

The Unite the Right Movement and the Brokerage of Social Conservative Voices Within the New Conservative Party of Canada

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Abstract: 2003 marked a year of significant change in the political landscape, particularly for the Canadian right. After ten years of division, the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada (PCs) and the Canadian Alliance united to create the Conservative Party of Canada. This union required a balancing of the interests of both of its founding parties who, on certain issues, espoused very different views. One important example of this was social conservatism. In this paper, the author examines the new party's attempt to balance the two parties' differing opinions on social conservatism. In order to accomplish this, the paper first examines the differences between the two parties, and then examines how conflicting interests were resolved under the banner of the 'New Conservative Party.' The author concludes that by deliberately declaring socially conservative issues beyond the scope of party policy, the new conservative party has been able to strike a balance between the interests of the voting population and the interests of its more socially conservative members, who are able to express their preferences by means of a free vote.

2003 marked a year of significant change in the political landscape, particularly for the Canadian right. After ten years of division, the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada (PCs) and the Canadian Alliance united to create the Conservative Party of Canada. For the purposes of this paper the Reform Party and the Canadian Alliance will be treated as a one party, as the Reform Party would be replaced by the Canadian Alliance in 2000. The creation of the new Conservative party of Canada resulted in what was arguably a return to brokerage politics on the Canadian right and a legitimate attempt to overtake the long-ruling Liberal Party. This union required a balancing of the interests of both of its founding parties who, on certain issues, espoused very different views. One important example of this was social conservatism. Though the literature presents many definitions of this concept, this work understands social conservatism as "believ[ing] strongly in pro-family positions, including laws to protect the unborn and the traditional definition of marriage."¹ In addition, some of the literature used in this work, particularly Snow and Moffitt (2012), include the concepts of social and moral order in their understanding of social conservatism and therefore they will also be important. This essay will argue that the approach of Reform/Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservatives to social conservatism was extremely different, and though the Conservative government has followed the example of the PCs, they have still been able to broker the interests of their social conservative members. It will outline the Unite the Right movement and the approaches of the Reform/Canadian Alliance, PCs, and Conservatives to social conservatism. Finally, it will demonstrate the ways in which the Conservative Party has been successful in brokering the interests of social conservatives within their party. Though it has been almost ten years since the Unite the Right movement and the creation of the new Conservative Party, the brokerage of social conservative voices within this new party is important to the study of politics, as it allows

¹ Bob Plamondon, *Full Circle: Death and Resurrection in Canadian Conservative Politics* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2006), 31.

Canadians to gain a better understanding of the motivations behind their government's actions and policies.

The Unite the Right Movement

The movement to unite the Canadian right grew out of a separation of the Canadian right fifteen years earlier. It was in the late 1980s, in the face of growing unhappiness with Mulroney's Progressive Conservative government, that a new right-wing party was formed. The new Reform Party slowly increased in popularity reaching 60 seats in the Canadian House of Commons in the election in 1997 and became the official opposition. However this party would prove unable to win seats outside of Western Canada and were unable to challenge the Liberal Party under Jean Chretien which had effectively been in power since 1993. It was in response to the domination of the Liberal party that many began to call for a union of the parties on the Canadian right, namely the Progressive Conservatives and the Canadian Alliance, which replaced the Reform Party in 2000.²

The Canadian Alliance desperately began pushing for a union between the two parties after they once again proved unable to gain any electoral support outside of the Western provinces. An Ontario by-election, in Perth-Middlesex, made this fact clear as it took place in what was viewed to be an ideal riding for the Alliance to finally achieve an electoral victory in an Eastern province. However, when the votes were tallied, the Alliance candidate finished third receiving only half the number of votes earned by the victorious PC candidate. This defeat sent a very strong message to the Alliance leadership who began to see that the only solution to the 'Ontario' problem, or their inability to win seats outside of the Western provinces, was a merger between the two parties³.

