

Canada: Fascist Shift, a New-old Right and Neo-liberalism

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In The End of America, Naomi Wolf shares concerns about the increasingly authoritarian nature of government in the United States; she calls to action on this matter reflecting on the nature of fascism as a process (a shift) rather than something that takes place overnight. Fascism came to power in both, Italy and Germany, legally, incrementally and in the mist of functioning democracies, she said. It is important for people to know this because many believe that fascism came to power violently and overnight. Knowing about this process can help people identify and hopefully prevent fascist shifts.

Canadians understand themselves as distinct from Americans and politicians seem to agree and accept that having a distinct identity favors pride in a vision of Canada as a caring society. With the arrival of neo-liberalism and the signing of free trade agreements Canada becomes more like the United States. The Canadian U.S. Free Trade Agreement (CUSFTA) forces integration with the U.S. and with the signing of NAFTA (the North America Free Trade Agreement) continental integration starts. Free trade agreements are not about trade but about corporate money flow and increased power in decision making. Adopting these agreements was like adopting a new Economic Constitution for Canada, and one that greatly limits what the Canadian state can and cannot do. Sadly, McBride and Shields point,

“the Canadian state has thus been actively complicit in its own dismantling, a process that can best be explained by the dominance of capital in the political process of the country” (8).



Former Canadian Prime Minister
Stephen Harper (Source: Wikipedia)

Thus, when the Harper government came to power (2006-2015) important neo-liberal work had already been completed. Harper expanded and cemented ideological efforts changing Canada's culture, with the support of think tanks, into a meaner, more militaristic and secretive society while furthering the agenda of corporations and the rich to the detriment of an increasing number of Canadians. Harper's way, in keeping with "Reform," brought a hate-based culture that shocked and scared many of us; and yet, it was a culture in sync with the purpose of free trade and neo-liberalism. Mc Bride and Shields define it as a transition in preparation for things to come.

"Neo-liberalism provides the perfect ideological vehicle for a transition from a society based on democratic political decision-making to one where many issues are outside politics and are settled by the undemocratic rule of the marketplace." (8) That is, corporate rule.

Naturally, if asked, most Canadians would disagree with moving towards a hateful, non-egalitarian Canada, where growing numbers of part-time, minimum wage jobs and fewer benefits and programs become the norm. And yet here we are, even after the Harper government, continuing to ignore evidence, science and truth, in crucial areas like the environment, in favor of the hocus pocus of privately funded "think tanks." As governments change but free trade and war remain unquestioned, we need to ask who, then, keeps taking us back to the 19th century. In mid-September 2006 members of the Canadian business elite organized a three-day meeting at the Banff Springs Hotel including top-level American, Canadian and Mexican government officials and many senior corporate heads. The clandestine meeting organized by the Canadian Council of Chief Executives and the Canada West Foundation was discovered; not seeing information about it anywhere, Mel Hurtig sent information to the media including the meeting agenda. Still, nothing appeared on the Globe and Mail, the National Post, CBC, CTV or Global (6).

Local rumors about the meeting, however, prompted a few media enquires. Linda McQuaig explains that

"John Larson, who acted as a spokesperson for the gathering, which called itself the North American Forum, refused to confirm who attended or to release details of what was discussed. 'The participants joined the conference essentially knowing that it would be a private function,' he said." The meeting, says McQuaig, "is the ultimate expression of the treachery of our business and political elite...the essence of what was going on in Banff was that key members of our elite were meeting with business and political leaders from the United States to discuss ways to further a far-reaching agenda that is at odds with the Canadian public interest." (9)

There are elements of a fascist shift in the coming to power of neo-liberalism in Canada; neo-liberal policies increase inequality and unfairness, and attack democratic processes that could eventually generate discontent and favor collective action. In many third world countries this elitist corporate agenda could not be imposed by regular governments, dictatorships were required. In Chile, the Pinochet dictatorship turned to neo-liberalism with support and guidance from the "Chicago boys" (the Chicago School of neo-liberal thinking). Chile was the first and it was used later as example to impose neo-liberalism everywhere, privatizing state enterprises and even pensions.

