EVANGELICALS AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

ABSTRACT

The participation of evangelical Christians in politics has prompted suspicion and expressions of fear, reflecting some misunderstandings about Canadian evangelicals. Canada is a religiously plural society. The author maintains that if we want a participatory democracy, all should be welcome to engage in a constructive discussion about how we shape our common lives together. No one should be excluded or told explicitly or implicitly that they are not welcome.

The political engagement of evangelicals is often greeted with expressions of concern about the emergence of the "religious right" in Canada. It is presumed that evangelicals are fiscally and socially conservative, and a Canadian version of the Republican Party at prayer. With the re-election of evangelical George Bush, many presume evangelicals in Canada are hoping to flex their political muscle.

Of course, in light of such musings about the possible emergence of the religious right in Canada there is little commentary about the religious left, or their political aspirations. Nor are pronouncements of churches espousing liberal political concerns met with accusations of mixing church and state. It was the intervention of some Catholic Bishops against same sex marriage and not the United Church's endorsement of the civil marriage legislation that provoked one Cabinet minister to suggest churches stay out of the debate over marriage. And it was US funding to Canadian religious organizations opposed to the government's legislation on civil marriage that prompted the Justice Minister to wonder aloud about restrictions on third party spending outside of elections when a gay and lesbian lobby group's web site thanked Canadians and those around the world who have contributed to their fight for equality.

In all, it is the political engagement of evangelicals that, it seems, requires an apologetic. Of all the politicians who are open about their faith commitment, why is it the evangelicals who are "scary?" Immediately prior to the 2004 election, liberal pollsters reportedly asked Ontarians if they were "more or less likely to vote for the Conservatives if you knew they had been taken over by evangelical Christians." Merely naming a group in such a political strategy creates an impression that the group is suspect. It is the first step in a process of disinformation that leads to discrimination and marginalization. This occurred a week after the Prime Minister and Minister of Justice were calling for religious tolerance in the wake of anti-Semitic violence and religious intolerance was denounced as un-Canadian.

So why isolate evangelicals? As with other religious minorities, evangelicals do have strong views on issues such as marriage. So is the case with many other religious and cultural minority groups. Yet do strong views alone make a group suspect? Such prejudice against faith communities will serve only to undermine the fabric of the kind of Canada we want. The temptation in politics to vilify for political gain is no doubt strong; but let us practice the tolerance we desire even when it is not expedient, for that is what true tolerance and respect demands. I will return to this theme, but first a bit more about evangelicals and politics.

Who are evangelicals?

Evangelicals are theologically orthodox Protestants. There are four defining characteristics: they believe that Jesus is the divine son of God and that through the life, death, resurrection of Jesus, God provided the way for the forgiveness of one's sins; that the Bible is the word of God and is reliable and trustworthy; they have committed their life to Christ and consider themselves to be a converted Christian; and that it is important to attend church regularly and share one's faith. It should be noted the first two of these beliefs are held by a majority of Canadians.

The most recent data on evangelicals in Canada is provided by an Ipsos Reid survey of religious attitudes and beliefs of Canadians conducted in the fall of 2003. Sponsored by the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, The Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, Focus on the Family and World

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Vision, it was designed to compare results with a similar survey conducted in 1993 by Angus Reid and Dr. George Rawlyk of Queen's University. In a poll of three thousand Canadians, a poll which included questions framed in terms of the four characteristics of evangelicalism, the results indicate that protestant evangelicals comprise 12% of the Canadian population, with another 7% of the population being Catholics who also share the same beliefs. Thus some 6 million share evangelical beliefs.

Slightly more female than male, evangelicals tend to be married or widowed more than non-evangelicals, and fewer are divorced or living common law. There are no significant differences between evangelicals and the general population in family size or highest level of formal education achieved. The income levels of evangelicals are slightly lower, and evangelicals are slightly grayer than the general population. They are more likely to volunteer in the community and more likely to give to charity than non-evangelicals – and this is over and above what they contribute to their church.