Though there was much resistance on the part of the PCs, the movement to Unite the Right was strengthened after the election of Peter MacKay as PC leader. Bob Plamondon, author of *Full Circle* suggested that there was "a sense that a change in leadership would bring a new era of cooperation."⁴ Shortly after MacKay's election as PC party leader, this union seemed highly unlikely as, in the final push for victory, MacKay signed a secret agreement with David Orchard who had been a candidate for leadership of the PC party. Orchard was strongly opposed to a merger between the PCs and the Canadian Alliance. The agreement between the two stated that Orchard back MacKay over the other remaining candidate and help him win the leadership race on the condition that he did not merge the PCs and the Canadian Alliance. The agreement between MacKay and Orchard also included a promise that as party leader, MacKay would oppose free trade. When this agreement became public it seemed like a merger between the two parties was as unlikely as ever.⁵

However, MacKay would eventually come around to the idea of union and talks between the two parties began. Initially the goal was to create a common strategy in the House of Commons and find a solution to vote splitting. However, these goals would soon evolve into the creation of a single party in order to challenge the ruling Liberals. Over the next few months negotiations between representatives of both parties would take place.⁶ Throughout the process, there were many more concessions made by the Canadian Alliance than the PCs. The founding

² Ibid., 84, 162, & 286.

³ Ibid., 285.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ William Johnson, *Stephen Harper and the Future of Canada*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2006), 327.

⁶ Plamondon, 2006, 291.

principles of the new party for example were almost identical to those of the PCs with a few notable adjustments. The principles of equality of French and English, reasonable access to free healthcare and free trade were the amendments that were added to the PC constitution during the merger of the two parties.⁷ William Johnson, Stephen Harper's biographer, explains that the inclusion of the equality of both official languages was a compromise for the Alliance rather than the PCs. He also argues that the new party's promotion of '*progressive* social policy' was representative of PCs members rather than most of the Alliance supporters.⁸ Further, Plamondon explained that the name of the party also represented a significant compromise on the part of the Canadian Alliance⁹

Finally at the end of September of 2003, there remained only two important issues to work out before the parties could merge. The first was the method that would be used to select the leader of the newly united party. Harper and the Alliance wanted a voting system where each member would be accorded one vote, but Alliance supporters far outweighed PCs supporters and as a result the PCs did not want the election of a leader to proceed in this way. Instead they wanted to use an approach similar to the Canadian electoral system where each riding would equate to one vote in order to avoid the regionalism which had initially fractured the party. The second contentious issue was Harper's desire to ensure that returning Members of Parliament would not have to face approval from a united constituency association but be guaranteed to be that riding's candidacy in the next election. In the end, it was Harper and the Canadian Alliance that compromised once again. They accepted the PC method for leadership selection and removed the clause that would allow incumbents to automatically retain their position. With these issues settled, both party leaders announced, on October 15, 2005, that with the approval of their members there would be a union of the Alliance and Progressive Conservative Parties.¹⁰

Both parties' members overwhelmingly approved the merger. This motion was supported by 95% of Alliance members and over 90% of PC members.¹¹ All that was left was to select the leader, and it would be Stephen Harper who was chosen to head the newly united Conservative Party of Canada. Having examined the background to the union of the Canadian Alliance and PC parties, we will now shift our attention to an examination of the approaches of each of the relevant parties to social conservatism.

Social Conservatism and the Reform/Canadian Alliance

Of all the parties examined, the Reform/Canadian Alliance's approach to social conservatism was the most prominent and they were often viewed as a socially conservative party. Thus it is the members of this party that will be brokered under the new Conservative Party. The leaders of both Reform and Canadian Alliance have generally been religious social conservative individuals. As a result, this has influenced both the membership and the direction of the party. For example, Preston Manning brought his religious views into party governance. He explained that he tried to "work Christianity with the urgent or existing public agenda, trying to influence it from within the application of one's most deeply held values."¹²

⁷ Ibid., 297.

⁸ Johnson, 2006, 330.

⁹ Plamondon, 2006, 296.

¹⁰ Ibid., 308, 310 & 318.

¹¹ Johnson, 2006, 338.

¹² Manning, 1992, 505 quoted in Plamondon, 2006, 52

As leader of the Canadian Alliance, Stockwell Day was described by *Edmonton Journal* columnist Paula Simons as “the charismatic, casual social conservative, the pastor-turned-politician who wants to save your soul, while he saves the country from moral decay.”¹³ From this account of Day, it is easy to see why he would have difficulty separating his religious views from his role as party leader. In addition, various scandals pertaining to the interference of his religious beliefs in his work arose during his time as a Member of the Legislative Assembly in Alberta.¹⁴ Thus it is clear that Day had a great deal of difficulty separating his religious beliefs from his responsibility as party leader.