Some say the ideological impact of the Mulroney government made it impossible for liberal governments after him to challenge neo-liberalism. Liberals did not try to but expanded the neo-liberal grip by signing NAFTA, cutting benefits and programs even farther and faster than conservatives; and, leading us to conclude that there is collusion among political parties. Therefore, focusing on “Harper the mean,” like Chileans focusing on “Pinochet the mean” (more likely given his Darth Vader’s cape and shades), mainly distorts truth helping to hide the workings of a corporate elite managing from behind our political parties, and ensuring their “peculiar” vision of globalization, one that takes us back to the Age of Capital, is implemented. In this way neo-liberalism creates a neo-liberal world.

In Canada, and during the last half of the 20th century, dissent has been managed generally through ideology, but this was not always this way, there were struggles and confrontations before, and, more of this could take place in the future. The Chilean motto of “by reason or by force” favors ideological dominance too, when feasible, but force is there to be used when enough concern encourages people to take to the streets to actively organize to protect their rights. In Canada, today, we seem mostly unconcerned about neo-liberalism returning us to our oppressive past; we march behind the Pied Piper decidedly focused on unlimited consumerism and generally oblivious to increasing personal and national debt. Our money elite, however, has enough experience to know that one day this could change and those captured by the Piper could wake up; then, “reason” may no longer work. Our elite prepares for such a time, ensuring key elements are in place if needed. This is how fascist shifts connect with oppressive ideologies like neo-liberalism; they can be useful when force, rather than reason, becomes the answer.

What about fascist shifts

A fascist shift implies a militaristic system opposed to democracy and seeking to crush it. It also implies top-down terror to which most people (the non-targeted) somehow adapt through complicity, so while a minority of citizens is terrorized and persecuted a majority lives fairly “normal” lives by stifling dissent and going along “quietly” with the state’s act of violent repression. The cases of Italy and Germany show how legislation, cultural pressure, and baseless imprisonment and torture were used to progressively consolidate fascist power. In both cases, state terror was used to subordinate and control individuals and in both cases dominant ideology was radically antidemocratic and used the law aggressively to pervert and subvert it (1).

Fascist shifts include ten crucial steps. All dictators

- (a) invoke an external and internal threat,
- (b) create a secret prison system,
- (c) develop a paramilitary force,
- (d) use surveillance on ordinary citizens,
- (e) arbitrarily detain and release them,
- (f) infiltrate/harass citizens’ groups,
- (g) target writers, entertainers and other key individuals for dissenting,

- (h) intimidate the press,
- (i) recast dissent as treason and criticism as espionage, and, eventually,
- (j) subvert the rule of law.

These same ten steps shut down democracies during the 20th century all over the world, not just in Italy and Germany, in Indonesia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Paraguay, Ecuador, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina; people paid a high price. Those of us who lived though one understand Wolf's argument as basically correct.

Wolf sounds the alarm about changes taking place in the U.S. since September 11, 2001, publishing her book during George W. Bush time. She is not arguing that the U.S. is a fascist state; she is identifying "historical echoes" that help citizens know how episodes today connect with the past and fascism. The "mob of young men dressed in identical shirts, shouting at poll workers outside a voting center in Florida during the 2000," or "Bush supporters in the South holding organized public events to burn CDs by the Dixie Chicks," echo Nazi events. When in 2002 the Bush administration created the "Department of Homeland Security," calling the U.S. homeland was peculiar, homeland is how Nazi propagandists in 1930 referred to Germany. The USA PATRIOT Act, requiring doctors to give up confidential records echoes Nazi Germany doctors having to disclose citizen medical records to the state.

Enemies are treated harshly after September 11. President Bush "argued that the prisoners in Guantanamo Bay could be treated harshly *because they were not covered by the Geneva Conventions.*" The Nazis argued their invading troops in Russia *should treat the enemy with marked brutality because they were not covered by the Hague Conventions.* American perceptions also changed. Condoleezza Rice (National Security Advisor) and Vice President Cheney coined a new phrase: America was on a "*war footing.*" Nazi leaders after the Reichstag's fire said Germany was on a war footing too (a *kriegsfausz*). The White House under the Bush administration embedded reporters with US military units in Iraq. Nazi propaganda officials did the same so "Filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl was embedded with Nazi troops in Poland" and "U.S. correspondent William Shirer drove with German units into occupied France."

