

INTRODUCTION

Like many people living in Canada, I am ashamed of our current government. I am ashamed and I am appalled by the actions it has undertaken, and continues to undertake, in our name. I have never been particularly patriotic, but I do have a Canadian passport and I do pay taxes to the Canadian state. By virtue of these simple facts, I am responsible, like any citizen, for my government's initiatives. For this reason, I have to take action because feeling ashamed is not enough. I have to understand who I am dealing with, exactly what it is that they want, and why this government, with considerable success to date, is changing the face of our Canadian institutions.

The approach I use in this book is that of political philosophy, or more precisely what might be called "applied

political philosophy.”¹ Broadly speaking, political philosophy examines political issues, but only in the abstract. For example, it will examine the basic principles of democratic governance, but without reference to a particular country. What is a just society? What are the rights and responsibilities of citizens? What is the best form of government? What are collective rights? These are just a few of the hundreds of questions it asks.

Applied political philosophy evaluates actual situations using the tools of abstract political philosophy. This is an exciting exercise for any philosopher who wants to escape the ivory tower. I hope it will also be helpful for all those who are not philosophers, but would like to think about ideas and arguments in a serious way in order to understand their crucial importance. I have been a professor of political philosophy at the Université de Montréal for a number of years and—without abandoning basic research, which is most often abstract and difficult for the uninitiated to understand—I have always tried to ensure that my work does not isolate me from the real world. With this book, I aim to combine my professional commitments with my duty as a citizen.

What I do in this book is examine the world of Canadian politics critically, using a philosophical lens. More specifically, I focus on the Conservatives’ policies and actions as well as on the ideals that motivated them. I think the primary danger represented by the Conservatives lies in their profound belief in certain ideas and values and in their willingness to impose those ideas and values on Canadians. In this book, I argue against the Conservatives, but I use the words, arguments, ideas, and principles of moral and

political philosophy. It is not necessary to be an activist to denounce what the Conservatives are doing, nor is it necessary to sacrifice the intellectual rigour needed to conduct a philosophical investigation simply because of anger. Indeed, understanding the causes behind the Conservatives' ploys and machinations and revealing how they work only makes them appear all the more outrageous.

Some people, including my colleague Joseph Heath of the University of Toronto, see efficiency as a unifying value across the country.² He says Canadians simply want things to work. If we oppose social programs, it is not because we are against them in principle, but because they have not proven their effectiveness. Or conversely, if we ask the government to intervene in a certain situation, it is because we think it's the most practical way to solve a problem. Today's Conservatives may be pragmatic, but they are idealists above all. They are willing to take very high risks to accomplish their goal of changing the country. They are willing to tarnish our reputation abroad—Afghanistan is an example—to project an image as a strong country, one that has left our traditional role of peacekeeper behind and taken its place in a world of imperialists. Efficiency may be important to them, but they rarely invoke it as what matters first and foremost.

Let me offer you an example. In 2010, as we all know, the Conservatives abolished the mandatory long-form census. There were never any good, practical reasons for doing away with it. Nobody could argue that the information obtained from it had only limited value because the data it collects are impartial and invaluable to countless public, private, and academic bodies. Instead, the Conservatives defended their

decision to do away with it by citing the principle of individual freedom.

This is a classic example of the way they have operated to date. The problem is that the Conservatives' political convictions push them to the point where they dismantle our institutions or render them virtually useless. The more parliamentary democracy is undermined, the less it functions. The less it functions, the more we ask what purpose it serves. So we leave the job to the executive branch of government, which can work without having its hands tied. This approach may have some advantages, but it also carries enormous risks, and it is not clear that Canadians have contemplated all of the consequences.

My thesis in this book is that today's Conservatives are actually reformers or perhaps even revolutionaries. While conservatism is inherently skeptical of moral and political change, preferring the weight of tradition, Harper's Conservatives want to change the country's political and social organization by radically extending values and principles that have always been present in Canada but have never been invoked so clearly and with such force. Not so long ago a centre-right movement in intellectual terms, Canadian conservatism is now firmly on the right, closer to the American neo-cons than the Tory tradition whose leading representative in recent years has been Joe Clark.

In the past, Conservatives thought in terms of stability, mixed with a bit of very moderate reform. The people who come to mind, such as Peter Lougheed, Robert Stanfield, and Joe Clark, are linked to the Red Tory tradition. Today's Conservatives—Harper, current and former cabinet ministers such as Stockwell Day, Vic Toews, and Jim Prentice,

and people who have worked with the government such as former *Calgary Herald* columnist Nigel Hannaford—dream only of change. They seek to return to an idealized distant past, perhaps, but their goal is nevertheless to completely change the country's framework and organization. They will fight tooth and nail for their principles, which they want to embed permanently in our society. This push for change is unacceptable because it seriously threatens what makes democracy possible; it goes against the kind of pluralism that we should seek to establish in our political institutions. This is the main reason why the fight against the Conservatives should start with an in-depth analysis of their stated intentions and motivations. To protect our institutions and maintain a pluralistic and democratic state, we need to understand what threatens us today.

Therefore, my goal has been to write a critical essay on the thought and policies of the Conservatives in recent years. If the title focuses on Stephen Harper, it is because he represents a major rupture in conservative discourse from the inception of the Reform Party and the Canadian Alliance up to the formation of the Conservative Party of Canada as we know it today. I am not a psychologist but a philosopher. My business is not to understand what Stephen Harper really thinks, but to conduct an honest and rigorous examination of the guiding principles that have been publicly invoked by the occupant of the country's leading office.