The survey also asked respondents about the relative importance of nine areas of church social action, activities ranging from child poverty to racisim and the environment. Both evangelicals and non-evangelicals ranked supporting Canadian children living in poverty, preventing the exploitation of children in pornography and the sex trade in Canada and around the world, and reducing homelessness in Canada as the top three priorities. Care for the vulnerable is a dominant social concern for evangelicals and non-evangelicals agree this is a priority for the church. A notable difference between the priorities of evangelicals and non-evangelicals concerned abortion. Evangelicals include the unborn among the vulnerable that need protection; non-evangelicals gave the environment higher priority.

Evangelicals are also committed to marriage as the union of one man and one woman. When asked whether marriage should be defined as between a man and a woman, should be redefined, or remain man and woman and another legal category be used for gay and lesbian relationships, 94% did not want marriage redefined. Marriage and abortion are two of the social issues that are usually identified when identifying social conservatism and which distinguishes evangelicals from many other Canadians.

However, these socially conservative views are not strong predictors for a person's views on other social policy issues. When commentators muse about the religious right in Canada, the presumption is that is that social conservatives are also fiscal conservatives. This is not necessarily the case and this difference is something that distinguishes Canadian evangelicals from their American counterparts.

Seymour Martin Lipset contends that America is distinctive in terms of a conservative moralism and economic individualism. He argues that this is a uniquely American feature and polling indicates that he is correct. Canadian evangelicals are socially conservative on issues like marriage and abortion. However, in attitudes towards income inequality and the government's role in society and the welfare state, the views of Canadian evangelicals are similar to Canadian non-evangelicals.

Evangelicals and politics

The alignment of economic and social conservatism is not as strong among Canadian evangelicals as among their American counterparts. Seymour Martin Lipset contends that America is distinctive in terms of a conservative moralism and economic individualism. He argues that this is a uniquely American feature and polling indicates that he is correct. Canadian evangelicals are socially conservative on issues like marriage and abortion. However, in attitudes towards income inequality and the government's role in society and the welfare state, the views of Canadian evangelicals are similar to Canadian non-evangelicals. If you ask evangelicals whether they are concerned about poverty, they will answer yes. If you ask them what the role of government is in addressing poverty, they will disagree. Thus evangelicals are not as right wing in their voting patters as their American counterparts.

Polls indicate that in terms of voting intentions; slightly over half of Canadian evangelicals vote to the right (voted or preferred Reform Party/Canadian Alliance or Progressive Conservative in 1993, 1996, 2000, 2001). In each of these years, the Reform Party and Canadian Alliance were led by evangelicals Preston Manning and Stockwell Day respectively. There was a pronounced shift to the Canadian Alliance during the 2000 election, not only by evangelicals but by mainline Protestants and Catholics who regularly attend church. However, this support dissipated dramatically by 2001 where some of the support shifted to the Progressive Conservatives to the political left. Many contend that the shift to the Alliance was likely due to sympathies aroused as a result of the public ridicule of Day's personal beliefs during the 2000 campaign rather than a shift in support for Alliance, and more broadly conservative policies.

In a poll conducted the week prior to the 2004 election, and before a shift towards the Liberal party that surprised many, the results indicated Canadian Protestants who regularly attend church were 12% more likely to vote Conservative, while regular Catholic attendees were 10% more likely to vote Liberal. Overall, 51% of Protestants who attend regularly intended to vote conservative compared to 46% of all other Protestants. As Andrew Grenville of Ipsos-Reid and Bill Flederus of *Faith Today* magazine summarized the data:

Among Christians who attend less frequently, these trends were less pronounced: such Protestants were only seven percent more likely to vote Conservative, and such catholics were only seven percent more likely to vote Liberal. These linkages are not something new associated with Liberal leader Paul Martin self-identifying as a Catholic and Conservative leader Stephen Harper as a Protestant. These voting patterns have been observed to varying degrees for the past half-century. Traditional wisdom suggests that the more community mindset of Catholicism finds some common ground with the more socially conscious Liberals. And Protestants, who are known for emphasizing the individual's relationship with God, link more easily with the do-it-yourself philosophy of the Conservative.

They ask whether this will continue or whether Canada will reflect an American trend where weekly church goers, including Catholics who used to vote Democrat, are now voting Republican.