The new-old right in Canada



Former Canadian Prime

Minister Brian Mulroney
(Source: Wikipedia)

Changes in our neighbor affect us more after free-trade. Concerns about a “new” political culture emerged with the Reform Party -vocal, militant, aggressive and more in sync with the U.S. Republicans. But our political culture started changing during the Mulroney government (1984-1993) as we moved closer to U.S. Republicans under Reagan and because of CUSFTA. Mulroney knew of the impact the agreement will have in moving our parties to the right. He facilitated neo-liberal ideological takeover by cutting funding to three of the neutral, academic research-based organizations created before him -The Economic Council of Canada (1963-1992), The Science Council of Canada (1966-1992) and The Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security (1984-1992). He also transformed the Foreign Investment Review Agency into “Investment Canada” to fit his purposes (3).

The next conservative government followed suit and cut funding to the surviving ones -the Law Reform Commission of Canada (1970-2006), the Canadian Policy Research Networks (1994-2009), the National Welfare Council (1968-2012) and the North-South Institute (1976-2014). The Institute for Research on Public Policy (1972) survived because it had its own endowment. Mulroney and Harper were strategic, eliminated unbiased publicly funded research advising policy to make room for the biased recommendations of privately funded neo-liberal think tanks, like C.D. Howe Institute or the Fraser Institute (3).

Liberal governments after Mulroney (Chretien, Martin) did not challenged this; over the years these neo-liberal think tanks earned a legitimacy they did not deserve, becoming government preferred source of information and advice (3). They are obviously ideological. I attended a full day event organized by the Fraser Institute at the Convention Centre in Edmonton -free of charge, lunch included. It discussed immigration and other issues. I left after the morning section afraid of the ideology portrayed. It was “survival of the fittest,” which meant abandoning people at the mercy of the markets. Individuals needed to manage on their own and within their families (if they had one). Decentralization of the state and privatization of public corporations were mantras. The welfare state and the unions were the enemy. Immigration perspectives were market-based. It was a pervasive ideology in the West.

It turned out it was quite common in other places too. Mulroney did not believe in free trade but changed his views in 1984 adopting neo-liberalism and opening the country to foreign investment. He was following The C.D. Howe Institute, which adopted neo-liberalism and free trade in the early 1980s. Free Trade was promoted by Mulroney with a wink and a smile; it was bad medicine taken with sugar. When Mulroney was defeated and Progressive Conservatives were decimated, there was something already cooking in the West. Harper will become leader of the Canadian Alliance and eventually merge it with the Progressive Conservatives to form the Conservative Party of Canada (8).

Harper worked with Preston Manning and Tom Flanagan -the guru of the “Calgary School” at the department of political-science of the U of C. Flanagan was an American recruited by Burke Inlow -also American, head of the U of C political-science department (by invitation and directly after an assignment for the Pentagon). Flanagan and Harper understood neo-liberalism as favoring the primacy of “economic freedom” over everything else. Dismantling the welfare state was the goal, but not ending welfare to corporations. A strong state, not a weak one, is a neo-liberal requirement because the state needs power to create and enforce

markets, and to prop them up when they fail -like they did in the 2007-2008 financial melt-down (3). Neo-liberalism changed politics in England and the U.S. facilitating the ascendance of Thatcher and Regan. It will do the same for Harper. In Canada it was delayed by the re-election of Pierre Trudeau until 1984.

Harper came to power in a convoluted way that Flanagan describes in his 2007 book (Harper's Team) -a book Harper did not like, not because Flanagan did not praise him enough; Harper may prefer to keep details secret, concerned information can be used against him. Much of the political culture had already changed by then and Harper knew it. He explained it to Civitas in 2003 this way:

“socialists and liberals began to stand for balanced budgeting, the superiority of the markets, welfare reversal, free trade and some privatization.”

Harper used the ideological work of neo-liberal think tanks to further change and to support his policies (3).

Harper favored incremental change because it worked and favored less resistance. To achieve majority Harper was in constant political campaign, focusing only on voters he could win. He played on the perception of “western alienation” while building on regional discontent. He targeted minorities because of their conservative views of the family. He controlled and suppressed information, manipulated the media (when not with him), and trained party representatives on what to say, not to say and how to say it. He spent lots of money on negative ads attacking the opposition. He muzzled bureaucracy and scientists working for government. He worked at keeping his party, Cabinet, and any dissent within the ranks under control. And he developed a unified (closed) Prime Minister Office (PMO). Harper authoritarian, controlling, and ruthless style was his Achilles heel (1).

