

Left justification

A more progressive, saner approach to politics

Radical Randy

The lack of any meaningful direction from Ed Stelmach's lacklustre administration has left many voters looking for alternatives. What's a disgruntled Albertan to do? Vote Wildrose, of course! That'll show all those right-wing corporate-dominated Conservative politicians!

Why does the Right in Alberta and elsewhere continue to exert its hold over many voters despite the failure of its underpinning tenets? The economic collapse exposed the absurdity of the Right's infatuation with the dysfunctional dogma of neoliberal market fundamentalism. Not only has it failed abysmally in its fraudulent trickle-down promise to lift the poor out of poverty and buttress the middle class, it has now even begun failing the wealthy elite it was set up to serve — at least until the massive global taxpayer-funded bailouts. The neoliberal conjurers who have so bedazzled the world for so many years may have finally run out of tricks. No more rabbits, no more hats.

This, along with the loss of any remaining credibility for the American Empire and its wars and occupations, would seem to sound the death knell for the Right. The Left provides an alternative world, one with an equitable distribution of wealth and the promotion of international peace and human rights. So how do right-wing politicians and parties continue to maintain their grip on power?

Fish in a bowl

All America's far-right neocons wanted was the opportunity to show the world what they could do if they gained real power. Unfortunately for Americans (and the rest of the World) they got the chance.

The Right likes to present itself as the hard-headed bastion for those firmly rooted in the real world, unlike those squishy lefty idealists residing in their utopian fantasy. A quick fact check of the major policy issues of the last few decades is, therefore, revealing. Neoliberal economists promoted an ever-expanding, infinitely growing economy on a finite planet. It was also the Right that celebrated the new deregulated economy and its ever-upward spiral of increasing prosperity for all. It spearheaded massive public relations campaigns denying global warming. And, if memory serves, it wasn't the lefties who were stampeding to invade Iraq because of Saddam Hussein's specious connections to 9/11 or nonexistent Weapons of Mass Destruction. An iron grip on reality, these conservatives.

The Right holds up the rugged individualist stubbornly sticking to their own opinion while challenging government authority as its icon, contrasting this to those left-wing, politically correct sheep meekly conforming to the party line. It was fascinating to watch the right-wing corporate media and punditocracy's talking heads as they eagerly flocked behind every absurd post 9/11 Bush pronouncement on the immediate dire necessity for war. Baa indeed.

The centrepiece of the right has been its devotion to capitalism as the pinnacle of human economic achievement. Perhaps the strangest aspect of capitalism is the way it is taken for granted. The capitalist mindset is so pervasive in our society that its basic premises are rarely considered. Like a fish surrounded by water we are so immersed in our present economic system that we mistake it for the natural order of things, scarcely aware that there may be anything beyond our limited bowl.

All things good and holy

A multitude of issues seem to swarm around conservative political campaigns but the one constant is an unwavering support for capitalism coupled with the rollback of workers' 20th century social, economic, and political gains. The interests of big business and the wealthiest members of society are paramount for these parties, but it would hardly do to use this as a campaign platform. It might be inadvisable to come out calling for the privatization of Medicare or another war generating corporate profits. Instead conservative politicians take refuge behind the “values issues” smokescreen to appeal to voters, along with facile neoliberal economic platitudes. The deeper implications and assumptions of capitalist gospel are rarely if ever examined — for good reason.

The Con of the Neo-con, an article I wrote for the Fall 2008 *Post*, explored the strange coalition of the Religious Right with big business and conservative political parties and the sanctification of capitalism as a Christian virtue. Traditional family values are paired with the single minded pursuit of profit and the glorification of greed. This bundling of capitalism with ostensibly divergent concepts may be vital to its continued ascendancy.

Conservatives frequently extol the virtues of the free market as exemplified by corporate capitalism but, as my Winter 2009 article *Free Market Farce* argued, capitalism and the resulting monopolies are very far removed from true free market competition. Proponents of capitalism claim to champion small business while family farmers are forced off their land by factory farms and local stores are demolished by big box chains, often assisted by government subsidies and tax breaks. Corporations may try to appeal to workers by insisting that their well-being is tied to that of big business but workers shared in virtually none of the increase in wealth their greater productivity created over the last few decades.

American-led invasions are promoted as bringing democracy and human rights to conquered nations when what is evidently meant by this is an imposed capitalist system, one often only kept in place with force by anti-democratic governments. Democratic reforms in the West itself occurred in spite of our plutocrats and their capitalist system, not because of them.

Freedom in our society is defined by the Right as the freedom of individuals to accumulate as much wealth as they can manage, as with the Fraser Institute's annual *Economic Freedom of the World* report, ranking a nation's freedom based on its government's lack of regulation of capital. The resulting freedom for some comes at the expense of a tremendous loss of freedom for many, both in terms of their marginalization through diminished economic opportunities as well as being trapped in a coercive society organized to shape its citizens' lives for the maximization of profits for the owners.

