

The Impossibility of Conservatism: New Right Ideology and Civic Discourse in Canada

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“The specific care of the political philosopher is political words, not political things. Thus the unique charge of political theorists is not to direct political activists but to safeguard political language”

Edward Andrew (1988: 196).

What’s in a “neo-”? Writing in 1965, Canadian patriot and philosopher George Grant lamented that “The impossibility of conservatism in our era is the impossibility of Canada” (Grant, 1995: 81). Nearly three decades later, political economists Stephen McBride and John Shields would write that “neo-conservatism is incompatible with the continued existence of Canada as we have come to know it” (McBride & Shields, 1993: 1). For Grant, conservatism was essential to Canada; for McBride and Shields neo-conservatism undermines Canada. Nevertheless, in both cases, the enemy of Canada is identified as a particular brand of market capitalism in combination with the ideology of laissez-faire liberalism. And both these statements preface arguments which conclude that the possibility of Canada as a nation substantially distinct from the United States relies on its embodiment of virtues (for Grant these virtues are conservative; for McBride and Shields they are social democratic) which are impossible under the regime of an unfettered market and American liberalism. These sentences can say the same thing about liberal capitalism (and Canadian nationhood) while saying opposite things about conservatism because Grant’s conservatism was not the same as McBride’s and Shields’ *neo*-conservatism. The latter’s “neo-” refers to what Grant sensed conservatism was becoming, even in 1965, when he observed that “Lockian liberalism is the conservatism of the English-speaking peoples...” (Grant, 1995: 75).

Confused yet? We haven’t even reached the part about Canada’s history of political parties calling themselves Liberal and Progressive (!) Conservative, whose relationships to the

philosophies and ideologies of liberalism and conservatism have long-since ceased to correspond unambiguously to their names. The little dialogue imagined above is meant to suggest that the discursive terrain of Canadian partisan ideology is as formidable, shifting, and deceptive as the geographical terrain of the country itself. This chapter will explore what the rise of “new right” political parties and ideology might mean for civic discourse in Canada. I will argue that the ideology of the new right presents a challenge to our contemporary political conversation, and signals a crisis of meaning in that part of our civic vocabulary where ideological designations or categories are used to mark coherent political positions. In particular, I will suggest that the discourse surrounding the rise of the new right finally drains the word “conservative” of any descriptive utility in the Canadian context.

A NEW RIGHT PARTY FOR CANADA

The new right in Canada is a multi-faceted, loosely-aggregated social and political movement. Its non-partisan elements include: intellectual incubators such as the Fraser Institute and the Conservative Forum; media outlets such as *Alberta Report* and *BC Report* magazines; umbrella organizations such as the National Citizen’s Coalition; and more directed advocacy and activist groups such as the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, REAL Women, the Campaign Life Coalition, the Canada Family Action Coalition, and the Canada West Foundation. The partisan manifestations of the new right are similarly diverse, with several parties of varying strengths and prospects emerging in a number of provinces. Included in this list are the Progressive Conservative parties that have managed to form governments in Alberta and Ontario, the Liberal Party of British Columbia and the Saskatchewan Party – both of which are the Official Opposition in their respective provinces, and have strong prospects for eventually forming governments, the Confederation of Regions party – a minor but notable force in New Brunswick and elsewhere in the 1990s, and a smattering of provincial Reform and Libertarian parties in various provinces. For the purposes of this discussion, I will limit consideration to the federal Reform/Alliance party. On the one hand, singling Reform/Alliance is somewhat artificial, as it is organically linked in terms of membership, organization and ideology with most of the above-listed actors. On the other hand, among these it is Reform/Alliance whose impact upon civic discourse, and political life more generally, has been felt most acutely at the federal level in and throughout Canada. Also, it is fair to say that many of the ideological elements of the new

right constellation find order in the ideology of Reform/Alliance.

