

Stephen Harper, God, and the Bomb

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The Nation - Chris Hedges - The new Canadian prime minister, Stephen Harper, inspired by the neocons to the south, appears determined to visit the worst excesses of George Bush's presidency on his own country. He plans to pull Canada out of the Kyoto Protocol and expand military spending. He defended Israel's massive bombing of southern Lebanon, even as Israeli warplanes bombed a clearly marked UN observation post, killing a Canadian peacekeeper. He was the first world leader to cut off funding after Hamas took over the Palestinian Authority.

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Letter From Canada: The New Christian Right

Chris Hedges

The Nation

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Toronto - When things get bad in the United States it is reassuring to turn to Canada, a country with a high standard of living, a small military and a national healthcare plan. Canada always seemed to be, if a bit duller than America, also a bit saner.

But this is changing. The new Canadian prime minister, Stephen Harper, inspired by the neocons to the south, appears determined to visit the worst excesses of George Bush's presidency on his own country. He plans to pull Canada out of the Kyoto Protocol and expand military spending. He defended Israel's massive bombing of southern Lebanon, even as Israeli warplanes bombed a clearly marked UN observation post, killing a Canadian peacekeeper. He was the first world leader to cut off funding after Hamas took over the Palestinian Authority. The decision was made despite Hamas having taken power after winning democratic elections that not only were recognized as free and fair but fulfilled demands made by the West.

Harper has extended the mission for the 2,200 Canadian soldiers fighting in Afghanistan, where forty-two have died so far. He has slashed \$1 billion in funding that assists the most vulnerable Canadians, including cuts in adult literacy programs, legal aid to gays and lesbians, and measures to assist unemployed youth, despite a near-record surplus of \$13.2 billion for 2005-06. If the Bush Administration launches an attack on Iran there is little doubt that Harper would line up behind Washington.

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When the Canadian prime minister was asked about Iran before his recent speech to the UN General Assembly, he called Iran "the biggest single threat the planet faces." And he sneers at Canada's long tradition of antimilitarism and generous social services, once calling Canada "a second-tier socialistic country, boasting ever more loudly about its...social services to mask its second-rate status."

But that is not the worst of it. The prime minister, who has begun, in very un-Canadian fashion, to close his speeches with the words "God Bless Canada," is also a born-again Christian. And Harper is rapidly building an alliance with the worst elements of the US Christian right.

Harper, who heads a minority government, is a member of the East Gate Alliance Church, part of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, a denomination with 400,000 members that believes in the literal word of the Bible, faith-healing and the imminent return of Jesus Christ. Women cannot be ordained in his church, homosexuality is a sin and abortion is murder. Canada, however, is unused to public displays of faith, and Harper has had to tread more lightly than George Bush. But many fear the prime minister is taking a cue from the Bush Administration and slowly mobilizing Canada's 3.5 million evangelicals--along with the 44 percent of Canadians who say they have committed themselves to Christ--as a power base. Harper has spent the past three years methodically knitting a coalition of social conservatives and evangelicals that looks ominously similar to the American model.

"While the Ottawa press corps has been preoccupied with Harper's ability to keep the most blooper-prone Christians in his caucus buttoned up, he has quietly but determinedly nurtured a coalition of evangelicals, Catholics, and conservative Jews that brought him to power and that will put every effort into ensuring that he stays there," wrote Marci McDonald in the October issue of the Canadian magazine *Walrus*.

Harper's Conservative government, for the first time since the January 2006 election that brought him to power, is tied in the polls with the Liberal Party, which is locked in a leadership battle that includes frontrunner Michael Ignatieff, a prolific author on ethnic conflict, a former Harvard professor and a vocal supporter of the Iraq War. A poll done for the *Toronto Globe and Mail* and CTV News has the Conservatives and Liberals tied with 32 percent support, although no date has been set for new elections.

Harper's combination of bellicosity, slash-and-burn attitude toward Canadian social programs and religious fervor makes many Canadians nervous. Unfortunately for Canada, Harper has a

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lot of American help. James Dobson has set up a Canadian branch of his Focus on the Family three blocks from the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. The organization, called the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, provides political expertise to and otherwise supports Harper's allies in the bid to turn Canada into an Americanized Christian state. Dobson, who rails against Canada's defense of gay rights and legalization of same-sex marriage, buys radio time in Canada to attack the nation's tolerance of gays and calls for legislation to roll back these measures.

The proliferation of new Christian groups is dizzying, with organizations such as the National House of Prayer, the Institute for Canadian Values and the Canada Family Action Coalition, whose mission is "to see Judeo-Christian moral principles restored in Canada," publishing election guides, working with sympathetic legislators and mobilizing Canadian evangelicals in local and national campaigns. These groups turn frequently to American Christian leaders like Jerry Falwell, who came to Canada two years ago for an "Emergency Pastors Briefing" to rally 400 evangelical ministers against a bill before Parliament that included a provision making it a hate crime to denounce homosexuals.

Other stalwarts, like former Christian Coalition leader Ralph Reed and televangelist John Hagee, have come north to spread their toxic message to the newly energized Canadian evangelical church. And in the Harper government they have found not only a willing convert but an important ally.

Harper's hold on power, like that of George Bush, is shaky. He too has no clear mandate to transform Canada, but this has not stopped his minority government from steadily undermining social programs and a once enlightened foreign policy that liberal Americans could only envy. The tools he is using are familiar to many Americans, who stood sleepily by as Pat Robertson and other religious bigots hijacked the Republican Party and moved into the legislative and executive branches of government. As I walk the windy streets of Toronto I wonder if those who push past me will wake up and see in Harper's government our own malaise or watch passively as Canada becomes a demented reflection of George Bush's America.

[Stephen Harper, God, and the Bomb is in deference to PEJ News contributor, Dr. Fred Knelman's book title, 'Reagan, God, and the Bomb.' Rest in Peace, Fred. - lex]