Fascist shifts and neo-liberalism

Canada does not have secret prisons or a paramilitary force; and yet the Harper government used a number of strategies included in fascist shifts. Harper government favored undemocratic strategies and an authoritarian style, internal and external threats, the surveillance of ordinary citizens and harassment of specific citizen groups and key individuals (David Suzuki stepped down from the Board of Directors of the Suzuki Foundation in 2012 to avoid government harassment). The press was restricted, public servants were mistreated and criticism was treated as espionage and dissent as treason.

Dictators and undemocratic leaders: authoritarian styles in fascist shifts

Harper ran one of the most undemocratic regimes in Canadian history, undermining and abusing democratic institutions and procedures. He is the only Canadian prime minister to be found in contempt of Parliament after his government refused to release costs on certain programs to opposition MPs. Harper pushed Bill C-51 which raises concerns about the criminalization of free speech, allows government agencies to share personal information and gives intelligence agencies freer range to spy anybody. These agencies (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, CSIS, the Royal Canadian Mounted police, RCMP, the Communications Security Establishment Canada CSEC) can hold people for up to a week in “preventative detention.” For Christian Nadeau (political philosopher, Université de Montréal) the Harper government is the worse we had ever had:

“We have a weaker democracy...a weaker social justice system...compromised the environment for many decades to come...” (2).

Harper is an “arrogant autocrat” said Hurtig, while pointing to the need of reforming our electoral system to ensure proportional representation. Thus, in the future we do not have a Harper repeat of majority power in Parliament with only 39.6 percent of the votes, that proceeds to

“systematically dismantle our democracy, crippling or eliminating many of the institutions...developed over decades to deliver programs...and to allow for a democratic exchange of information and ideas between the electorate and the elected” (5).



Protesters outside the Central East Detention Centre in Lindsay, Ontario, 2015. Photo by [Jeff Bierke](#) via [VICE](#)

The Harper government took democracy to its limit and proved that much damage can be caused. Harper prorogued Parliament four times, shutting it down for a total of 181 days. He used omnibus bills showing his government cared little about democratic procedures, discussion or dialogue. Starting in 2010 Harper tabled a bill of 883 pages including changes to Canada Post and environmental assessments and, as he often did, put a cap limiting discussion time. Harper followed with 10 more such bills, all pushed through in Parliament without much discussion. Bill C-38 gutted Canada’s environmental laws, cut \$36-billion from health care funding, weakened Canada’s food inspectors (cutting jobs), and made it harder to qualify for EI benefits. Harper’s *Fair Elections Act* overhauled Canada’s election laws in dealing with electoral fraud, weakened the power of Elections Canada, muzzled the chief electoral officer from communicating with the public and MPs about investigations, cutting off the investigations arm (2).

Internal and external threats

Much evidence suggests that deficits and rising public debt have little to do with excessive government expenditures and much to do with forgone tax revenues, high interest rates, and recessions largely the product of neo-liberal economic policies (8). A number of writers have argued that loopholes, tax breaks and tax expenditures lead to a shortfall of revenues since 1975 –and, even though not all these tax breaks benefitted corporations or the wealthy most did (8). Despite this deficits are used to cut benefits and programs dismantling our welfare state.

Terrorism, an external threat, encouraged the Harper and Mulroney governments towards militarism. Harper put greater effort in promoting patriotic militarism as key to our political culture. For Lawrence Martin “*Harper’s far-more hawkish stance benefited greatly from the events of 9/11.*” In 2006, the Harper conservatives responded with Cold War style rhetoric, echoing the U.S., adopting a “war on terror” discourse and committing Canada enthusiastically to military action. Harper visited the troops in Afghanistan and had Governor General Michaëlle Jean visit too and sport a military uniform at the November 11 ceremonies in Ottawa. Still, Canadians remained opposed to the Afghan mission. Canada’s

participation in the Libyan expedition was expanded at Harper's request; his persistence, however, did not move Canadians towards militarism (1).

A Canadian child prisoner in Guantanamo Bay

The Harper government ignored Omar Khadr, taken prisoner to Guantanamo Bay where he stayed for 10 years before being brought to Canada by insistence of the Clinton administration. Khadr was taken in Afghanistan in 2002 at the age of 15; his family returned home and his father, affiliated with an extreme group, indoctrinated him to fight. The 15 year old became involved and was injured when captured. He confessed to throwing a grenade and pleaded guilty, not remembering what happened but following his lawyer advice and hoping to return to Canada. Khadr was finally repatriated in 2012 to serve the remainder of his sentence; he was released on bail in May 2015 but only after the Alberta Court of Appeal refused to block his release as requested by the Harper government (6).