The relentless capitalist pursuit of corporate profit is cherished as a vital element of the American Way. In reality, the American Revolution was largely a revolt against the entrenched power of royal chartered corporate monopolies, with corporations subsequently kept under close control in the early republic. Right-wing pundits credit the prosperity of the U.S. and other western countries to capitalism, forgetting that much of it was due to the brutal colonial subjugation of underdeveloped countries and their continuing post-colonial looting by the West through “free trade” treaties and debt bondage. Additionally, this increase in wealth has accrued overwhelmingly to those already at the top of the economic pyramid. Corporations take credit for advancing scientific research and technological innovation when much of the fundamental work was funded by governments, with the private sector taking over only after the heavy lifting was already done (case in point: the Internet). In fact, the corporate patent monopolies that result often stifle innovation.

By being bundled with positive concepts eliciting warm fuzzy feelings, corporations and the institution of capitalism are made to appear as inevitabilities, indispensable to our very lives. Attacking them becomes an assault on the other values they have been paired with, even upon Western Civilization itself, outraging conservative commentators. This is part of a wider battery of framing techniques used by the Right to present policies inimical to the general public in a glowing light. Any suggestion of another possibility for organizing the economy is dismissed as advocating Soviet-style communism, echoing Margaret Thatcher's infamous “TINA: There Is No Alternative.”

The solution that dare not speak its name

It would seem our citizens would benefit greatly by a much more equitable sharing of resources and economic production. Maybe a good living wage with robust unions and universal and comprehensive access to medicare, education, unemployment benefits, pensions, and other social programs. Progressive income tax rates and fairer distribution of wealth. Government could also play a significant role in both regulating business for the public good rather than allowing the maximization of profit at all cost and in direct or controlling ownership of major industries and resources for the benefit of the public. The economy should be made to serve the citizens not the reverse. Hey. Wait just a minute. That sounds like some kind of *socialism* or something.

The fact that what should be an obvious alternative to the mess we're in is considered beyond the pale of civilized economic discourse is a tribute to decades of hard work by

corporations . The *Post's* Fall 2009 *Marketing a Myth* detailed the push by big business and corporate media, government, and so-called right-wing think tanks to make capitalism, especially neoliberalism, seem like the only game in town. Conservative pundits and politicians are quick to dismiss socialism as social engineering but seem to have no problem with transnational corporations moulding the world in their image. The past few decades have been characterized by the demonization of any government intervention in the economy except for the promotion of big business interests, as Donald Gutstein chronicles in *Not a Conspiracy Theory*.

The Scandinavian welfare state, so derided by conservatives, provides not only a much more equitable distribution of resources and decent living standards but also a high level of technological innovation. Complementing this top-down style, the bottom-up socialism of Venezuela's "Bolivarian Revolution," sweeping through Latin America, provides a more direct participatory method for citizen involvement in economic transformation.

Socialism is not an all-or-nothing package precluding a role for the real free market in providing goods and services to the public. Small businesses, worker owned collectives and partnerships, cooperatives, and family firms would provide far more of the supply-and-demand, honest competition that conservatives claim to cherish and a fairer distribution of wealth than corporate oligopolies. German workers in the private sector have a major role in running their companies and in wage setting, with a country possessing the world's second-largest trade surplus after China. Spain's Mondragon workers' cooperative oversees numerous worker-owned enterprises as alternatives to capitalist production. Some may argue that only huge corporations can lower costs of production but the same result is achieved in Italy where numerous independent small businesses band together to achieve economies of scale. Rather than some rigid ideological straightjacket, this vibrant mixed economy synthesis would provide a menu which individual countries, provinces and states, municipalities, etc. could use to choose the best fit for them, evolving over time as circumstances require to better serve their citizens as a whole. TINA? TATA! There Are Thousands of Alternatives.

Making the links

Rather than fighting a grab bag of right-wing economic policies, it is vital that the Left link them in public discourse as part of the overall neoliberal "free market" push for deregulation, privatization, government cutbacks, and globalization. When dealing with the social conservatives' polemics, it is vital to never allow them to hijack "family values" for their political gain. The underlying economic motivation for these parties must always be made centre stage. Ultimately, the promotion of capitalism and concentration of wealth are the main agenda for the Right regardless of whatever social wedge issues may be dredged up.

Any benefit post-war capitalism may have provided ended after decades of neoliberal market supremacy. Capitalism is long past its expiry date and only a concerted campaign by the Right has kept the public from tossing it in the bin. The natural assumption should

be that the Left's vision of a fairer distribution of wealth and the elimination of wars for corporate profit should be the default position. The onus is on those on the Right to make the case showing why we should have a society based on unfairness and massive hoarding of wealth by a few.

Perversely, some parties traditionally on the left of the political spectrum have been so cowed by the neoliberal onslaught that many have been conditioned not to challenge the underlying myths of capitalism and empire, being content just to advocate cleaning up after them. Lacking the courage to provide real alternatives to the policies of institutionalized greed, they have abandoned the voters and should not express surprise when the voters reciprocate.