The rise to prominence of the Reform/Alliance party has been well-documented (Dabbs, 1997; Dobbin, 1991; Harrison, 1995; Sharpe & Braid, 1992). The Reform Party of Canada was conceived at an assembly in Vancouver in May 1987, and born at a founding convention in Winnipeg that October, as Brian Mulroney's historic electoral coalition of moderate Québécois nationalists and disgruntled western Canadian economic and political elites began to unravel on the heels of the 1986 Meech Lake Agreement, and the award in the same year of a large federal contract to build CF-18 military aircraft to Canadair-CAE Ltd. of Montreal over Winnipeg-based Bristol Aerospace (Carty, Cross & Young, 2000: 37-41; Harrison, 1995: 82-120). The Winnipeg convention also saw the party choose as its leader Preston Manning, a management consultant in the oil industry and son of former Social Credit Premier of Alberta Ernest Manning (the elder Manning's predecessor, William Aberhart, was Preston's godfather). The party fielded twenty-eight candidates in the 1988 federal general election, but failed to secure a seat. In this election the pivotal issue was the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement proposed by the Progressive Conservative government; Reform supported the deal, which left the upstart party in the somewhat ironic position of fighting its first campaign by aligning itself with a key platform position of the very party it had risen to oppose. Entry into the House of Commons would await the victory of Deborah Grey – “a straight-talking, gospel-singing schoolteacher with strong anti-abortionist views and a political pedigree...” (Harrison, 1995: 140) – in a 1989 by-election in the Alberta riding of Beaver River. Also in 1989, Alberta premier Don Getty decided to determine the province's recommendation for a vacant Senate seat via an election. The election was won handily by the Reform candidate, Stan Waters.

The general election of 1993 marked the emergence of the Reform Party as a full-fledged player on the federal scene. Capitalizing on the collapse of the Progressive Conservative vote in the west, and on its exclusive status as the only federal party based in English Canada to have opposed the Charlottetown Accord (54.4 per cent of Canadians voted against the constitutional proposal), Reform won 52 seats, all but one from west of the Manitoba-Ontario border. As David Laycock has pointed out, this meant that in western Canada Reform had elected five times as many MPs as the other opposition parties combined, and had thus become “the de facto parliamentary opposition west of the Ottawa River” (Laycock, 1994: 214). The 1997 general election saw Reform convert de facto into de jure, as the party won 60 seats, and Preston

Manning became the Leader of Official Opposition in House of Commons. The news in 1997 was not all rosy, however, as despite the expenditure of considerable effort the party was unable to elect a single member to a seat east of Manitoba. The party and its leadership was convinced that its lack of success in this regard was due to a split in the right-wing, anti-Liberal vote between ascending Reform candidates and declining Progressive Conservatives.

Soon after the 1997 election Reform leader Preston Manning began to press for a solution to the perceived vote-splitting problem, in the hope of forestalling repetition of the party's shut-out of seat-rich Ontario. Manning's initial foray in this respect consisted of a prospective appeal to Progressive Conservative voters in that province to consider switching allegiances and voting strategically to prevent the election of Liberal candidates by default. Quickly, Manning's overtures matured into a full-fledged strategy to "unite the right," either via agreements between Reform and Progressive Conservative constituency associations not to contest each other for seats in ridings where their combined vote might exceed that of their common Liberal opponents, or by a more formal amalgamation of the parties at the national level. Despite having these invitations rebuffed by the leadership of the federal Progressive Conservatives, as well as substantial reservation within the ranks of his own party, Manning pressed forward with the plan under the auspices of the United Alternative movement. The United Alternative plan proceeded with the support of the federal Reform caucus, 60 percent of the party membership (as expressed in a June 1999 referendum) and, crucially, Progressive Conservative Premier of Alberta Ralph Klein and several high-profile members of Mike Harris' ruling Ontario Progressive Conservative party. In February of 1999, a United Alternative convention voted to create a new right-wing federal political party, a proposal which reignited dissension within the Reform fold – to which Manning responded with a threat to resign should the membership reject the plan for a new party.

In January 2000, a second United Alternative convention was held at which delegates adopted a constitution, policy declaration and name for the new party – the Canadian Conservative-Reform Alliance Party (CCRAP), later changed to the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance to circumvent derogatory pronunciation of the initial name's acronym. In a March 2000 referendum, the Reform party membership approved formal consolidation with the Alliance. Four months later, in July 2000, the Alliance selected its first leader, Stockwell Day, a former pastor, auctioneer and Finance Minister of Alberta under the Progressive Conservative

government of Ralph Klein. The founding father of both the Reform party and the Alliance, Preston Manning, placed second in the leadership contest, with Ontario Progressive Conservative strategist Tom Long placing third. Under Day's leadership, the Alliance contested the 2000 general election in each of the Canada's 301 federal ridings. The party increased its national seat total to 66 (increasing Reform's 1997 total by 6), its percentage share of the national popular vote from 19.4 to 25.5, and retained its status as Official Opposition in the House of Commons. The province of Ontario continued to elude the Alliance, as the party managed only 2 seats and a 4.5 per cent increase in popular vote (from 19.1 to 23.5), despite a massive campaign effort – the remaining Alliance seats were all located in western Canada, 50 of them concentrated in British Columbia and Alberta alone.

