

Listening In

What recent populist victories tell us about Canada

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Societies have conversations with themselves. Sometimes these conversations are so noisy that everyone is forced to pay attention. In Canada, our noisiest conversations since World War II have been Quebec sovereignty and the War Measures Act. Those two would have been hard to miss.

Sometimes, however, a conversation begins in one part of society without others (governments, mainstream media, the majority of the public) taking much notice. Frustrations can be repeated in a particular region or in a particular sector of the economy but be ignored or even dismissed elsewhere. These unheeded concerns eventually either fade away or force themselves onto the public agenda.

The election of Rob Ford in Toronto in 2010 was one instance. At a time when serious municipal leaders focused on issues such as smart regional transportation solutions, wooing the global “creative class,” and inter-jurisdictional negotiations, Ford barreled to power on anger about a vehicle registration fee and a garbage strike.

At first he was dismissed by many. “Toronto is a major city,” the thinking went, “too major to be taken in by a platform revolving around a sixty-dollar fee and supposed misspending at City Hall.” There was just one problem: for nearly half the city’s voters, Ford was the only one giving voice to their concerns in public. His promise to “stop the gravy train” resonated widely.

Rob Ford is a unique case. But Canada’s national political landscape has been shaped by some of the same dynamics as the Toronto race that brought Ford to power: frustrations long unheeded, even dismissed, and then finally harnessed and forced to the top of the agenda by a politician who took them seriously.

Consider the context. Canada experienced an era of strong state activism and deep social change from the 1960s to the mid-2000s, but not all of these changes were universally embraced. Sometimes the opposition was ideological, as with social welfare programs such as medicare. Sometimes it was ethnocultural: Anglo traditionalists believed Canada should behave as a loyal Dominion, not a bilingual upstart. Sometimes the opposition was regional, as when the National Energy Program inflamed Albertans. Sometimes it was values-based: as on issues such as gender equality and the death penalty.

Although each strain of dissent found some airing on the national stage, collectively the dissenting constituencies did not enjoy anything like the dominance of the social-democratic forces that ran the country for most of the 20th century.

The Reform movement was a watershed, but Reform and its immediate heirs never rallied enough of the latent forces of dissent in Canada to become a truly dominant national political force. They did, however get far enough in their journey to let a young political nerd with an economics degree discern the path that might take him the rest of the way.

Stephen Harper came to power in 2006. Why were voters willing to give the keys to government to an anti-tax activist who is, by his own admission, to the political right of most Canadians? It was not that Canadians had undergone a radical change of heart on either social or fiscal issues. It was that Stephen Harper had been listening to neglected strains in the Canadian conversation—and eventually found a way to knit them together into a viable national party.

The West was one critical piece of Harper's puzzle. The region had long been an afterthought in a national political scene dominated by French-English dynamics, but was emerging as an economic and demographic third force to be reckoned with. The new Conservative party has consistently won all but a handful of seats in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba—and in 2008 and 2011 won most of those in B.C as well.

A second piece was fiscal conservatives outside the West. Reform never won a seat east of Manitoba, and Stockwell Day's Canadian Alliance barely made a dent in Ontario. But after the merger of the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives in 2003, the new Conservative coalition made steady gains in Ontario, winning 24 seats there in 2004, 40 in 2006, 51 in 2008, and 73 in 2011, the year they achieved their long-sought majority.¹

Critically, the potential for fiscal conservative votes went beyond those who in the case of Ontario had supported Mike Harris's "Common Sense Revolution." From 1960 to 1990, total government spending in Canada as a percentage of GDP went from 28.9% to 48.8%. (It has since come down to a bit more than 40%.) Federal borrowing, especially during times of high interest rates, cost taxpayers dearly. By the 1990s, a lot of Canadians decided that they liked the government they had, but that they had acquired about all the government they wanted. Some of the votes that brought the new Conservative Party into the political mainstream came from this centrist constituency.

Building out from the core pillars of Western resentment and fiscal conservatism, Stephen Harper has proved adept at nurturing and validating other doubts and irritations of Canadians ill at ease with the country's post-1960 trajectory.

He has appealed to revanchists and those who feel strongly about Canada's Anglo history. He has beefed up the government's use of monarchical symbols, displaying portraits of the Queen more consistently and lending pomp to royal visits. He restored the word "Royal" to the official names of Canada's navy and air force.