The answer will depend on a number of factors. For example, will positions on social issues become a permanent dividing factor between the Conservative and Liberal parties? Historically, both parties when in power, despite their specific party policies, have operated as big tent coalitions and have successfully attracted support from social conservatives. The Liberal party has a number of Members of Parliament that are socially conservative (blue liberals) on issues of abortion or redefining marriage. Will the Liberal Party continue to be successful in providing a political home for blue liberals? Likewise with the Conservative Party? A considerable amount of ink has been used to muse about the helpfulness of the Conservative Party's attempt to provide a home for the Reform/Alliance social conservatives and how it might balance their interests with those of the party's progressive wing. If positions on social issues become a clear defining line between a party's policies and free votes are not allowed on these issues of conscience, then there may be a more permanent shift for regular church attendees to one of the two historically centrist parties.

Alternatively, there is no federal political party that mirrors the social agenda of Catholic social teaching and that of many evangelicals. Those evangelicals and catholics, who are both socially conservative in matters of marriage and abortion, and socially progressive in areas of social justice, have no natural political home. While individual MPs vary, by in large the Liberal party by its resolutions is more unwelcoming to social conservatives, while the Conservative Party tends be more fiscally conservative and not as welcoming to those concerned about social justice as the Liberal or New Democratic Party.

The policy aspirations of evangelicals

Another common accusation leveled at evangelicals is that they are seeking to impose their morality on Canadian society. Practically speaking, this is difficult for a minority to accomplish in a democracy and evangelicals are proponents of democracy. Theologically, the various traditions that inform Canadian evangelicals emphasize persuasion in politics and not imposition. Of course, it is governments through criminal codes and human rights codes that "impose" morality, not citizen groups. The criminal code is a moral code and evangelicals, as other Canadians and communities, seek to influence it.

Most of the issues that the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada has engaged in can be clustered under four themes: the sanctity of human life, care for the vulnerable, family, and religious freedom. All of these are manifest in Canadian law and public policy and are themes promoted by other communities in Canada. The policy approach the EFC undertakes is to show how proposed legislative changes on a related issue will either promote or undermine our society's commitment to these themes.

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As we believe human life is created in the image of God and the object of God's love and grace, life is something that we should cherish and care for. We should love others as we love ourselves. In both the Old and New Testaments, the people of Israel and the followers of Jesus were commanded to care for the alien, the widow, the orphan, and the poor.

It is this principle which is also reflected in our society's concern for the poor and the vulnerable,

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for those who are unable to care for themselves. It is reflected in our refugee programs and in our private and our governmental relief and development programs overseas. It is also reflected in the myriad of voluntary associations and programs that care for a variety of human needs here in Canada.

We went on to discuss the life affirming ethos that has shaped Canadian policy in health care and after reviewing the current law, explained how the legalization of assisted suicide or euthanasia would undermine this ethos and place vulnerable person's at risk. We also explained the implications for health care providers and the health care system.

When we appeared before Canada's Supreme Court on a related issue, our argument followed the same lines. Intervening with the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, we argued that a commitment to the sanctity of human life undergirds much of Canadian social policy. In a split decision; the majority grounded its decision to uphold the law on the importance of recognizing the sanctity of human life in Canadian law. Even though the law against assisted suicide was found to violate the section of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom* that guarantee life, liberty and the security of the person, the court ruled that this infringement was justified due to the state's interest in preserving the sanctity of human life.

The nature of Canadian pluralism

The reception of evangelicals at the table of public policy is a reflection of the nature of pluralism at play in Canadian public life. Are we truly a religious and cultural mosaic? If so, then all should be welcome to engage in a constructive discussion about how we shape our common lives together. No one should be excluded or told explicitly or implicitly that they are not welcome. Nor should participation be contingent on someone obscuring what John Rawls calls their comprehensive doctrine. To require this is not an expression of deep pluralism but the imposition of a secularist view that public life and personal faith should be divorced. It pretends that faith can be bifurcated and that this is the cost of public engagement in a secular society.

This secularist view of religion is not neutral. It accommodates only secularists and is itself a form of sectarianism that many seek to avoid. And maybe it is concern for sectarianism that prompts discomfort. Perhaps the reaction to the policy engagement of evangelicals is a suspicion that they are seeking to reinstate a Christian hegemony that arguably once shaped Canadian life. But this suspicion of and discomfort with sectarianism is also shared by people of faith. Can we find a way of managing our lives together that is non sectarian, be it religious or secular?