NEW RIGHT IDEOLOGY IN CANADA

In the popular imagination and discourse, Preston Manning's Reform party and its offspring in the Alliance are typically characterized, often dismissively, as a western party of regional protest, vaguely descendant from the failed tradition of Canadian prairie populism, pathologically xenophobic (particularly in relation to the Québécois) and animated by fundamentalist Christian zealotry. This account is inadequate and misleading on a number of levels, a fact that is revealed in the growing body of scholarship which attempts to reckon with the nuances and complexity of the party's ideology (Barney & Laycock, 1999; Flanagan, 1995; Harrison, 1995; Jeffrey, 1999; Laycock, 1994; Patten, 1996; Sigurdson, 1994). Indeed, each of the above characterizations obscure more than they reveal about the political essence of new right ideology, and so distract us from critical consideration of what is really at stake in its emergence. In what follows I would like to sketch out what I take to be the primary and enduring pillars of the party's ideology, as it moves into its period of maturity and institutionalization, concentrating on official Alliance policy. These include commitments to particular interpretations of liberty, equality, and democracy which combine to yield a principled conviction regarding the role of the state, and the character of public and private life.

Liberty

Accepting his election as leader of the Alliance, Stockwell Day began his speech by proclaiming that the "Freedom Train" was about to roll on to Ottawa, bringing with it "freedom

from oppressive government.” As this declaration suggests, the core of the Reform/Alliance ideology is a principled commitment to the protection of negative liberty – understood as individual freedom from formal, external constraint – which manifests itself in a particular antagonism towards the state and its government. This is a fairly standard expression of a branch of liberal ideology that is rooted in the political theory of John Locke (1986), which seeks to provide philosophical justification for strict limits on the scope of public authority (especially in economic matters) in observance of an individually-held, inalienable natural right to unlimited accumulation of private property. According to Locke, men unite into political communities in order to preserve their lives, liberties and estates, each of which is reducible to “the general name, property.” Thus, wrote Locke, “The great and *chief end*, therefore, of men’s uniting into common-wealths, and putting themselves under government, *is the preservation of their property*” (Locke, 1986:180). For Lockean liberals, this end establishes both the purpose and limit of state authority and government: positively, governments must act to protect individuals and their property from domestic and foreign invasion; negatively, upon pain of revolution, they must never act to infringe the property right or its enjoyment by individuals.

In Article 21 of its Policy Declaration, the Canadian Alliance commits itself to amending the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to include “the right to own, use and benefit from private property” (Canadian Alliance, 2000a). While it is true this right has been historically recognized in Canadian common law, its inclusion in the Charter would constitute a radical change. More significant, however, is the manner in which the liberal disposition for which this commitment stands articulates itself throughout the party’s economic policy and ideology, an articulation which is generally anti-statist, and particularly designed to roll-back the expansion of public authority that attended the growth of Canada’s welfare state in the postwar era. As stated in the preamble to the Policy Declaration, the party is concerned primarily to ensure “minimal government intrusion in people’s lives” by providing government “whose powers are strictly limited to the functions essential to a modern state”(Canadian Alliance, 2000a). In the Alliance’s view, the essential economic functions of a modern state are quite few, but chief among them is the responsibility to “create an economic climate in which businesses can thrive”(Canadian Alliance, 2000a), a function which is best fulfilled when the intervention of public authority in market distribution of private property and goods is either minimized or eliminated.

The most obvious manifestation of this ideological commitment has been the party’s

policy on taxation. Taxation is perhaps the most basic claim the public good makes against the private property of individuals, an indispensable instrument of wealth re-distribution underpinning the welfare state and, for better or for worse, it is one of the few remaining tangible means through which modern citizens affirm their mutual obligation to common, social well-being. It is also the primary target of new right liberalism. In this view, the level of taxation necessary to sustain the welfare state is by definition excessive, and a coercive infringement of individuals' right to dispose of their property freely. In its platform for the 2000 federal election, the Alliance characterized current levels of taxation as "an incredible hardship for ordinary Canadians trying to make ends meet" and, in a New Age twist on an old bourgeois refrain, promised that "by paying lower taxes you can achieve your true potential" (Canadian Alliance, 2000b). The discourse of massive tax reduction, to degrees that would effectively neuter what remains of the welfare state in Canada, was central to the Alliance's first campaign for office, including a regressive proposal to flatten income-specific taxation to the single rate of 17 per cent.¹ Along with this lowering of personal income tax, the 2000 election platform pledged the Alliance to reducing taxes paid by corporations, including cuts to payroll taxes, capital gains taxes, and taxes paid by service, high-tech and small businesses (Canadian Alliance, 2000b).

