

How conservative are Canadians?

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his team have expressed the desire to move Canada in an incrementally more conservative direction through successive Conservative governments. Although opinions and expectations differ on where exactly Mr. Harper is headed, in anticipating scenarios for the future it's valuable to consider the political orientations of the country he leads today. As of 2008, how conservative are Canadians - and where might they be nudged to the right?

This discussion cannot get far without at least a brief discussion of what we mean by conservatism. There are, of course, fiscal and social strains of conservatism, and adherents of these two strains do not always sit cozily together under a single political tent. Americans have recently been wrestling with their own definitions of conservatism, with a President who sees "liberal" as a dirty word but has presided over an unprecedented government spending blitz.

For the Harper government's purposes, it seems safe to say that conservatism consists, on the fiscal side, in diminishing the size of government and cutting taxes and, on the social side, in taking some steps to promote what it sees as traditionalism and propriety. These latter steps have been halting thus far - like the inconsequential reopening of the same-sex marriage debate in 2006, and efforts to withhold public funds from artists whose work the government deems inappropriate.

Where do Canadians stand on this kind of conservatism? Polling and behavioural data show Canadians to be prudent in their fiscal mindset when it comes to both personal finances and the federal books. Canadians have no interest in shrinking government until, in the words of the American anti-tax activist Grover Norquist, it can be drowned in the bathtub. But nor do they have much taste for profligacy and waste. Mr. Harper's emphasis on restrained spending and a rolling assessment of all federal programs' efficacy and efficiency is likely to appeal to Canadians' fiscal caution, a small-c conservative orientation that is one of this society's most abiding characteristics.

Social and cultural issues are another matter. Public opinion and values research data reveal a population that is socially liberal: secular, tolerant of differences, profoundly committed to social equality. Canadians are proud of the equality measures that have been advanced by their courts and governments in recent decades; in this area, the dominant orientation is liberal. Canadians, moreover, have relatively little appetite for culture wars. So-called ordinary Canadians

demonstrated this aversion recently when they declined an invitation to engage in some angry resentment of greedy, effete big-city artists. It isn't clear that Mr. Harper's tactic of attacking artists as separate from real Canadians succeeded in energizing the Conservatives' small-town base, but it is clear that it backfired in Quebec.

Finally, although Canadians believe in the power of markets to advance a range of worthwhile objectives, they display strong faith in government intervention in areas where they believe fundamental issues of fairness are at stake - and they are willing to pay for it. Nine in 10 Canadians believe that social spending should either be maintained at its current level (41 per cent) or increased (50 per cent). Easy to say, but what about when these opinions hit us in the wallet? It is true that a slim majority (55 per cent) believe their tax burden is too high. But the rest believe current tax levels are about right, or, in a few cases, 3 per cent, that taxes should be increased.

Shaving points off the GST and reducing the diesel tax will probably generate warm feelings toward Mr. Harper among Canadians who are feeling hard-pressed, and broader reductions may be welcome in some quarters. But sweeping tax cuts and the drastic shrinking of government are not likely to be the keys to a lasting majority. Despite Canadians' fiscal prudence, they like having a government with plenty of capacity to intervene in areas such as health care, the environment and, these days, potentially salvaging the economy and the jobs and savings of average citizens.

Canadians don't want bloated government, but they do want leadership that is sufficiently well resourced to respond in areas where they believe core values or urgent social and economic imperatives are at stake.

On the whole, then, when it comes to representing conservative principles in a way Canadians are likely to find palatable, Mr. Harper has done an excellent job during this campaign. He has emphasized fiscal prudence and stability, announced new youth crime measures but steered clear of more volatile social issues like abortion, and has proposed tax measures - like the diesel tax cut - that are simple and highly visible to the general public, but not too radical. In other words, finding Canadian attitudes as they are, Mr. Harper has been able to navigate them with considerable savvy in adapting his party's principles to the reality of Canadian public opinion and values.

As to moving those attitudes in a direction he and his caucus might find more in keeping with their own - the Prime Minister himself has acknowledged the gulf between his team and the public at large - that is a much larger challenge. Social change tends to come as a result of broad economic and historical forces, not at the behest of political strategists.

Still, if recent trends in the U.S. and European economies continue, broad economic and historical forces may be coming our way - forces that may put a new premium on compassionate government. Predicting whose political fortunes those forces will ultimately favour is miles beyond any pollster's margin of error.

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