

## Three ways Liberals and NDP can win over Conservative Voters

By Michael Adams

Published in *The Globe and Mail*

April 6, 2015

As this year's federal election approaches, the Conservative government is increasingly crystallizing its offer to voters around a single promise: security. The economy has been removed from the party's display window, replaced by the global fight against ISIS and its sympathizers, some abroad, some next door.

For the Conservatives, a focus on keeping Canadians safe from terror is a strong play: fear may well be humans' most powerful emotion. Academics such as Jonathan Haidt and George Lakoff have argued that conservatives and liberals have distinct sensibilities and seek different kinds of emotional satisfaction from politics. Lakoff, for instance, describes a conservative mindset that values leadership from strong, paternal figures—and keeping the brood safe is an essential part of the job description for any strong papa. (In exchange, dad gets loyalty, deference to his authority, and in some cases a tie or patterned socks at Christmas.)

One drawback of the Conservatives' laser-like focus on terror and security, however, is that it cedes so much other territory to challengers. It gives an opening for the Liberals and the NDP to make noise not only about their own traditional issues (social programs, the environment, and so on) but also about some issues that the Conservatives usually claim as their own. How might the Liberals or NDP show that they should be taken seriously not only by their own stalwarts but by Canadians who have voted Conservative in recent elections, especially those who gave Harper's party its surprising majority in 2011?

How about advocating for veterans? The Harper government embraces military symbolism, and armed forces that can fight evil and keep Canadians safe is certainly part of the Conservatives' strong-father model of leadership. But in recent years many Canadian veterans have expressed dissatisfaction with the government's handling of their services and supports. For many, the highway of heroes seems to lead to a less exalted place at the end of the road. Although the Conservatives' new minister of Veterans Affairs is working to repair relations with military personnel, a *Globe and Mail* [editorial](#) argued that there is still much work to be done—both to rebuild trust and to address quantifiable inequities.

Most Canadians would wish to see their military personnel honoured not only when they're deployed, but also when they return from doing what the country has asked of them, especially if they have been injured physically or psychologically in the course of their duties. An opposition party that demonstrated a concrete commitment to meeting veterans' health care and employment needs—even if it were not a party that voters associated automatically with fighting capabilities—might well appeal to conservative-leaning Canadians disappointed by recent headlines.

How about celebrating old-fashioned citizenship? Civic education and pride in citizenship were once rather conservative ideals. They were connected to the patriotism and loyalty to country that right-leaning people have often claimed as special virtues. Recently, however, Canada's immigration program has taken on a more transactional character. It has become more strongly associated with short-term labour trends than with long-term nation-building. And indeed, a recent [analysis](#) from Andrew Griffith indicates that the rate at which immigrants become citizens has declined.

Despite some concerns about cultural integration (a process that citizenship and belonging only help), Canadians remain positive about immigration and take pride in multiculturalism. Shifting the immigration frame away from this quarter's want ads and toward meaningful citizenship, civic participation, and inclusive nation-building might just appeal to some Canadian patriots who believe countries and their citizens do best when their responsibilities toward each other are durable and deeply felt.

How about smart spending? The Harper government highlights its fiscal restraint, but some of its discretionary projects have had big price tags. The F-35 procurement project, estimated by the Department of National Defense at \$45-billion, is perhaps the most conspicuous example. The voluntary National Household Survey cost \$22-million more than the old census while yielding a lower-quality result. The Parliamentary Budget Office reported in 2013 that spending on the criminal justice system, expressed as a percentage of GDP, increased by 15.2% between the Conservatives' taking office in 2006 and the last year reported (2012, in which year criminal justice consumed \$20.3-billion). That's a big increase in spending on a problem that was improving on its own. Experts know crime rates are decreasing; even a growing proportion of Canadians realize this. Public Works Canada reports that between 2009 and 2013, the government spent close to \$370-million dollars on advertising—with a notable peak in 2009-10 (taxpayers paid \$136.3-million that fiscal year) when the government was aggressively touting its stimulus spending program.

Canadians are not hostile to government spending or to the idea of government, but nobody likes the idea of wasting money, or spending it on things that don't work. Is there an opposition party that can compellingly articulate the cost—including the opportunity cost—of decisions on which the Conservatives have failed the efficacy test?

Of course, in addition to these appeals to right-of-centre sensibilities, opposition parties must also appeal to their own traditional constituencies. The NDP have already claimed public child care as an issue for this year. Will one of the opposition parties take on pharmacare, a program that our 2012 Focus Canada survey found nine in ten Canadians supporting (56% strongly so)? Taking the environment more seriously is a no-brainer: it's an issue on which both major opposition parties—and of course the Greens—are more in line with the public than the current government is.

Stephen Harper is hoping to win in October by pushing buttons related to fear and protection. To be successful, opposition parties must find their own buttons to push. Some of these can be traditional centre-left buttons such as environmental responsibility and social programs like child care and bringing prescription drugs under the umbrella of Medicare. A focus on these issues evinces leadership less in the mould of the strong, protective father and more in the mould of the nurturing parent. But with the Conservatives tightly focused on terror, opposition parties may even be able to make some successful centre-right appeals in areas like civic responsibility, care for people who put their lives on the line for Canada, and sound fiscal management.

Who can wait for our next date with electoral destiny?