
It is a mystery why the Left has never thought to seize the vacant high ground of conservatism—as in conserving Canadian traditions of peace, community, social conscience and civility—and to frame the neo-cons as what they are: ultra-right wing radicals. It's a case that has been begging to be made for years, and, in Harperism: How Stephen Harper and His Think Tank Colleagues Have Transformed Canada, Donald Gutstein does it about as well as anybody could.

“Harper’s neo-liberal program … cannot be considered conservative by any stretch of the imagination,” Gutstein writes. “His efforts to bring in free-market environmentalism and a new land-ownership regime for First Nations are radical, not conservative. The agenda is to create and enforce markets, often where they didn't exist before” (p. 245).

Harper is a direct descendant of the neo-liberal (as in laissez faire capitalism, and not to be confused with liberal politics) think tanks that bubbled up in the backwash of the Thatcher and Reagan revolutions, Gutstein argues, and are part of movement by economists like Friedrich Hayak and Milton Friedman to place economic freedom ahead of political freedom. And, lest anyone think the two are compatible, all one needs to do is compare the Fraser Institute’s ranking of economic freedom with that of the 70-year-old Freedom House, one of whose founders was Eleanor Roosevelt. In the case of the Fraser Institute’s rankings, “laws that establish labour-union rights, a minimum wage, or regulations regarding dismissal lower a country’s ranking.” By comparison, Freedom House’s index takes into account individual rights to earn a living—of labour to organize, freedom from indentured servitude and the banning of child labour, for example.

This sort of thinking—that anything that inhibits the rich’s ability to get richer must be neutralized—is the main characteristic of the ideology of Harperism, which, Gutstein argues, has transformed Canada, perhaps irrevocably, into a colder, meaner land of less opportunity. The author, an adjunct professor of communication at Simon Fraser and a regular contributor to the progressive website The Tyee, breaks this ideology down into its components, and presents them, with extensive supporting research, as points in a strategic plan. The chapter titles alone—such as “Send in the Think Tanks to Win the Battle of Ideas,” “Counter the Environmental Threat to the Market,” and “Undermine Scientific Knowledge”—are chilling, or inspirational, depending on your political bent. For anyone who leans toward the progressive and the communitarian, it’s like reading a road map to the nineteenth century, complete with teeming masses, crooked political bosses, stinking tenements, and Triangle Shirtwaist fires.
The job of framing this new reality has been accomplished by think tanks working with friendly media to create a new normal, Gutstein writes. He does not invoke U.S. media critic Daniel C. Hallin, but the process harks back to a passage in Hallin’s book, *The Uncensored War*, which explains how the news media organize ideas into three concentric spheres. At the centre is the Sphere of Consensus, which contains concepts and values that are universally accepted: murder is wrong; slavery is bad; free speech is good. Next, is the sphere of Legitimate Controversy, in which people may hold opposing views. Finally, there is the Sphere of Deviance, where we place ideas that are so ridiculous or subversive they may be freely mocked. As Gutstein points out, the think tanks have succeeded in pushing such subjects as tax increases to fund social programs into the Sphere of Deviance, and the notions of small government, perpetual war, and the universal wisdom of the free market into the Sphere of Consensus—severely limiting the political discourse.

“Both Liberals and New Democrats have indicated they will not stray far from the economic consensus,” he writes.

The New Democrats’ Tom Mulcair pledged to not raise personal income tax nor the sales tax, and to increase corporate taxes only for large corporations. Justin Trudeau of the Liberals says ‘we are not going to be raising taxes.’ They’ve accepted Harperism, the new reality. (p. 77)

That new reality involves: crackdowns on crime, regardless of necessity or lack of it; the perpetual spectre of foreign threats, such as ISIS, Saddam and Syrian refugees; the dismantling of the welfare state; restoring the “great man” approach to history and creating the “narrative of a great nation populated by patriotic citizens”; undermining scientific research that supports human-driven climate change or the effectiveness of publicly funded social programs. Anything that might tend to get in the way of a free market must be pushed to the Sphere of Deviance, where it can be jeered or ignored. And, for the most part, we have created a frame of reference where almost everything that serves the interests of the common citizen—unions, social programs, labour laws—has been pushed beyond the pale. The facts are pretty well incontrovertible—and, as we have seen in the most recent election, Harperism may have led to a widespread loathing of a prime minister that may be unique in our history. The only thing debatable is how you feel about the wholesale neo-liberal transformation of Canada. For neo-cons, the revolution is over; long live the New Order.

For the rest of us, the fight has yet to begin, and Gutstein implies it will be long, and it must be global, because the neo-liberal revolution has been global. There needs to be a counter-ideological movement and it must be one that imagines “a new role for government … one that doesn’t treat everything as an offshoot of the economy, but reincorporates social and political rights into its mandate while addressing the dominance of the market in social and political life” (p. 249).

What Gutstein does not say is that, going by the history of the first progressive movement, the counter-revolution promises to be messy, violent, and long.

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