Finally, there is considerable disagreement in the literature on the social conservative views of Stephen Harper. Johnson (2006) does not believe that Harper has social conservative leanings. Others, such as Michael Beheils and Robert Talbot argue that under the influence of Preston Manning, Harper developed such views.¹⁵ In addition, Steve Patten explained that though Harper is much more concerned with economic conservatism than social conservatism, he is more deeply tied to the evangelical church than when he entered politics. Further, Patten explains that while Harper has often tried to distance himself from social conservative voices, he has allowed those closest to him to woo such supporters.¹⁶ Patten’s explanations suggest that despite the debate over the social conservative views of Stephen Harper, he has allowed and even recruited social conservative actors in his party. Though Harper’s views are not widely understood, the previous two leaders, Manning and Day, clearly let their social conservative views influence party policy. However, there were also other factors involved in the promotion of social conservative policies by the Reform/Canadian Alliance.

When looking at the supporters of these parties and their founding principles, it is clear that social conservatism was of considerable importance to these parties. Harrison and Krahn found that older Albertan males likely supported the Reform Party because of their traditional views of family and of the roles that women should play in society.¹⁷ Lusztig and Wilson found similar results in their study on partisanship and moral traditionalism. They stated that people were likely to become Reform/Alliance supporters for both their stance on Quebec and social conservative issues.¹⁸ Finally, in a poll conducted in 2003, Reform/Alliance supporters were more likely than PC members to oppose same sex marriage.¹⁹ These studies have demonstrated that Reform/Alliance supporters were likely to be socially conservative and this translated into clear social conservative voices within the party.

This openness to social conservatism was demonstrated in the principles of both the Reform and Alliance Parties. For example, the last *Blue Book* outlining the Reform Party’s policies, promoted a traditional definition of marriage, between a man and a woman, as well

¹³ Simons quoted in Johnson, 2006, 296.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 288.

¹⁵ Michael Beheils and Robert Talbot, “Stephen Harper and Canadian Federalism: Theory and Practice, 1987-2011,” In *The State in Transition: Challenges for Canadian Federalism*, edited by Michael Beheils and François Rocher, 15-86, (Ottawa: Invenire Books, 2011), 21.

¹⁶ Steve Patten, “Understanding Stephen Harper: The long view” in *The Harper Record*, ed. Teresa Healy (Ottawa: Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, 2008), 34.

¹⁷ Trevor Harrison and Harvey Krahn, “Populism and the Rise of the Reform Party in Alberta,” *Canadian Review of Sociology & Anthropology* 32.2 (1995): 140.

¹⁸ Michael Lusztig, and J. Matthew Wilson, “A New Right? Moral Issues and Partisan Change in Canada,” *Social Science Quarterly* 86 (2005): 125.

¹⁹ Johnson, 2006, 340.

supporting as harsher punishments for criminals.²⁰ These same concepts were present in the policy statement of the Canadian Alliance who made commitments to traditional families and law and order.²¹ These documents demonstrate the clear position taken by the Reform and Alliance parties when it comes to social conservative issues, which differ greatly from that of both the Progressive Conservatives and the Conservative Party.

Social Conservatism and the Progressive Conservative Party

In sharp contrast to the prominence of social conservative issues in the Reform/Canadian Alliance, the approach of the PCs for most of the late twentieth century was to state that debates on issues important to social conservatives, such as traditional family forms and others, were not political. Rather, this party espoused a view that these were not issues that should be divided based on partisan lines. In addition, while in opposition, this party promoted free votes on these issues. James Farney explained that the PCs promoted this view due to past religious controversies, to the approach of the influential British Conservative party, and to brokerage politics.²²

However, electoral defeat beginning in 1993 however brought a shift in the PC's approach to social conservatism. Farney explains that the PCs had a difficult time differentiating themselves from the other federal parties and attracting voters. One of the principal ways they attempted to do so was to abandon their former approach and take a clear stance on social conservative issues. For example, the party became supportive of rights for same-sex couples. In addition, leader Joe Clark made it clear to any social conservatives who remained within the PC ranks that they should leave.²³ This banishment of social conservatives suggests that remaining PC supporters were more liberal on social conservative issues while maintaining their fiscal conservatism. This represented significant shift from the previous policy of the PCs and would pose a new challenge after the merger, as this approach to social conservatism was markedly different from that of the Reform/Canadian Alliance.

Social Conservatism and the New Conservative Party

After the 2003 merger, Stephen Harper and the new Conservative Party needed to find a way to represent the interests of social conservative Reform/Alliance supporters and more liberal PC supporters. Johnson explains that in order to do so, Harper believed that controversial social conservative issues should not be made into party policy. Rather, those decisions should be left to individual Members of Parliament to vote based on their conscience and the wishes of their constituents.²⁴ In doing this, the Harper Conservatives adopted an approach much like that of the PCs before 1993. This would allow them to maintain the support of those social conservatives while not alienating their other members. However, the success of this approach has yet to be examined.

