of the Social Credit in 1943 and Premier of the Province until 1968. On the one hand, he admired Charles Fuller and Billy Graham, two American evangelicals, and believed that Christians in a party were the guarantees of political stability (Irving, 40). In Manning’s viewpoint,

- 2) Although this paper focuses on right-wing political parties, it is worth noting that religious politicians have also been involved in left-wing parties. Generally speaking, the Social Gospel with the importance given to brotherhood, cooperation and equal opportunities strongly influenced left-wing movements in Western Canada. Both J.S. Woodsworth and Tommy Douglas were ministers with a socialist orientation and founded what became known as the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF): in 1935, most CCF supporters believed that socialism was a form of cooperation between Christians and that capitalism was contrary to their religious ideals (Peter R. Sinclair, “The Saskatchewan CCF: Ascent to Power and the Decline of Socialism”, p. 190). Tommy Douglas stated on May 11 in 1934:

The program of the CCF is an honest endeavour to apply the social message of Christianity to life. It is complementary, rather than in opposition to the work of the church. For, while the church is seeking to establish right relationships between man and God, the CCF is endeavouring to bring a brotherly relationship between man and man. We must recognize that this cannot be done under the present competitive system (cited in Shackleton, 1975, 70).

Action Catholique in Quebec is another example of a religious movement getting involved in what is traditionally described as left-wing issues: they were involved in social and community work and battled the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church which strongly supported Premier Duplessis.



the values of finance and Christianity were opposite and Jesus Christ was the answer to the needs of mankind: he believed the system had been organized in opposition to his Christian faith due to a deliberate anti-Christian conspiracy (Mackey, 2006, 128). On the other hand, Ernest Manning as Premier did not implement any religiously-oriented measure: he gave a growing importance to private companies and worked hard on creating a business climate favorable to investors.

Contrary to the Social Credit whose influence was mostly limited to provincial politics in Alberta, the Reform Party only existed federally: it was founded in 1987 by the son of Ernest Manning, Preston Manning, who was to be his only leader on whose personal religious background we will concentrate. In what can be considered his political autobiography, *Think Big* (2002), Manning argued that his faith had motivated his political commitment. In several of his speeches, politics was perceived as a calling with strong religious overtones: “Do we feel led of the Spirit to become involved in the politics of our country or province or city? Then let us go and be involved in politics but let us be sure that our real motive is to give ourselves sacrificially to others and for others as God direct and not simply a desire to advance our own interests and convictions, even our religious interests and convictions” (cited in Flanagan, 1995, 8). For Manning, Christian values and beliefs needed to be represented in the political area (Manning, 2002, 150). It raised the criticism of Dobbin (1997) who stated the Reform Party had links with the Christian Right in the United States: many candidates, he claimed, had been previously or were still involved in fundamentalist or evangelical organizations. However, Preston Manning refused to consider any religious community as an interest group to be targeted and mobilized for political purposes and as a result very rarely held political speeches in churches (Manning, 2002, 149).

The Reform Party became the Official Opposition from 1997 to 2000: the reason it did not manage to form government had nothing to do with religion but mostly because it was unable to attract enough electors outside Western Canada where it had been created. The party had not been founded to implement religious ideas. One of the key reasons for its creation was the feeling of alienation that had become widespread in Western Canada: provinces felt left out of the decision-making process at a federal level. Finally, the Reform Party mostly concentrated on promoting a reform of the Senate and on reducing the government debt and the taxes and was against the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords and against multiculturalism as presented by the government of the time (Conway, 1994). As a result, it is clear from those issues that evangelical beliefs did not constitute the core elements of its political agenda.

When the Reform Party merged with the Progressive Conservative Party to form the Canadian Alliance in 2000, religion resurfaced in the leadership race and during the election campaign. Stockwell Day, the leader of the Canadian Alliance, was assistant Pastor at an evangelical church in Alberta between 1978 and 85. He maintained close links with fundamentalist organizations and explicitly tried to attract the support of their members. He thus advocated anti-abortionist measures and opposed gay marriage: during the leadership race, he relied on signing up members at churches and allying himself with evangelical and Catholic pro-life groups: since the 1970s, evangelical activism in both Canada and the US has been most noticeable on issues of sexuality and reproduction. For example, Buss and Herman (2002) define the “Christian Right” as a range of organizations and actors that “cohere around a shared conviction

tion that conservative Christians must form a bulwark against encroaching liberalism and the chaos it represents.”

However, I would argue that Stockwell’s explicit linkages of politics and religion is most noticeable in a speech he gave on November 16, 2000. He stated that the Earth had been created about 6,000 years ago, that humans and dinosaurs had roamed the earth together and that Adam and Eve had been real people. Such elements should not be considered as a mere “joke” as they constitute a clear reference to creationist beliefs. Creationism refers to the belief that the Bible is the true history of the universe including the true history of humans: a group called “Young Earth Creationists” is convinced that Archbishop Ussher’s sixteenth-century calculation of about 6000 years is a good estimate (Numbers 1992). Stockwell Day and the Canadian Alliance lost the 2000 federal elections, a defeat partly explained by Day’s strong religious commitment.

The final case we will consider is Stephen Harper and his Conservative Party, created after the Canadian Alliance merged with the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada. In 2003, an analysis carried out for the Vancouver Sun estimated that half of the 98-member federal Conservative caucus was made up of religiously conservative MPs and that 31 members were evangelical Protestants. The percentage was well over double the national average with only 20% of the general Canadian population fitting the description of a religious conservative. As a result, while most advocacy groups work across the political spectrum, they do see the Conservative Party as providing more fertile ground for encouraging the consideration of faith-based socially conservative public policies (Unruh, 2006).

