

The con of the neo-cons

North America's conservatives manipulate voters by stirring up emotional debates about values, religion

By Radical Randy

How do they do it? How do right-wing conservative parties, whose only major objective is the pursuit of policies that benefit the corporations and the wealthy, get elected? Naturally, the rich tend to vote for them, but by definition this is only a small proportion of the population. They may try the old neoliberal free market "trickle down" ploy, whereby everyone supposedly benefits from their policies, or manipulate public opinion with fear. The 9/11 attacks certainly did so for U.S. President George Bush and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper used fear to sell the ongoing Afghanistan occupation. But by far, the favourite solution for politicians in both countries has been to climb on board the values bandwagon.

The dominant manifestation of this is the unholy trinity that has existed since the 1980's between right-wing politicians, the wealthy elites and their corporations, and conservative Christian fundamentalist evangelicals. Of course, conservatives have railed for decades against Godless atheistic communism, but since the Reagan years and Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, the alliance has been firmly cemented. The conservatives court evangelical groups by espousing the "family values" these voters care so passionately about. These broadly include crusading against abortion access and fetal stem-cell research, feminism, gay rights/marriage, teaching any form of birth control in schools other than abstinence, and the promotion of causes such as literal scriptural interpretation, using the public schools to teach creationism (oh, uh, intelligent design) and the erosion of the separation of church and state.

Some of these values are also useful in securing support from conservative Catholics and members of other faiths as well as non-religious social conservatives. The siege mentality many traditionalist Christians exhibit is further inflamed by the attack dogs on far right radio and television talk shows who gleefully play on their fears to whip up support for conservative politicians.

The con is on

Regardless of how one may personally feel about these controversies, the political right's interest in these wedge issues is a scam. While individual politicians promoting these policies may be sincerely religious, most of them are blatantly manipulating the faithful for their support. The party machinery itself has absolutely no qualms when it comes to telling these people whatever they want to hear and making promises they can't possibly deliver on.

The support of the evangelicals was crucial to George Bush's run for the White House. Without it, he wouldn't have come close enough in either race to even pretend to be

president. The Christian Right, in a bizarre parody of the 1960's civil-rights movement, fervently organized voter registration drives for the Republicans. In the 2004 election, white evangelical males voted for Bush over the Democrat's John Kerry by a four-to-one margin. Even some African-American ministers supported Bush, although they may have had second thoughts in the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina debacle. What was the big issue that galvanized this outpouring of support? The bang-up job George was doing in Iraq protecting the free world from weapons of mass destruction? The fantastic performance of the economy and elimination of poverty? Nothing so trivial. The burning issue driving the vote was Bush's promise to back a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. Once the election was over and this pledge had served its purpose, like much of New Orleans, it sank beneath the waves.

The same ploy has also been used in Alberta. Former Premier Ralph Klein maintained his popularity by posing as the defender of family values. This led to his government's empty threat to use the Constitution's notwithstanding clause to opt out of Bill C-38 which legalized gay marriage in Canada. After Ralph finally slunk away following his Third Way Medicare "reform" fiasco, Albertans were treated to the spectacle of Ted Morton milking the same issue in his run for the provincial Conservative leadership.

Nationally, Stephen Harper roused right-wing religious support for his 2006 campaign by promising to reopen debate on gay marriage legislation. He finally got around to going through the motions almost a year later, losing a desultory free vote in Parliament and that was the end of it.

Gay marriage is only the latest hot-button issue these politicians have latched onto. In decades past abortion served the purpose. What will these crusaders do once the latest crisis is finally played out and loses its ability to whip up fundamentalist fervor? Rest easy. The right-wing corporate-backed politicians can be counted on to dredge up another moral controversy in time for their next glory hallelujah routine.

An obvious question presents itself. Why is that while the Christian Right's political partners achieve power, they so rarely deliver on the more contentious resolutions on which they campaigned? The general public, as well as the economic elites that run these parties, would not tolerate the actual curtailment of their rights that most of these promises involve. Candidates try to have it both ways by carefully tailoring their most extreme rhetoric to the true believers while downplaying and moderating these views to the rest of the voters. As a result, the bewildered faithful seem perpetual inhabitants of next year country.