On foreign policy, the Harper government has turned away from the multilateralism of the second half of the twentieth century and instead emphasized the country's military history, alliances, and credentials in the fight against evil. As Roland Paris puts it, the current government's picture of Canada's international role is, "one that plays down the accomplishments of Canada as a multilateral entrepreneur and peacemaker, and instead highlights Canada's participation in wars and great moral struggles—including the War of 1812, the two world wars, and the Cold War."

The Harper government has famously pursued a populist course on crime. As criminologist Anthony Doob has argued, before 2006 crime and punishment were not partisan issues in Canada. Liberals and Progressive Conservatives both deferred to the evidence about what worked to reduce crime and rehabilitate offenders. This approach might have been effective in reducing recidivism while saving money, but it was not always in step with a large section of public opinion. Stephen Harper saw an opportunity to claim the "common sense" territory on

¹ <http://www.sfu.ca/~aheard/elections/past-elections.html>

crime: to take an emotionally satisfying, punitive approach—regardless of its effectiveness. In foregrounding crime as a priority, the Harper Conservatives have cast themselves as steely realists. A pile of data showing that “tougher” policies don’t work and that crime is in decline is easily brushed aside with a heart-rending story from a victim or distraught relatives. Crime is one more area where Conservatives style themselves as strong protectors, strict fathers well equipped to keep order—as tough on crime as they are on terrorists, fake refugees, and government waste.

The macho element of the tough-on-crime approach is no accident. Evidence-based crime-reduction approaches, which emphasize prevention (through measures like programs for at-risk youth) and rehabilitation (education and other supports to help offenders make successful transitions back into society) are products of a society in which the mainstream has become more empathic, more aware of the consequences of inequity, and less knee-jerk. Just as parents today are more likely than they were a couple of generations ago to investigate the sources of their children’s misbehaviour instead of automatically spanking them, majority opinion has grown more likely to reflect on the causes and contexts of crime instead of locking people up and throwing away the key.

But elections are usually won on the basis of strategically constructed constituencies, not outright majorities. In its rejection of societal reflection, its impatience with experts and data, and its ostentatious desire to deal harshly with criminals, the Harper government is able to communicate volumes: the message is that we’ve had enough of this feminized culture of empathy, excuses, hugging thugs, and fourth and fifth chances. This sensibility appeals to a portion of the electorate far larger than just those who fear becoming victims of crime, a group that constitutes about a fifth of the population, the same proportion as in 1976 when we at Environics started tracking it.

So in ways both substantial and subtle, Stephen Harper has successfully courted the diverse—albeit often overlapping—constituencies that were dismayed by the changes that took place in the decades following 1960. He has found pathways to electoral support and policy reform, even in a largely hostile context of increasingly liberal Canadian values, by showing a penchant for incrementalism and by exploiting the mistakes and divisions of the multiple parties to his left in our first-past-the-post electoral system.

But most Canadians are not part of this backlash. Nearly two-thirds have remained unsupportive of the Harper government; the Conservatives peaked at just under 40 percent of the popular vote when they won their majority in 2011. What does a progressive candidate need to do to connect with this frustrated majority?

Although the post-1960 period produced a large and diverse set of changes, they mostly fall into two broad categories: changes related to the size and role of government, and changes in what might be called cultural sensibility (things like colonial versus cosmopolitan, traditional versus future-oriented, empathic versus macho, moralistic versus evidence-based). Recent history offers a number of lessons about how candidates can relate to these two aspects of public life and how voters might respond.

Much recent action at the provincial level is at odds with the backlash occurring at the federal level.

In Alberta in 2012, it seemed as though the socially and fiscally conservative Wildrose Party was set to overtake the centre-right Progressive Conservatives. The PCs’ long incumbency and a perception of government complacency and waste produced some restlessness in the

electorate. But as Tony Coulson and I wrote at the time, surveys showed that most Albertans believed government “often does a better job than people give it credit for”; saw more good than harm in taxation; and wanted government to take an active role in tackling the big challenges of the day, such as inequality. Wildrose’s hostility to government seemed out of step with these attitudes, and indeed, although voters were restless, that year they eventually veered away from the hard-right option and stuck with the perpetually incumbent PCs.

When their provisional support for that party was met not with humility and reform but with spending scandals under Alison Redford and the seeming hubris from new leader Jim Prentice, Albertans reacted strongly—but they didn’t veer rightward. Instead, on May 5th, they voted Rachel Notley’s NDP into majority government with 53 seats, an election outcome that was unimaginable just a few weeks earlier—never mind during the preceding four decades of Tory rule.