The liberal conception of liberty as the freedom of property holders from state intervention in markets animates a range of Alliance policy positions that extend beyond matters of taxation, all of which manifest an ideological aim to truncate public intervention in the distribution of economic goods, especially intervention pursuant to the common welfare. These positions, articulated repeatedly throughout Alliance policy and campaign documents, include: support for international and inter-provincial free trade; massive reductions in social spending; dismantling of regional development agencies such as the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency; reduction of employment and income security benefits; privatization and divestiture of crown corporations, including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and VIA Rail; comprehensive deregulation (specifically of the commercial airline industry); abandonment of the federal spending power in social policy areas; de-universalization of the Canada Pension Plan; de-collectivization of agricultural marketing; and legislated requirements regarding social spending, balanced budgets and debt reduction that would seriously curtail the economic discretion of duly elected governments.

In the Alliance's relatively unreconstructed liberal economic ideology, the chief positive

role of democratic government *vis-a-vis* the economy is thus, ironically, a negative one: to institutionalize the absence of the state. Such an absence necessarily renders moot the possibility of the state acting as a public agent of economic re-distribution, or as a medium through which considerations of common welfare might moderate the extremities and inequities of the capitalist market. In place of the welfare state, Alliance ideology as expressed in its Policy Declaration recommends to the disadvantaged precisely what might be expected of adherents to the Lockean faith: “personal responsibility, individual freedom, and independence” (Canadian Alliance, 2000a). For “those who require assistance to achieve the level of independence of which they are capable,” the Alliance suggests that, rather than the state, “families, communities and non-governmental organizations are best placed to respond to individual needs on a personal basis” (Canadian Alliance, 2000a). That these agents of civil society might face resource challenges due to reductions in social spending by the state is of no concern, as Alliance tax cuts “will leave resources in the hands of those who are best able to help” (Canadian Alliance, 2000a).

It should be noted that the Alliance’s ideological commitment to Lockean economic liberty for individual property holders in free markets does not correspond to a similar commitment to state absence in the realms of civil relations and personal morality. In this respect, Alliance ideology departs somewhat from the doctrine of strict non-interference and recommends a robust, activist role for the state in certain instances. This exceptionalism is expressed most clearly in the party’s policy in the areas of criminal justice and the family.

Despite its aforementioned commitment to “minimal government intrusion in people’s lives,” the Alliance principles and platform items regarding criminal justice indicate unambiguously the party’s willingness to flex the muscle of the state in order to enforce upon certain individuals its particular vision of social order. Under the rubric of establishing “clear consequences for crime and compassion for victims” (Canadian Alliance, 2000b), the Alliance advocates a range of measures, including: removal of judicial discretion in sentencing; increased use of indefinite incarceration for “career criminals”; registration and mandatory lifetime supervision or monitoring for certain categories of offenders; lowering the age for prosecution of youth offenders as adults to 14, and enabling publication of their identity; increased restrictions on parole eligibility; and denial of prisoners’ right to vote. Survey research of the opinions of Reform party activists in the early 1990s indicated that 82 per cent favoured the restoration of

capital punishment (Archer & Ellis, 1994: 297) – a position endorsed publicly by Alliance leader Stockwell Day in 2000 election campaign (Leblanc, 2000: A4). This endorsement of legalized execution (the grossest violation of an individual’s liberty a state can possibly commit), along with the party’s contemplation of the range of measures listed above, confirms that the Alliance’s concern for minimalist state intervention in economic liberty is not matched by a similar reticence regarding state invasion of individual civil liberty; the new right’s plan to minimize the state’s redistributive economic power is coupled with a plan to maximize its punitive civic power. Though it may seem contradictory and illiberal, the Alliance view is completely consistent with Locke’s foundational vision of the state’s primary responsibility to protect private property (which for Locke, we should recall, includes life, liberty and estate), in this case by punishing grievously those who threaten or do it harm. This vision of justice as individuated restraint and retribution (as opposed to, for example, equity, fairness or collective welfare) supplements the Alliance’s liberal view of negative liberty, and is expressed ideologically as a principled conviction that “the rights of victims of crime must take precedence over those of criminals” (Canadian Alliance, 2000a).