Stephen Harper is not only the Prime Minister of Canada, but also the key representative of a broad movement, and probably one of that movement's most influential players. It is a movement that aims to dismantle the progressive values that have prevailed over the last forty years, one after

another, and to substitute the values of a new right-wing conservative worldview. While not all Conservatives are Harper think-alikes, I do believe he is fully representative of the new-style conservatism that will be examined throughout this book. I don't think I am presenting an ad hominem argument or, in other words, an argument attacking a person rather than his ideas. Ideas—and the resulting policies—are the stuff of this book.

While I take a critical perspective, what is important is not whether you agree with my point of view but whether I lead you to reflect on why you agree or disagree with the Conservatives' actions and ideas. Neither a simple reminder of events that have occurred since the 2006 election nor a broad condemnation of what has happened since then is enough. I hope there will be a democratic opposition to the Conservatives, but that opposition has to be based on clear ideas that everyone can understand.

What is it we wish to protect? Most of us are deeply attached to the basic principles of the liberal tradition: freedom of speech and movement, equality before the law, equity in social dealings, transparency in government, and independence of the judiciary from political power. These principles do not belong to any particular party but constitute a common set of values. When I use the term *liberal values*, I do not mean Liberal Party values. In the same way, I reject the overly hasty conflation of liberalism and what in the last few years has been called *neoliberalism*.

I am referring here to the liberal tradition that goes back to the seventeenth century and John Locke. This tradition holds that government must guarantee our individual freedoms, not yield them to an all-powerful political authority. Many

Conservatives also abide by this tradition. What has been at issue these last few years is our interpretation of the most basic liberal ideals. In short, a profound disagreement has developed about the meaning of the very principles that allow us to live together: justice, democracy, and our individual freedoms.

Two major political families are in conflict. According to the first camp, to which I belong, basic freedoms are guaranteed by true civic equality and by fairness in resource distribution. This guarantee presupposes a major role for government, which must be controlled by a variety of democratic mechanisms. In contrast, the other camp sees these same freedoms as being under threat from expansion of the welfare state which, under the pretext of protecting us, is encroaching on them ever further. State control must thus be limited to a bare minimum, and we must be skeptical of any measure with allegedly social aims, such as pay equity policies. This latter concept of liberalism is what Harper and his supporters advocate.

We do not necessarily come together to love one another. Rather, we must deal with the fact that, for better and we hope not for worse, we live in a society, and nobody can claim to be completely independent of others. Even the wealthiest—especially the wealthiest—depend on what others provide. As I see it, we are attached to our individual freedoms, but we also want them to be tied in with a collective project with everyone taking part in protecting everyone else. Our wish for freedom must not pit us against others or lead us to turn inwards, because only a coordinated effort can guarantee us enjoyment of our rights.

Harper's "liberal" logic follows a very curious course: while he would claim to be working to get government off

people's backs, he would have the state take on increasing powers in deciding what is good for citizens, without prior democratic agreement, consultation, or in-depth discussion.

It is necessary to understand the true motivations of this proclivity for change and this increased government role. Otherwise, it is easy to fool ourselves into believing that what we are seeing today will disappear once the Harper episode is over. What interests the Harper Conservatives goes well beyond their years in power, now and in the future. What they want is to make government an organ of conservatism, regardless of who is in power.

There are different types of Conservatives. This book looks at the Conservatives whom we see today and who are in power in Ottawa. They are the ones we need to understand so that we can act more effectively. We can criticize this or that political action that we see as seriously flawed. We can cry out against corruption among elected officials or political functionaries. But in the case of the Conservatives, it is our very institutions that are under threat. A great many citizens who vote on the right but who remain deeply committed to democracy must have trouble recognizing themselves in the policies devised by Stephen Harper and his team.

Conservatives, liberals, left, right, centre—all these categories are useful and even necessary in attempting to understand the orientations of the main players on the political stage, but they are not like hockey teams. When a hockey player moves from one team to another, he signs a contract with his new team and owes nothing to his old one. In contrast, someone who moves from one political group to another may well remain faithful to his or her ideals.

Similarly, when one party loses an election and is replaced by another party, this changes nothing if the same kinds of decisions and actions continue to prevail. This is precisely what the Conservatives are hoping for.

As in any work on current politics, there is a gap between the time this book was written and when it actually comes out. Therefore, it is impossible to provide a comprehensive analysis of all the political actions taken by the government. Harper's most zealous supporters are far from being lazy. Hardly a week goes by without some new controversy or proposed legislation that challenges longstanding programs and institutions. I believe, however, that the examples provided here are sufficient to make my point. Following a brief presentation of the ideas at the core of the Conservative project, I show how the Harper government has, slowly but surely, overhauled the country's institutions so that the Conservatives have the maximum possible room to manoeuvre in terms of citizens' rights and security, freedom of conscience, and social justice. I conclude with Canada's new image on the international scene. In each chapter, my aim is to explain how each piece of legislation fits together logically within the Conservatives' project or agenda. My analysis relies on information that is within anyone's reach.

It is not unusual to hear journalists, politicians, or members of the public deplore the Conservative government. Most citizens feel helpless, however, when it comes to moving from words to deeds, almost as if the presence of the Conservatives in power were an inevitable calamity. But their arrival in government was not a natural catastrophe. While they won, they can also lose.

Political action—indeed, any form of activism—requires a concerted effort, and this in turn requires knowing what exactly a particular government decision means and why we oppose it. Political philosophy can contribute to this work. While obscurity may be the weapon of the demagogue, the activist philosopher relies on clarity. Much of the work of philosophers is to bring order to our understanding of the world. Bombarded with information on a plethora of topics, we are shocked or disturbed, but we never get past being perplexed or disenchanted. We become like children who can't untie the knots in their shoelaces. Philosophy, if practised successfully, consists of untying knots. We attempt to understand so that we can overcome our sense of impotence and become capable of acting.