In Ontario, there was no reason why Kathleen Wynne’s Liberals should have won the provincial election in 2014. Voters were tired of her party and angry about a massive spending scandal. Although well liked, Wynne was not new: she had been a high-profile cabinet minister for years.

But if Ontarians were fed up with the Liberals, they were alarmed by Tim Hudak’s Progressive Conservatives, who proposed a frontal assault on government. Despite scandals and voter fatigue, Ontarians returned Wynne to office with a strengthened mandate. This was not the decision of a voting public that thinks government is the problem. As for cultural sensibilities, Wynne’s sexuality (she’s married to a woman) went virtually unmentioned in the campaign, a silence that spoke loudly of Ontarians’ social values.

These stories from Alberta and Ontario are striking cases of voters showing considerable sympathy towards centre-left parties who pledge to protect existing entitlements and even incrementally expand them. In other jurisdictions, voters have gravitated to candidates who see promise in government: Naheed Nenshi in Calgary, Don Iveson in Edmonton, Gregor Robertson in Vancouver, Brian Gallant in New Brunswick. In addition to belief in government, another common denominator in all these cases is the role of leadership. In Notley, Wynne, and the others, voters saw intelligent leaders with integrity—people who avoided arrogance, expressed respect for other people, and seemed authentic and trustworthy.

Amid all this openness to government, to young candidates, female candidates, and gay and lesbian candidates (PEI elected Canada’s second openly gay head of government, Liberal Wade McLauchlan), what explains the freight-train of anti-government, politically incorrect anger that barreled Rob Ford into City Hall in Canada’s largest and most diverse urban centre? The contradiction in Ontario is especially bizarre: Wynne’s triumph and Ford’s election seem as though they happened on different planets, not in overlapping jurisdictions.

Events dealt Rob Ford an ace in 2009 in the form of a protracted municipal garbage strike. At a time when, following the 2008 financial meltdown, many Torontonians were unemployed, financially strained, or terrified of becoming so, the strike gave Ford a chance to attack what he cast as an entitled public-sector union.

His basic message was “I am angry like you and I will fix this mess, even if I have to move every bag of trash myself.” In contrast, the message of incumbent David Miller was about municipalities having insufficient powers to meet their responsibilities. Miller’s point was valid. No matter: Ford hit a nerve. This was a vision of straightforward government efficacy, however simplistic and illusory, that struck home after Miller’s insistence on multi-jurisdictional responsibility and structural problems.

In times of crisis, people want solutions, not excuses, committee meetings, or policy papers. For all his obvious flaws, Ford essentially told people that government was a simple machine and that, with no extra tax dollars, he would get it working for them again.

Torontonians—and Canadians more broadly—are not strongly hostile to government or to unions. But Ford tapped into public anxiety about government and government employees. This anxiety is usually latent but, as Ford demonstrated with wild success, it can be aroused.

During the era of government growth and activism from the 1960s through the early 2000s, governments at all levels had increasingly complex demands placed on them. They needed capable people in order to do the big, complicated jobs Canadians asked of them. Tasked with things such as keeping the population healthy and overseeing a transportation system that keeps borders secure while facilitating the movement of goods and people, governments hired qualified people and had to offer them compensation commensurate with their skills.

Today, the apparatus of our state is enormous. The value it delivers is also enormous. But it's not hard to find an anecdote to make it sound bloated. Canadians are unlikely to come across the headline, "Government continues to save billions through economies of scale." They have, however, read the headlines, "\$16 glass of OJ a symbol of government excess" and "E Health scandal a \$1B waste: auditor".

Governments often perform well. But when they get it wrong the price tags are either astronomical (eHealth Ontario) or simply galling (that tumbler of orange juice would cost over an hour of work for many Canadians).

And it's not just the gap between cabinet ministers or high-flying consultants and everyone else that causes trouble. The private sector rank-and-file and their counterparts in the public sector are increasingly working under different rules, with unionization rates notably higher in the public sector (71%) than in the private sector (16.4%).² This disproportionate unionization in the public sector is new: in 1997, union members were about evenly divided between public and private sector. Today, they are more concentrated in the public sector.