The role for the state in domestic relations contemplated by Alliance ideology is also less than perfectly non-interventionist. On the one hand, Alliance principles assert a paradigmatically liberal doctrine of non-intervention in private domestic matters, affirming “the right and duty of parents to raise their children responsibly according to their own conscience and beliefs,” and that “no person, government or agency has the right to interfere in the exercise of that duty except through due process of law” (Canadian Alliance, 2000a). However, on the other hand, the Alliance is also committed to using state authority to legitimize certain types of domestic relationships as constitutive of “family” while explicitly de-legitimizing others. Calling the family “the essential building block of a healthy society,” Alliance principles endorse the extension of legislated benefits to “individuals related by blood, adoption or marriage” and restrict qualification in the latter category to “the exclusive union of one man and one woman” (Canadian Alliance, 2000a).ⁱⁱ Given the number of entitlements (and obligations) attached to conjugal union in Canadian society, Alliance policy regarding promotion of “the family” would uncharacteristically involve the state in a high degree of prescriptive intervention in private life and the personal choices of individuals: under an Alliance government, gay and lesbian couples and their children, or those living in other non-traditional configurations, would not be

recognized as “families” by the state. Such domestic configurations would not be illegal, but choosing them would entail prejudicial disadvantage and exclusion from significant public benefit as a matter of state policy. Apparently, the new right’s faith in the logic of the market is not so secure that they are content to leave the matter of domestic choice to individuals free from active state encouragement of some choices over others.

Equality

The preamble of the Alliance Policy Declaration lists among the party’s core principles a devotion to “true equality of citizens and provinces” (Canadian Alliance, 2000a), and its 2000 election platform pledges that an Alliance government would “treat all Canadians equally” (Canadian Alliance, 2000b). A rhetorical commitment to equality is a minimum condition of admission into legitimate political discussion in a liberal democracy. The new right in Canada clearly meets this condition, but this does not provide much insight into its ideology – for this it is necessary to determine the specific character of the equality to which the new right’s partisan vehicle is committed. There are of course a range of “equalities” available for consideration and endorsement with the liberal democratic tradition, including: radical egalitarian rejection of distinction and excellence; equality before and under the law; equal opportunity; equality of rights; and material equality. To be sure, like other ideological positions in the modern liberal democratic galaxy, Alliance principles suggest support for some of these equalities and not others. However, (notwithstanding the aforementioned prejudice regarding “the family”) what distinguishes the new right’s view of equality is a categorical opposition to recognizing any substantive distinction that might activate state-supported benefits or exceptions. This view is typically expressed as a principled objection to any “special” status, rights or entitlements attached to, or resulting from, the particular or unique characteristics, needs or situations of individuals collected in distinct groups or categories. Phrased differently, in this view equality always means identical treatment for individuals, and it never requires differential treatment. This, it might be said, represents a version of what is perhaps the thinnest conception of equality available in the liberal democratic tradition.

This conception of equality as an absence of prejudice in the distribution of state favour and public goods is expressed in a number of the Alliance’s principles and platform positions. The most obvious is probably the party’s unambiguous opposition to “the use of affirmative

action or any other type of discriminatory quota system” (Canadian Alliance, 2000a) in the federal public service, which manifests itself in a pledge to abolish “preferential hiring based on gender, race and ethnicity quotas” (Canadian Alliance, 2000b). It is not clear whether this proposal extends to rejecting bilingualism as a qualification for advance within in the federal public sector.ⁱⁱⁱ The Alliance vision of equality is indicated also in its approach to aboriginal affairs. Citing “individual freedom and equality before and under the law” as the “key principle” of the party’s position, the Alliance pledges that it will “protect the democratic rights and freedoms of *individual* aboriginals” provided that they have “the same rights and responsibilities as all other Canadians” (Canadian Alliance, 2000a). In practical terms, this principled commitment to equality for aboriginals translates into elimination of most aspects of the distinct status aboriginals have enjoyed as a group due to their unique historical and material circumstances in Canadian society. Thus, an Alliance government would eradicate “race-based allocation of harvest rights to natural resources” (Canadian Alliance, 2000a) and would end the tax-exemption extended to many aboriginals by assuring that they “pay their share of federal and provincial tax” (Canadian Alliance, 2000b), just like any other citizens.

