

Imagine Canada's Conservative Nightmare

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As election campaigning moves into hyperdrive across Canada, politicians from across the political spectrum are pulling media tricks to win coveted votes from coast to coast. Music speaks to the heart across cultures and political campaigners are certainly utilizing song, often cynically, to boost spirits on the campaign trail.

While musicians in Canada continue to make waves globally for innovative sound—[Arcade Fire](#) projecting inspiring Montreal art rock internationally, [Samian](#) spotlighting indigenous struggles to the hip-hop world—culture is most certainly key to ongoing efforts to foster a national identity on these colonized native lands.

Over recent years the Conservative government has moved systematically to [cut public funding to the arts](#), without popular debate or public consultation multiple national arts programs have seen funding ruthlessly slashed. As independent musicians, documentary filmmakers, cultural festivals and poets across the country face an increasingly uphill battle to secure public arts funding after millions of dollars in Conservative cuts, culture in Canada certainly remains a key election issue.

In 2008, culture cuts in Canada totalling \$45-million played a key role in limiting Conservative election gains, halting possibilities for a majority government and [sparking thousands-strong protests](#) on the streets in Montreal. Conservative claims projected by Stephen Harper in 2008 that “ordinary people” in Canada do not care about the arts [provoked major debate](#), fuelling protests against state funding arts cuts.

Since the last election Harper has backtracked on inflammatory jabs toward artists, and sustained the reduced cultural funding levels while hiking spending on military projects like [the new acquisition of F-35s fighter jets](#).

On the arts Harper has made moves, not toward restoring slashed public funding but toward the stage, taking liberty to serenade people in Canada with [wobbled renditions of classic rock tunes](#) at Conservative gala dinners and most recently on the campaign trail. Aside from singing skill comparable to atonal regulars at hazy karaoke bars, it seems that Harper's response to critiques on arts funding cuts is a barrage of botched cover performances.

Last week in Winnipeg, on the first days of the 2011 campaign trail, Harper appeared for reporters [side-by-side with 10-year-old Maria Aragon](#), projected into internet fame by pop star Lady Gaga earlier this year after the Winnipeg youth posted a sweet [cover version of Gaga's Born This Way](#) to YouTube.

Aside from the disturbing image of Canada's hard-right Conservative party leader sitting

beside [Aragon](#) on a piano following millions in arts cuts, it is the choice of song that sinks the heart. *Imagine* by John Lennon is played on keyboard by Harper, attempting to duet lyrics written by [a revolutionary artist](#) with a Filipino-Canadian youth.

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace ...

Lyrics voiced by Harper that most certainly portray an exact opposite political orientation to the nationalist, war-driven foreign policy propelled by the Conservative minority government in recent years.

"Imagine all the people, living life in peace," sings Harper in the cynically orchestrated musical campaign stop. Do these words extend to Afghanistan where Canadian forces continue to participate in the NATO-lead military occupation? Afghan activist Malalai Joya recently called for an immediate end to NATO's military presence in the country [on Democracy Now!](#) describing U.S. and Canadian forces as "doubling our miseries, creating more obstacles, problems for the justice-loving, democratic-minded parties that we have, intellectuals, innocent people of my country."

Do the lyrics of *Imagine* apply for Harper to [Gaza](#) where Palestinians continue to struggle under a [Canadian-supported](#) Israeli military occupation – a land and sea blockade condemned by the majority of nations in the world?

[CBC is reporting](#) that the YouTube video featuring Harper performing *Imagine* has been removed for copyright reasons, replaced with the following message: "This video is no longer available due to a copyright claim." Yoko Ono, celebrated globally for [anti-war activism](#) and subversive cultural projects, owns the rights to *Imagine*. Despite Harper's rendition being pulled, thousands of other cover versions of the song remain on YouTube.

Harper's recent musical act is a heartless attempt to deploy *Imagine* for electoral gain. Here is a Conservative politician who has worked to dismantle public arts funding and has headed 'closed-border' immigration policies enforced by the Conservatives for years. His campaign appearances highlighting Canada's 'diversity', like Harper's appearance beside Maria Aragon in Winnipeg, are entirely disingenuous and by extension callous. In reality, Conservative immigration policies and even 2011 election campaign ads are [overtly racist](#) in nature.

Great art inspires dreams and the beauty in life, distant themes from the fear-driven politics of the Conservative party in Canada. As artists and creators of culture it is critical to sound the alarm bells on the reality of Harper's attack on culture in Canada and call-out self-serving manoeuvres to utilize liberation songs for the Conservative party election campaign.

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