Stephen Harper, elected in January 2006, is the first evangelical Prime Minister since John Diefenbaker. Based on religious characteristics, he could have more in common with George W. Bush, a born-again Christian, than with his predecessors. Indeed, Stephen Harper is the first Prime Minister ever to belong to the relatively obscure Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination which follows traditions normally associated with American evangelicalism (Campbell, 2006). Some of his behaviours could actually be very closely linked to his religious beliefs. For example, after being elected in January 2006, the Prime Minister ended several of his speeches with “God Bless Canada”, an expression unheard of in Canada before Harper’s election: this term has drawn comparisons between Harper and George W. Bush, who regularly ends speaking engagements with “God Bless America”.

Another example has to do with gay marriage. In 2006, shortly after the remarks of Pope Benedict claiming that Canada had excluded “God from the public sphere” with laws supporting same-sex marriage and abortion, Stephen Harper tried to revisit this legalisation by holding a free vote on it in the House of Commons (Puxley, 2006, A1) but it was to no avail. Indeed, on December 7, 2006, the Conservative motion calling on the government to restore the traditional definition of marriage was defeated by 175 to 123 (Galloway, 2006, A1).

Based on our brief outline of the background of five political leaders and on their impact on four different right-wing political parties, religious ideas can trigger political involvement. But having a leader with evangelical beliefs, whether provincially or federally, is not enough to see religiously-oriented measures implemented. Thomas Koelble (1995) encompasses several elements that we will take into account to explain such a characteristic of Canadian political life: “How do we explain the things people do? How much weight ought to be given to the



individual and to the institutional context within which decisions are made and to the larger environmental factors such as culture, social norms and conventions?”

A first explanation for the absence of widespread and concrete political measures in favour of evangelical and/or fundamentalist beliefs can simply be related to the lack of support from the general Canadian voters. Indeed, Canadians have long been squeamish about religion and politics and religious beliefs must remain within the private sphere. During the 2000 election campaign, Ekos Research Associates polled Canadian adults to draw parallels between voters' patterns and faith: more than 75% of the supporters of the Liberal Party, Bloc Québécois and New Democratic Party and 58% of the voters in favour of the Alliance opposed mixing religion and politics (Tibbetts, 2006). Finally, support for the belief Christians should get into politics to protect their values has slipped from 46% in 1996 to 39% (Tibbetts, 2006). The public interest in evangelical Christian political leaders has continued to decrease over the years. It can be partly explained by the unpopularity of the religious American President, George W. Bush: the religious right in the United States is considered to be largely responsible for sending him back to the White House in 2004. The invasion of Iraq, which Canada did not support, was widely regarded as having a religious background. In other words, there is a way Canadians react by saying “we are not that”, meaning that they have nothing to do with those American fundamentalists.

Additional reasons can be found in the theoretical framework of institutionalism and more precisely in sociological institutionalism which regards actors, interests and, to a large extent, power as deriving from institutions and culture: in other words, social groups must adapt their behaviours to the framework of existing institutions (Lecours, 2005). Skocpal (1992) indicated that political activities, whether carried by politicians or by social groups, are conditioned by institutional configurations of governments and political party systems.

Canadian evangelical politics must be taken into account in the context of Canadian institutions which have had an impact on the political opportunities: institutional characteristics and not so much purely societal factors can explain the limited impact such groups have had on Canadian political life as a whole (Smith, 2002). We will focus on the following so-called “institutions”: party-discipline, Cabinet decision-making and the first-past-the-post system.

The Canadian evangelical subculture is linked to American resources with church materials, books, media and educational resources, political strategies and tactics imported from the US, creating some sort of generic evangelicalism: the many institutional differences between the two countries are not taken into account (Reimer, 2000). Contrary to American politics, Canadian legislatures are based on party discipline: elected politicians must vote according to their party's positions regardless of their own viewpoints unless there is a free vote. Consequently, if American evangelicals spend a great deal of time lobbying individual legislators, pressuring their votes and working for or against their re-election, it would be a waste of time in Canada to put pressure on individual party members who are more than likely to vote along party lines. And currently evangelicals do not have a particularly strong presence in any political party: the most explicitly evangelical/fundamentalist party in Canadian politics, the Christian Heritage Party, has had little success in its two decades and in recent years has only put up a handful of candidates. However, party discipline alone cannot explain the lack of measures to support evangelical beliefs: free votes are sometimes held regarding moral or ethical issues,

as it was the case for same-sex marriage in 2006. Another element has to do with Cabinet decision-making, which takes place behind the closed doors of the Cabinet and makes it difficult to know which Cabinet minister is best to lobby. In other words, decisions are made by party leaders with varying input from members: much of Canadian political negotiations and decision-making occurs through the relatively closed processes of executive federalism, which is hard to penetrate and influence. The electoral system is also based on the first-past-the-post: the party which wins the greatest number of electoral divisions but not necessarily the greatest number of votes wins the election. To be powerful in such a system, interest groups have to be geographically clustered, which is far from being the case of evangelicals and/or fundamentalists. Finally, third-party advertising is not allowed during election campaigns, making it even harder for evangelical organizations to officially promote a party or a candidate (Malloy, 2004, 12).

Conclusion

Canadians are increasingly unwilling to mix religion and politics and Christian values play a diminishing role in their daily lives although religion has never been completely removed from the political sphere with a long tradition of religious politicians both in right- and in left-wing parties.

Despite the evangelical background of political leaders such as William Aberhart, Ernest and Preston Manning, Stockwell Day and Stephen Harper, Canadian political institutions have constituted a limit on the scope of influence of those evangelically-oriented politicians, which partly explains why the Conservative Party cannot afford to act like the Republican Party in the United States.



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