The doctrine of equality as identical negative liberty for individuals coupled with non-distinction for and between groups is also evident in the Alliance position on multiculturalism. Pledging to “uphold the freedom of individuals and families to nurture aspects of culture that are important to them,” the Alliance nevertheless qualifies this sentiment when it declares that “we believe that multiculturalism is a personal choice, and should not be publicly funded” (Canadian Alliance, 2000b). Thus, in the Alliance view, individuals should be equally free to choose the identities they prefer from those available in the cultural marketplace, and they should be equally free to engage privately in the practices that express those identities. However, there must be no state support for the maintenance of those identities or for the public cultural practices of individuals or collectivities, as such support privileges members of particular groups over others. The Alliance view of equality does not comprehend the inequity and non-neutrality of a state which, for example, institutionalizes the cultural practices of the majority (e.g., state holidays tied to the Christian calendar) exclusively.

The one respect in which the Alliance view departs from a fundamental rejection of group-entitlement to equality is in the party’s demand for institutionalization of the equality of provinces as corporate bodies. While the party recognizes (at least rhetorically) the diversity of

Canada's provinces, it also believes that in order to pursue this diversity "all Canadian provinces should be equal before and under the law, possessing equal powers to govern within their areas of constitutional authority...and each should have equal freedom to build the society most appropriate to its citizens" (Canadian Alliance, 2000a). On the face of it, this policy would seem to conflict with the party's rejection of group-based equality claims. The contradiction is revealed as only apparent, however, once it is recalled that the new right's case for equality is articulated specifically in terms of an antagonism towards special status. In this case, equality as the opposite of distinction manifests itself in opposition to asymmetrical federalism – the doctrine perceived to be at the root of the special status historically granted to the province of Quebec and denied to the western provinces – and also to federal redistributive programs and agencies which have typically favored certain regions of the country disproportionately to others. Similar to their view of multiculturalism, in terms of federalism the new right commitment to equality amounts to toleration of superficial diversity provided it does not entail meaningful political distinction.

Democracy

In modern polities, ideological commitments to liberty and equality typically converge within the horizon of democracy and new right ideology is consistent with this tendency. However, as with liberty and equality, it is important to consider the particular vision of democracy contained in this ideology. As with its forebears in the Reform party, the Alliance expresses its commitment to democracy under the rubric of institutional and procedural reform of the Canadian electoral and parliamentary systems, and a particular vision of what constitutes legitimate political representation, much of which turns on advocacy of a range of instruments loosely described by the term "direct democracy." Popular discourse and pundits have generally been content to gather the new right's various democratic designs under the banner of "populism," but closer inspection reveals this designation to be incomplete and misleading. There are certainly populist elements in the new right's democratic program, but the program is quite far removed from several other visions of democracy that could also rightfully be labeled populist; thus, even if the new right's approach to democracy is populist, that is not *all* that it is. What distinguishes new right democratic populism as promoted by Reform/Alliance is its plebiscitarian character, the attributes of which David Laycock and I have detailed elsewhere

(Barney & Laycock, 1999), and to which I will return below.

The animus of the new right's program for democratic reform is a perceived corruption of democratic practice as it presently exists in Canada, the sources of which are two-fold. In the first instance, existing democratic practice has been corrupted by old-line parties and parliamentary conventions which together demand strictly disciplined voting behaviour by individual members of parliament, and so undermine their ability to represent the will of their constituents (Laycock, 1994: 233-239). To remedy this, the Alliance pledges to "restore democratic accountability in the House of Commons" by increasing the frequency of free votes (i.e., stipulating that, besides those pertaining to the budget and main estimates, no vote in the House shall be considered a matter of confidence unless expressly designated as such), thus releasing MPs from the discipline of party and freeing them to vote the will of their constituents without partisan consequence. When combined with the party's explicit restriction of the role of individual MPs to delegates who simply re-iterate the consensus of their constituents regardless of conflicts with party policy or personal conscience, and with ancillary measures that include the direct election of senators, parliamentary review of senior public service and judicial appointments, and recommendation of broader use of the "notwithstanding clause" (Canada, 1982: s.33) to override judicial decisions, the new right agenda for democratic reform would radically alter political institutions in Canada, and seriously undermine the role played in Canadian political life by parties – including itself, of course. This last fact, in concert with a history of highly-centralized and decisively-exercised authority within the leadership of new right parties in Canada, lends a certain incoherence to this element of their ideology. However this incoherence does not diminish the status of these proposals as ideological; coherence must be demanded of philosophy and perhaps even of principle, but not necessarily of ideology.

