

Unity in Diversity? Neoconservative Multiculturalism and the Conservative Party of Canada

Abstract

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Based on a mix of critical discourse analysis of leading party figures' speeches, platforms, government documents and policy analysis, this paper seeks to grasp how Canada's (neo) Conservative Party and former government has sought to navigate the country's popular common sense commitments to immigration and multiculturalism to compete for political power while pursuing exclusionary discourses and policies that negatively affect many (im)migrants and minorities in Canada.

The party's 2006 minority and 2011 majority election victories represented the culmination of a long march to power for Canadian neoconservatives begun with the 1987 founding of the Reform Party of Canada. Since then, the redefining of Canadian identity and notions of citizenship and multiculturalism by Canada's Conservative Party and former government has been a creative political project containing major contradictions. While they for a time purged themselves of some of the most blatant, anti-immigration elements of the discourses of their predecessor parties, continuities in its Canadian brand of authoritarian populist politics have continued in new forms since the founding of the new Conservative Party in 2003. A careful examination of some of their discursive efforts reveals an attempt to construct a highly regressive form of Canadian nationalism, which new Canadians are invited to share through the articulation of what I label *neoconservative multiculturalism*. Neoconservative multiculturalism involves both a hollowing out of the progressive potentials of multiculturalism discourses and policies as well as shifting the concept in (neo)conservative directions while making discursive and minor policy nods towards such a vision of Canada.

On the one hand leading Conservatives assert the existence of a generous, pluralistic, rights-respecting culture while downplaying historic and contemporary racism, discrimination and social exclusion. This is accompanied by the assertion of a neoliberal "rules respecting" culture respectful of the military and its sacrifices. Juxtaposed against this is a society at risk of abuse by demonized others alongside the promotion of clash of civilizations discourses.

This political project's contradictions are constitutive of a new and disciplinary neoconservative variant of multiculturalism and Canadian nationalism. This was a necessary political innovation as the Canadian neoconservative project had to be connected to an attempted hegemonic project that could obtain enough support to win elections and govern in a society with significant immigrant, racialized and ethnicized minority populations. However this promotion of asserted shared values and simultaneous exclusion is an authoritarian populist approach to politics and policy that reinforces and further intensifies existing social hierarchies between settler colonial and (im)migrant Canadians, particularly with their treatment of Muslims,

refugees, migrant workers, targeted civil society organizations and prospective citizens. This has resulted in a qualitative decline in democracy and social relations of citizenship, (im)migration and multiculturalism in the period the Conservatives held office and contributed to negative discourses and policies while in opposition.