

Rescuing the real Canadian conservatism

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The elephant and the mouse. This time-old reference often applies to Canada making its way in the world living beside the cultural and political behemoth that is the United States. A slight gust of wind in Washington can turn into a full-blown tornado in Ottawa, such can be the sensitivity of Canada to developments in the U.S. While some Canadians may not like to admit it, our standing on the world stage is often determined by how much influence we have — or are perceived to have — in America's corridors of power.

Canadian conservatism has unmistakably been influenced by the conservative movement south of the border. Some influence was welcome or inevitable, while at other times, forceful resistance was in order for the Tory monarchists. Along with a steadfast belief in the monarchy, the conservative impulse to store and preserve institutional knowledge led to Sir John A. Macdonald's preference of the Westminster system of government over America's then novel checks and balances approach. Canadian conservatism also allowed for the proper balancing of rights between the English and French founding peoples, which has now successfully evolved to include countless other minorities.

In the age of a Trump-led Republican Party, resistance must be in order for Canadian conservatives. Indeed, traditional conservatism, tracing its modern origins back to Edmund Burke in the UK, and John Adams in the U.S., must dissociate itself completely from the Trump phenomenon.

In times of political upheaval, it pays to return to first principles and re-examine what we have learned through the conservative reflexes of Burke and Adams, through to Lincoln and beyond. It is especially important that conservatism be allowed to have an appropriate and credible outlet after Trump's coup of the Republican Party. Conservatism, in its traditional essence, is not an ideology, but rather the negation of ideology. It is a certain view of life marked with deep regard for tradition, order, and private enterprise. But with Trump now being the Republican standard-bearer, can anyone blame young voters for instead associating conservatism and Republicanism with attacks on women and minorities, bellicose verbal assaults, and simply stupid ideas?

Canada's 2015 federal election may have turned on a Trump-like tactic of bullying Muslims and minorities, although the Canadian attack was more veiled. Then Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, trailing in the polls, decided that the (almost entirely academic) issue of the wearing of niqabs during citizenship ceremonies deserved his upmost attention on the campaign trail. While the Conservatives received a small bump in Quebec polls, vote-rich Southern Ontario arguably punished Mr. Harper on election night for such unstatesmanlike tactics. The protection of minorities and moreover, respect for the individual, have always been conservative values. However, can anyone blame voters for not knowing this, given the past and present practice of so many right-leaning politicians playing on nativist fears?

As Canada has historically — at least over most of the 20th century — been a left-leaning country, the United States has often been a stalwart right-leaning nation. Conservatism was entrenched in the American political psyche via federalists such as John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and John Marshall. Their conservative tendencies were imprinted on a Constitution that has placed important limits on any sophists or economic levellers trying to significantly change the U.S.

Canadian conservatives have often looked admirably upon the conservative movement in the U.S. However, now that the conservative movement and the Republican Party find themselves in disarray, Canadian conservatives must be wary of an unpleasant tide that may make its way north. Trump is not a conservative: instead, he represents the perversion of conservatism. Despite earlier attacks from significant political figures in the Republican Party, the number of politicians now vying for favour in Trump's Court is deplorable. Rather than politics as usual, the turnaround represents a complete abdication of principle. Trump violently attacked Republican establishment figures as cowering weaklings. Given the endless line of Republicans making their way in line to kiss his hand, could Trump have been far from correct?

While awaiting the autopsy of the 2016 presidential election, U.S. conservatives must contemplate that a split from the Republican Party might have to be a possibility. Political parties have died off and new ones born, but one based on traditional conservatism must have a place in the affairs of the United States. Should that require a messy divorce and the impossibility of challenging for the White House in a number of consecutive elections, it might be the just price to be paid for years of incompetence.



Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and U.S. President Ronald Reagan hold their first round of talks on March 17, 1985 in Quebec City.

The Conservative Party of Canada is currently undergoing a leadership race, presenting an opportunity to return to the basic tenets of conservatism, while vehemently disassociating itself with Trump and his perversion of conservatism. While Canadian conservatism will always have to weather the winds emanating from the United States, it can serve as a successful example to Americans during the inevitable rebuild of their conservative movement, regardless of the winner on November 8, 2016.

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