The second source of democratic corruption identified consistently by Reform/Alliance is a perceived capture of governance by "special interests." It is important to note that it is not simply the *organized* nature of certain interest groups that make them special, but rather their orientation to public goods. As Laycock has determined with regard to the Reform party, in new right ideology a special interest is defined as "any group that requests publicly provided benefits that require governments to skew market distributions of resources" (Laycock, 1994: 217). Thus, "feminist lobby groups, native organizations, organized labor, multicultural, linguistic and ethnic groups, the management of most crown corporations and state agencies, and public sector

unions”(Laycock, 1994: 217) are special interests, while advocacy organizations such as the Canadian Taxpayers’ Federation, the Fraser Institute, REAL Women, the National Citizens’ Coalition and the Business Council on National Issues are not because their efforts do not demand redistribution of public resources. In the new right imagination, special interests exert inordinate influence on bureaucrats and elected officials whose legitimacy is contingent on their ability to satisfy these groups, and in so doing constitute a “tyranny of minorities” which usurps the sovereignty of ordinary Canadians (Manning, 1992: 321). The proposed remedy for this condition is a reconstruction of democratic practice to include a variety of direct democracy instruments – often technologically mediated (see Barney, 1996) – that would de-amplify the voice of institutionalized special interests and enable the common sense of the common people to emerge and be recognized. Thus, the Alliance maintains traditional Reform party commitments to the frequent use and recognition of instruments such as MP recall, state-sponsored referenda, and citizens’ initiatives in Canadian democratic politics (Canadian Alliance, 2000a).

As mentioned above, previous research has demonstrated that the democratic elements of new right ideology are best described as plebiscitarian, rather than simply populist. Briefly, plebiscitarian democratic practices bear three definitive elements: a relative absence of institutionalized preference mediation/representation; decision-making oriented towards private calculation of personal interest (as opposed to public deliberation on collective goods); and a high degree of elite manipulation in the process of opinion registration (Barney & Laycock, 1999: 318-321). Direct democracy as designed and practiced by the Reform party exhibited each of these qualities, and there is little evidence to suggest the Alliance mutation will differ substantially. Considered in light of the new right’s core ideological commitment to reduce the role of the state and its government in the private actions of individuals in markets, this plebiscitarian approach to democracy makes perfect sense: not only does it accomplish an end-run around organized interests that operate in established channels of policy mediation to effect resource re-distribution, it also drains democratic participation of its public-spirited character. By replacing collective deliberation and dialogue with private calculation and iteration, plebiscitarian democracy deprives civil society of a regime (i.e., a political sphere and corresponding set of civic practices) in which it might organize itself to attend to its common welfare. Plebiscitarianism thus accomplishes a profound de-politicization/privatization of public life. That it can manage to do so in the name of increased democratic participation is the model’s

particular, albeit cynical, genius.

CONCLUSION

Some would contest the designation of the partisan new right as an ideological phenomenon. Reflecting on his tenure as senior advisor and strategist for the Reform party, Tom Flanagan rejects ideological characterizations of the party as “fundamentalist” or “conservative,” and instead attributes the party’s direction to the personal, non-ideological, methodical populism of Preston Manning (Flanagan, 1995: 5-36). Nevertheless, the consistency of the party’s foundational principles as it has matured into the Alliance and taken on new leadership would suggest that the glue binding the federal new right in Canada is something more deeply-adhesive than simple fealty to the vision of a single individual – in the foregoing I have presented this glue as ideology. That is not to say that new right ideology in its partisan manifestation is coherent, consistently expressed, or easy to name. Indeed, attempts to locate the thread which stitches together the various elements of the party’s ideology have typically been thwarted by a combination of the subject’s complexity, and the emptying of meaning from the nomenclature historically applied to designate and classify ideologies. Thus, for example, Harrison names Reform ideology as “pure populism” when it comes to politics, and “neo-conservatism” when it comes to economics (Harrison, 1995: 208). Steve Patten writes that, “Reform’s neo-liberal populism is further characterized by libertarian and socially conservative ideological commitments” (Patten, 1996: 96). Jeffrey (1999) prefers simply “neo-conservative.” Laycock and I throw “neo-conservative” around with abandon, but also isolate in Reform “a distinctive ideology we call ‘plebiscitarianism’” (Barney & Laycock, 1999:318). Richard Sigurdson, finally, settles on “a distinctively postmodern conservatism” to describe Manning’s ideological disposition (Sigurdson, 1994: 250) .