²⁰ Reform Party of Canada. *The Blue Book: Principles & Policies of The Reform Party of Canada-1999*. (Calgary: The Reform Party of Canada, 1999), 14 & 42.

²¹ Canadian Alliance. "Canadian Alliance Declaration of Policy."

http://web.archive.org/web/20000817012925/http://www.canadianalliance.ca/yourprinciples/policy_declare/index.html, 5.

²² James Farney, "The Personal Is Not Political: The Progressive Conservative Response to Social Issues," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 39.3 (2009): 243, 245 & 250.

²³ *Ibid.*, 249.

²⁴ Johnson, 2006, 363.

Harper and the Conservative party have managed to adequately represent the interests of their social conservative members while retaining support from other members of their party, particularly the fiscal conservatives. Snow and Moffitt argue that one of the reasons Harper has been successful at this is due to his platforms which have all included tough on crime proposals like ending house arrest for those convicted of serious offences and increasing punishment for those found guilty of gun crimes, impaired driving and violent crimes. Snow and Moffitt explain that this was a good way to broker the interests of both groups of conservatives within his party because it would please the social conservatives who believed in the promotion of law and order, however, it would not alienate the fiscal conservatives.²⁵

Another attempt to broker the interests of the social conservatives by the Conservatives was their promotion of family issues. Snow and Moffitt once again highlight the fact that Harper believed that family was "key to a conservative agenda," however; he realized that he could not legislate on contentious issues like abortion or same-sex marriage without alienating a large group of his supporters.²⁶ As a result, Harper would legislate on childcare instead. In the 2006 election, Harper promised a \$1200 allowance to parents with children under six. He has also created a pro-family tax policy, for example granting a spousal dependent tax exemption.²⁷ By implementing this type of pro-family policy, the Conservative party was able to promote the interests of both types of conservatives that compose his party. Further, Snow and Moffitt suggest that it was because of this fact that these platform points were promoted the most vigorously by the Harper government.²⁸

However, the recent debate and vote on abortion is of another example of brokerage of social conservatives within the Conservative Party of Canada. Motion 312 was introduced in the House of Commons by Conservative MP for Kitchener Center. This motion proposed to create a committee of twelve members of Parliament that would re-examine when life begins.²⁹ Though this motion would not directly re-open the abortion debate and did not pass, many believed that should it pass this would occur.

The approach taken by the Conservative Party demonstrates their ability to broker the interests of the social conservatives within their party. Harper's actions were consistent with the approach he had previously committed to. Conservative MPs, including cabinet ministers, were free to vote according to their conscience and the desire of their constituents.³⁰ This did not make either support or opposition to this motion a party policy. Further, by allowing this motion to be presented and a free vote to occur, Harper and his party left space for the social conservative voices within their caucus to be heard. As a result, the Conservative party is able to broker the social conservatives' interests on contentious social issues. They are able to blame the opposition, rather than their party, for the failure of such motions and as a result can retain support of their social conservative members.

The Conservative Party of Canada has demonstrated that it is able to represent the interests of social conservatives both through commitments to family and law and order as main platform points and by allowing debates on contentious social issues to take place. They have

²⁵ Snow David and Benjamin Moffitt, "Straddling the divide: mainstream populism and conservatism in Howard's Australia and Harper's Canada," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 50.3 (2012): 281.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 282.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 284.

²⁹ Stephen Woodworth, Member of Parliament for Kitchener Centre. "Motion 312." Accessed November 24, 2012. <http://www.stephenwoodworth.ca/canadas-400-year-old-definition-of-human-being/motion-312>.

³⁰ Payton, Laura. "Motion to study when life begins defeated in Parliament." *CBC News*, September 26, 2012.

done so by using an approach to social conservatism that was similar to that of the PC party before 1993, in that they do not create party policy on contentious social issues, rather they treat them as private and non-political. Thus they have been able to adequately broker the social conservative voices of Reform/Canadian Alliance supporters that now find themselves within the new Conservative Party. This paper has focused on the brokerage of social conservatism within this new right wing party in Canada, it is important to note that this was not that this was not the only issue that the founding PCs and Canadian Alliance had different views on. Thus this paper demonstrates the ways in which social conservatism has been adequately brokered, however, this may not have been the case with other differences.

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