It's not that Canadians are strongly anti-union. Indeed, a slim majority of all Canadians (55%) say that when workers unionize it is generally a good thing, and there is agreement across the political spectrum that union membership makes a difference in terms of average wages and job security. But the "union advantage" is well known among those who don't share in it, and in a climate of increasingly precarious employment as well as major inequality with complex causes, it is easier to take a populist run at public sector workers' perks and guarantees, forms of inequality small enough to fully digest, than to pore over Thomas Piketty's analysis or argue about multinational corporations' tax-avoidance arabesques.

What do the provincial and municipal election outcomes described above mean, when combined with the (apparently contradictory) success of staunchly conservative Stephen Harper at the federal level and raging Rob Ford in Canada's largest city? What can progressives seeking to harness a backlash to the backlash learn?

First, defenders of government are more or less in line with most Canadians in most jurisdictions—but they need to be careful. Canadians know government does good things for them, and they don't mind paying for it. The proportion of Canadians who believe that "government often does a better job than people give it credit for" (53%) is larger than the proportion who believe government "is almost always wasteful and inefficient" (42%).

² <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a05>; <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a26>

Canadians are also much more likely to believe taxes are on balance a good thing than a bad thing.

That said some Canadians—especially older ones—like what they’ve got from state activism but want to put on the brakes. When asked about their preferred size of government—the size we have today, a government that provides more services and requires more taxes, or a government that provides fewer services and demands less taxes—36 percent of Canadians want to keep the government they have, and an additional 36 percent would prefer smaller government. Older Canadians are markedly less likely than younger ones to say they’d like to see bigger government in Canada. Only 6% of those aged 45 and older say they would like more government; by contrast, about a fifth of those in the 18 to 44 age cohort would welcome more government. These findings may not surprise the people at Generation Squeeze, an advocacy group for young people, who report that governments in Canada spend over \$45,000 per citizen aged 65+, and just \$12,000 per citizen under the age of 45. (And that’s not all hip replacements; health care represents only about a quarter of the spending on older Canadians.) Canadian seniors are happy with their \$45,000 “entitlement”—but want governments to be careful about spending money on others.

Overall, there is enough tension in society about the size of the government machine that when a scandal erupts it can bring a simmering anxiety to the surface with remarkable speed. This is the lesson of Rob Ford and, in a more complicated way, even of Stephen Harper, who we should remember was propelled to power in part by the sponsorship scandal.

Challengers must assiduously avoid both complacency and overreach, and remember that the good achieved by government can easily be taken for granted and become invisible, while mistakes and absurdities make for great headlines. In Canada, concern about the efficacy of government has not reached American proportions, but the number who see government as broken is approaching plurality. About a third of Canadians believe government is either totally broken (10%) or largely broken but working in some areas (23%). An additional 31% see government as “working, but with major problems.”

Despite this unease, a majority of Canadians do still want government to play an active role in tackling issues like income inequality, climate change, and problems beyond Canada’s borders. Canadians do not aspire to become the United States. A majority want a government that helps to build a fair society; they favour compromise and cohesion; they would welcome a return to a more balanced and less bombastic foreign policy; they want governments that are not profligate but not gratuitously austere either.

But the practical consequences of these prevailing attitudes are far from certain. We are entering a new era in Canada of post-progressive politics when government is no longer seen as being the only vehicle for offering effective and efficient solutions to our collective problems. Stephen Harper defines the incremental backlash against the state leviathan. The jury is out on whether either of his main opponents will have a chance to gain power and define what it is to be pragmatically progressive in the 21st century.

Does Justin Trudeau have the gravitas, with Canadians at war against ISIS and Canadian soldiers dying on Canadian soil? A callow ingénue with fine bloodlines promising to legalize marijuana may be palatable in times of peace but in times of war and terrorism may prove as vulnerable to Conservative ridicule as were his immediate predecessors.

Thomas Mulcair has grit and gravitas, and can spar ably with Stephen Harper. But will his national day care promise be the kind of program Canadians are willing to vote for, or will the

older voters who make up a disproportionate share of the electorate decide that it's more government than we can afford?

It is impossible to predict electoral outcomes months away with so many complex factors in play. While a majority of Canadians would love to change the channel away from the Harper show, in a riding-by-riding race the prime minister remains formidable. No one should underestimate Stephen Harper. He has proven both astute and lucky, just like William Lyon Mackenzie King, whose steely pragmatism dominated Canadian politics for nearly three decades. Harper's time in office may end up falling far short of Mackenzie King's record, but he may continue to dominate our politics for some time without reflecting the generally centre-left attitudes and values of the majority of those he governs.