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Faith becoming a 'powerful political force,' says Crowley

By HARRIS MACLEOD

The Harper government likely isn't concerned its recent moves to pacify the religious right are turning off more socially liberal Canadians, because with increasingly low voter turnout on election day the key to success is mobilizing the base and fighting the best campaign, say observers.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) minority Conservative government has come under fire for deciding to exclude funding abortions from its G8 maternal health initiative, and for withholding funds for gay pride events, even though some of them, like Toronto's Pride Parade, come with a large economic footprint.

On May 13, approximately 15,000 anti-abortion activists were on Parliament Hill for the annual 'March for Life' rally. The event was attended by around 20 MPs, including three Liberals, and the rest were Tories. The government's decision not to fund abortions abroad was hailed as a victory for the movement.

Former MP Garth Turner, who was kicked out of Mr. Harper's caucus and then briefly sat as an Independent and then a Liberal, detailed what he said are the deep and extensive connections between the Harper Tories and the Christian right in his 2009 book *Sheeple: Caucus Confidential in Stephen Harper's Ottawa*. He said Mr. Harper knows that in a multi-party system with increasingly low voter turnout, which hit its lowest point ever at 59 per cent in the last federal election, in 2008, all a party needs is around 30 per cent of the vote to win government.

"It's about feeding them the red meat they want to mobilize the base," he said. "That's what Harper knows and that's what he does. That's exactly what Doug Finley has been accomplishing for the last five years. So I'm not surprised at this and I'm not surprised they would do things that are dumb and broad-based social moves such as cutting off gay funding, and this whole abortion debate. It's very divisive but it's done in order to make sure they've got that narrow constituency sewn up, and in a society where you've got four or five parties across the country looking for support he knows this is how to win power and keep it."

Pollster Nik Nanos said Mr. Harper's strategy of using "wedge politics" to win power was also how former Ontario premier Mike Harris won successive minority governments. The Prime Minister's chief of staff, Guy Giorno, was also Mr. Harris's chief of staff, and several of his ministers served in the Harris government, so it shouldn't come as a surprise that this is the strategy they are pursuing, said Mr. Nanos.

"The strategy that has put the Conservatives in power, albeit in a minority government, has been one of wedge politics and narrow-casting the message. And that's served them well in two elections and allowed them to win minority government. When I see this strategy, it's firming up the base, raising funds, and it also might be a tacit acknowledgment by the Conservatives that it's going to be difficult for them to form a majority government," he said.

Indeed, polls indicate that a majority of Canadians believe in legal access to abortion and support same-sex marriage.



photograph by Jake Wright, The Hill Times

Also, the conventional wisdom is that the government's handling of the abortion issue should hurt them with women, although recent polls have not reflected a significant gender gap between the Tories and the official opposition Liberals. It may be, said Mr. Nanos, that the Conservatives believe they can get the additional eight seats they need for a majority government by running the best campaign, and counting on those opposed to their agenda staying home on election day. "Women weren't hot on the Mike Harris government either, but the Ontario Liberals had run such a weak campaign that women who would normally vote Liberal either stayed home or opted for the Conservatives because they were more consistent and ran a better campaign and looked they could manage things better," he said.

Recently, the spotlight has been shined on the issue of how much influence the Christian right has on the Conservative government because of Marci McDonald's book, *The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada*. In the book, she reveals the extensive ties leading figures on the Christian right, such as Charles McVety, have with Mr. Harper and several of his Cabinet ministers.

In March, Mr. McVety's organization, the Canada Family Action Coalition, met with the Prime Minister, and last year met with MPs, government officials, and then Public Safety minister Peter Van Loan (York Simcoe, Ont.). According to the Registry of Lobbyists, the issues discussed included "protection of children, promotion of policies that encourage stable families, and protection of religion."

When contacted by *The Hill Times*, Family Action Coalition lobbyist Brian Rushfeldt, who pops up repeatedly in Ms. McDonald's book, said the book has contributed to singling out Christians in Canada for their beliefs, and that his organization has the same right as everybody else to lobby the government on issues.

"I'm not going to contribute to singling out Christian organizations for a story, because if you want to talk about lobbying then talk about everybody that lobbies," said Mr. Rushfeldt, who refused to go into any detail about his meetings with government officials.

NDP MP Peter Stoffer (Sackville-Eastern Shore, N.S.) the only non-Tory to meet with Mr. Rushfeldt last year, said he had a "respectful" conversation with him, even though they disagree on many fronts. He said he doesn't think it is so much that Christian organizations are influencing the government's policies, but rather many in the government already hold socially conservative views and the Christian right simply validates that.

"I think Mr. Harper had that view long before he was influenced by anyone. These are his deep-held beliefs, he said it publicly before he doesn't support abortion, we know that," said Mr. Stoffer. "Nobody should be surprised he's not funding abortions because they're his views and the views of the majority of his caucus."

Brian Lee Crowley, managing director of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute and author of the book *Fearful Symmetry: The Fall and Rise of Canada's Founding Values*, said the increased visibility of the religious right in politics is partly a reaction to a period of aggressive secularism in Western politics. He said it's a trend that's likely to continue.

"We're entering an era in which faith, in the largest sense, is becoming a powerful political force," said Mr. Crowley.

"People of faith in Canada are getting more involved in politics, not just Christians, I think Jews are doing it, the Muslim community is doing it, in the Sikh community, you'll find the various temples are powerful community rallying points. We're entering an era in which faith is going to be much more powerful force within politics."

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