

The
Economist

Canada's politics

49th parallels

Stephen Harper has imported American Republicanism just when Barack Obama has adopted some Canadian policies. Is there still a North American divide?

Jun 17th 2010 | OTTAWA



ANY country living beside an economic and cultural colossus tends to shore up its separate identity by emphasising its differences and ignoring its similarities. Few nations have mastered this better than Canada, which for decades has seen itself as a kinder, gentler counterpart to the United States. But under Stephen Harper, Canada's Conservative prime minister since 2006, the two countries have been converging. While Barack Obama has embraced policies that Canadians hold dear, such as near-universal health care and stricter financial regulation, Mr Harper has been importing many hallmarks of American Republicanism. Mr Obama's expansion of government has generated a fierce backlash from the tea-party movement. Will Mr Harper suffer a similar rebellion in reverse?

Compare the Canada preparing to host the G8 and G20 summits later this month with that of 2002, the last time it hosted the G8, and the difference is clear. Back then the debate was about legalising gay marriage, decriminalising marijuana and how to attract more immigrants. Now it is about lowering taxes, and cracking down on crime and bogus refugees. Even abortion, a question settled two decades ago in Canada, has returned to the news.

This grittier mood is partly a function of the world financial crisis. But Mr Harper can also claim to have moulded it. He argues that Canadians are not as left-wing as their governments have been, and that it was conservative divisions that long gave the Liberals free rein to impose a "benign dictatorship". He took over one of two rival right-of-centre parties in 2002 by attracting voters he described as "similar to what George Bush tapped", and then merged it with the other. Since then he has won two elections—but never with a parliamentary majority.

Like Mr Bush, Mr Harper is an evangelical Christian who once worked for an oil company. Many of his initiatives were first tried in America. Both men vowed to cut taxes and shrink government, and wound up completing only the first half of their agenda. Mr Harper has slashed corporate and personal income taxes as well as the national sales tax. His anti-tax rhetoric seems to have struck a chord: Liberals complain that they can no longer propose raising revenue because the Conservatives made "tax" a dirty word. The prime minister also increased spending, however, creating a deficit of 3% of GDP—large by Canadian standards.

Mr Harper's foreign policy has also echoed Mr Bush's. He has embraced Israel's right-wing government, even as Mr Obama has distanced himself from it. He wants to stop funding foreign health programmes that allow abortion. As opposition leader, he condemned Canada's decision not to join America's invasion of Iraq. In office, he has increased military spending by 27%, and the number of Canadian troops in Afghanistan by two-fifths. He has pledged to pull out in 2011, but in that he is obeying a binding parliamentary vote.

Another priority of Mr Harper's has been to get tough on crime. He introduced bills to stop prisoners from collecting pensions or receiving double credit for time served before conviction. His government has strengthened mandatory-sentencing laws, reducing judges' discretion to impose shorter jail terms. Even though the overall crime rate has been falling, Canadians' attitudes are hardening.

Mr Bush's one significant departure from conservative doctrine concerned immigration, where he unsuccessfully attempted a liberalising reform. Mr Harper is more orthodox. After a rise in the number of would-be refugees from Mexico last year, Canada required all visitors from Mexico—its partner in the North American Free Trade Agreement—to obtain visas. The government is now pushing a broader reform of immigration law which would make it harder for both bogus and legitimate refugees to reach Canadian soil. A poll this year found that 27% of Canadians see immigrants

and refugees as a critical threat, up from 21% five years ago.

There are some reasons to believe that the country's rightward drift might outlast Mr Harper. Ageing baby boomers care more about crime, for example, than they do about providing universal day care, an initiative of the previous Liberal government axed by the Conservatives. The anti-market sentiment that helped propel Mr Obama to office is absent in Canada, since its banks were already highly regulated. Voters approve of Mr Harper's economic stewardship. And now it is the left-of-centre parties that are squabbling among themselves. In another sign of the new zeitgeist, on June 15th Pierre Karl Péladeau, a media mogul, announced the launch of Sun TV News, a new television channel led by Kory Teneycke, Mr Harper's former communications director. Pundits have already dubbed it Fox News North.

Many people on both sides of the border share the same values, says Matthew Mendelsohn, who heads a think-tank in Toronto. He argues the conservative American south pulls the United States to the right, while Quebec's social-democratic traditions tug Canada to the left.

But the striking thing about Mr Harper's conservative revolution is the narrowness of its political base. The opinion polls still give the Conservatives just 31%, meaning that a parliamentary majority remains beyond their grasp. The prime minister has been masterful at extracting advantage from favourable circumstances and from small shifts in public opinion. But above all he has thrived on a shambolic opposition. It is far too early to conclude that he has remade his country.

The Americas

Copyright © The Economist Newspaper Limited 2010. All rights reserved.