In sum, if there is a consensus on how to characterize the ideology of the new right in Canada, it is roughly as follows: liberal economics; populist politics; and conservative social values – with “neo-conservative” often held out as the discursive bag to hold these three attributes. The foregoing exposition of the contemporary new-right’s positions on liberty, equality and democracy provides ample support for its designation as predominantly liberal in the classic, Lockean sense; suggests modifying the populist label to plebiscitarian; and finds little persuasive ground for a meaningful association of the word “conservative” with the new right in

Canada. Still, the label persists, and not without reason. As Jeffrey (1999) has shown, the lineage of the party's liberal economics are traceable to roots in parties led by Thatcher in the U.K., Mulroney in Canada, and Klein in Alberta, each of which were named Conservative (the nominal rebels here are the Reagan-Bush Republicans in the U.S.A.). Reform/Alliance leaders and members refer to themselves as conservatives, although some prefer "fiscal" to "social" as an antecedent modifier. The Alliance has added Conservative to its official name. The left has managed to convince many that the proper name for an ideology supportive of market capitalism is conservative. However, while extant, the reasons for calling Reform/Alliance conservative are ultimately not persuasive, particularly in the Canadian context.

It is commonly supposed that conservatism denotes an abstract aversion to change. It is to this which Sigurdson alludes when he suggests that Reform conservatism "speaks to the fear that Canadian society is changing too rapidly" in the wake of the cultural and economic dynamo of postmodernity (Sigurdson, 1994: 267). However, as a justification for naming the new right "conservative," appeal to its adherents' abstract disposition towards change is quite thin: conservatism in the Canadian tradition has historically exhibited more significant substantive and concrete attributes which are notoriously absent from the new right ideological agenda. Canadian conservatism, to the extent it has ever existed as meaningful category, has been rooted in British toryism, not American liberalism. The historical character of Canadian tory conservatism has been much debated and is well-known (Ajzenstat & Smith, 1997; Horowitz, 1967; Taylor, 1982). In brief, its priorities included: a preference for stability, order and collective welfare (paternalist though this may have been) over abstract individual liberty; a willingness to use the state to intervene in the market distribution of resources; nationalism; protection of hierarchy and social distinction against abstract egalitarianism; deference to duly constituted and responsible authority exercised by elites in the public interest.

If this list even remotely captures the distinctive historical attributes of Canadian conservatism, then it is difficult to see how the ideology of the new right in Canada can sensibly be described as conservative. Indeed, the Reform/Alliance agenda precisely inverts each of the principles listed above: individual liberty must trump the demands of social order and collective welfare; state intervention in the market must be minimized; free trade and continentalism are encouraged; equality (as identical negative liberty for individuals) obliterates hierarchy and disallows social and political distinction (i.e., multiculturalism) or asymmetry (distinct status for

aboriginals and Quebec); plebiscitarian populism neuters elite trusteeship and shifts power back to the people. Even the argument that the new right is conservative because its adherents value tradition over change is difficult to sustain in light of the fact that, taken together, Reform/Alliance proposals for institutional upheaval in the Canadian electoral and legislative systems verge on revolutionary. Is it supposed that we should label them “conservative” simply because they maintain a conception of “the family” and domestic life that might be better described as reactionary? Calling the new right conservative makes sense only if that word is drained of its Canadian content and historical substance. It only makes sense when, as Grant observed, it is reduced to identity with the very liberalism it has historically opposed – which is to say it makes sense only as a nonsense. On a discursive terrain where unreconstructed liberalism assumes the mantle of conservatism, there is no place for the latter as a genuine, substantive ideology because it cannot be named. Ironically, the rise of a new right liberalism that calls itself conservative marks the final impossibility of conservatism in Canada.

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ⁱ. Article 17 of the Alliance's Policy Declaration commits the party to "a single rate of taxation" (Canadian Alliance, 2000a). The 2000 election platform promises an Alliance government would "move towards a single rate of tax on income" – moving in the first term of office from the current three rates to two (a basic rate of 17 per cent and a rate of 25 per cent on incomes above \$100 000), and presumably to a single rate in a subsequent term (Canadian Alliance, 2000b).

ⁱⁱ. It should be noted that at the time of this writing Canadian law also defines marriage in this manner. However, it is also true that some federal benefits and entitlements are beginning to extend to same-sex couples. The evolution of this shift is slow and far from complete, but it is fair to say that even this limited extension of rights to non-heterosexual couples and alternative families is beyond the contemplation of new right ideology in Canada.

ⁱⁱⁱ. Article 40 of the Alliance Policy Declaration supports the need to maintain service in both official languages in "key federal institutions, such as Parliament and the Supreme Court," which might suggest that the party contemplates relaxing this requirement in the public service more broadly. This same article stipulates that the application of bilingualism must "reflect the reality of the community served," which can only be read as a retreat from the policy of Official Bilingualism in Canada.