Some promises are worth keeping

Although conservative politicians have cynically strung the Christian Right along on value issues, they're more than willing to deliver when it comes to policies that align with their neoliberal economic agenda. As *Walrus* writer Marci McDonald relates in *Stephen Harper and the Theo-cons*, Harper relied on the Religious Right to help sell his program

for more privately run daycare after he abandoned the previous Liberal government's plan for increased public daycare support.

The use of the Religious Right to advance an economic agenda was in evidence when George Bush slashed public delivery of government programs for those in need in favour of "faith-based and community initiatives" for the poor run by religious institutions. Meanwhile conservatives continue cutting taxes for the corporations and the rich while working overtime to help keep workers' wages down. *Focus On the Family*? Perhaps James Dobson and the rest of the halleluiah choir should focus on the damage these right-wing economic policies have done to working families and single-parent households.

On another front, Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition teamed up with the industry-front "Wise Use Movement" in a campaign to roll back environmental regulations. Many evangelicals enthusiastically endorsed Bush's business-friendly assault on environmentalism including preventing actions dealing with global warming caused by greenhouse gases.

The Christian Right seems to view feminists and environmentalists as among their most pernicious enemies, frequently charging them with being anti-American (gasp!) and anti-capitalist. Anti-capitalist? When was the Christian church mandated with the defence of the capitalist system? Great accumulations of wealth by individuals, rather than a source of embarrassment, are now trumpeted as a sign of God's favour. The only way these televangelists would recognize Jesus would be if he waltzed into the room in a three-piece business suit while waving his MBA diploma over his head. Preferably after a shave and haircut.

Ironically the crudity, sex, and profanity in popular entertainment that riles up the Religious Right is driven by the greed for corporate profits that is an integral part of the capitalist system these social conservatives so revere. Many of the lost, alienated and dispossessed flocking to politically active megachurches are victims of exploitation by the very economic system these preachers embrace. These leaders seem determined to truly make their religion the opiate of the masses.

In foreign relations, the evangelicals exhibit uncritical support for Israel in hopes of facilitating the Second Coming. Anyone not on board with their agenda risks being Left Behind with all those secular humanists come Rapture Day. Although politicians may not always accede to their every demand they do create a further distorting force in Canadian and U.S. Middle East policy.

Hidden danger?

Although the fundamentalists have been swindled by the politicians who so ardently court them, there is the unsettling possibility of their infiltration into political and military power. Disconcerting at the very least, as Michelle Goldberg in *Kingdom Coming* describes, is the influence of religious zealots at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. Additionally Blackwater Worldwide, the most powerful mercenary army in the

world and a major contractor in Iraq, was founded and is run by the fundamentalist former Navy SEAL Erik Prince. The Christian Right has historically been an enthusiastic flag-waver for American aggression abroad, the United States being the embodiment of God's will on Earth, but their jingoistic patriotism and ties to the military have escalated dramatically under the Bush administration. The ultimate aim of the right-wing evangelicals should they ever truly gain power is revealed in Chris Hedges' *American Fascists*. Dominionism teaches that, "American Christians have been mandated by God to make America a Christian state." Under these budding ayatollahs, Biblical law would be enforced in a theocracy.

Many of Bush's die-hard religious supporters continue to share the fantasy world he fashioned for them. The evangelicals fervently backed the Iraqi oil war, which born-again Bush and his neocons peddled using the most spectacular web of lies and deception the world had seen since the demise of the Third Reich. They now lament the backlash against Christianity they see, especially in the Muslim world, but seem genuinely oblivious as to what might have caused it. Then again religious fundamentalists aren't renowned for their critical thinking skills. The selection of Sarah Palin with her Pentecostal background as John McCain's vice presidential running mate continues the Republican tradition of pandering to the Christian Right.

The preceding discussion is not intended to detract from the social justice, peace, and environmental work many Christians, including evangelicals, and followers of other religions have carried out. It is the 'true believers' who perpetrate hypocrisies including: working to save the unborn but cheering on cuts to programs that might help keep them from starving after they're born; proclaiming the glory of creation but allowing industrial polluters to defile every corner of God's green Earth; and supporting the next Middle East war, despite that biblical expression, *blessed are the peacemakers*.

Praise the Lord, brothers and sisters. Praise the Lord.