Freedom of Speech, Citizen's surveillance and the harassment of organizations in Canada

The Harper government limited freedom of speech by not allowing scientists working for government to share information about their research with the press or in international conferences. The government also used propaganda (paid from the public purse by taxpayer's money) estimated in \$500 million dollars (between 2009-2015) by the Toronto Star. (2) Citizens' surveillance and spying, acceptable under Harper, was used on environmental, aboriginal activists and on groups like *Idle No More*, *Leadnow*, *Forest Ethics Advocacy*, *Council of Canadians*, *Eco-Society*, *Dogwood Initiative* and the *Sierra Club of BC*. This was discovered by Jeffrey Monaghan, a criminologist at Carleton University, when he obtained documents from CSIS and the RCMP and found they have been spying particularly on those opposing pipelines or participating in the National Energy Board (NEB) hearings. Harassing groups through auditing was acceptable too; the groups selected were those working with the environment or civil society, and charities working in areas considered problematic (environment, anti-poverty, foreign aid and human rights). Among the audited was *Amnesty International*, the *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives* and the *United Church of Canada*, but not one conservative think tank or group (2).

Restricting the press

"The Harper Conservatives came to power with a visceral dislike of the entire fourth estate at the national level, believing it represents a central-Canadian bias as well as a liberal one. As a result, the Harper government has worked hard to control and limit its interactions with the national media."

Harper refused to participate in traditional media scrums after parliamentary debates using instead scripted press conferences. Later, he insisted in a lineup of questioners provided to his press secretary in advance and those deemed "hostile" to him or his government were often not allowed to place a question. Soon the media fell into line; only a handful of print-media columnists dared to criticize or even report on this state of affairs. As time went on the PMO prevented any media access at all. Techniques helpful in portraying the prime minister in a positive light, like prepared texts and photos, were adopted (1).

Intimidation of public servants

The Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Mental Health declared:

“there was a mental health crisis in the federal public service...According to several observers the primary culprit was the climate of fear that the government was creating further damaging the bureaucracy’s already strained relationship with the Harper government.” (1)

Government behavior intimidated bureaucracy, the government dismissed public servants who did not agree with its agenda, often vilifying them before and after their dismissal and painting them as both incompetent and unstable. Jean-Pierre Kingsley (Elections Canada), and Robert Marleau (Information Commission) resigned. Linda Keen (chair of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission), Alan Leadbeater (Assistant Information Commission), Adrian Measner (president, Canadian Wheat Board), Dr. Arthur Carter (National Science Adviser), Kevin Page (Parliament Budget Officer), Paul Kennedy (chair, RCMP Complaints Commission), Peter Tinsley (chair, Military Police Complaints Commission), Pat Stogran (ombudsman, Veteran Affairs), Mary Cheliak (director, RCMP Firearms Registry) were all dismissed (1).

“Given its zero tolerance for dissent and its single-minded pursuit of critics, it is hardly surprising that the Harper government includes opposition parties on its enemies list. What is surprising is the degree of success the Conservatives have had in convincing Canadians that their hard-line approach to their political adversaries is both reasonable and fair in a democratic society. Essentially, their approach has been to bankrupt the opposition and hopefully destroy the Liberal Party, which Harper continues to see as his principal opposition and the epitome of liberal thinking. As senior Harper adviser Keith Beardsley acknowledged that “He hates the Liberal Party, and I would say his aim from day one –and I don’t think anyone would disagree– was to break the brand...” (1).

In summary, Canada shows evidence of fascist shifts including many of the steps discussed by Wolf. There is still reason to be concerned about Canada after Harper; trade agreements are in place to be expanded and they are the economic framework of neo-liberalism. The liberal government under Justin Trudeau has completed some work towards rebuilding institutional damage, ensuring a more open government, stopping anti-union legislation, implementing the mandatory long Census form and initiating a national inquiry on the murders of indigenous women among others. And yet, it does not question neo-liberalism or our war involvement. Both free trade agreements and the war on terror are not being challenged and crucial elements of the neo-liberal agenda remain in place. Canada should focus on citizens’ basic human rights to food, shelter, education, health, employment, and protection and safety including ensuring citizen safety from abuses by the state.

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