

Centrist Politics: the Problem, Not the Solution

—Brian Dijkema—



Thomas Mulcair
Photo: The Canadian Press

The most interesting thing about this weekend's NDP leadership election is not that Thomas Mulcair won and that Brian Topp lost. No, what will last longest is the weakening of *principle*—call it ideology if you want—as a driving factor in Canadian politics.

It is generally acknowledged among the punditry, and apparently among the NDP's leadership as well, that the election of Thomas Mulcair was a move to the mushy middle. Mulcair, who flirted with the federal Tories and served as a Liberal cabinet minister in Quebec before winning a seat for, and then the leadership of, the NDP, campaigned openly for the NDP to "modernize," and has maintained this position in the wake of his election. His pro-middle agenda was opposed by members of the NDP's principled elite, including Ed Broadbent, and was set against Brian Topp, whose position on matters of party principle could not be clearer. Topp wanted an NDP which found its "fundamental identity as a social democratic/democratic socialist party."

As Andrew Coyne notes, Mulcair "was elected, then, for one reason: because, it is believed, he can win power—and because enough New Democrats, in the wake of last year's stunning breakthrough, have decided they would like to win power." The NDP, having caught a scent of power, now wants the whole grass-fed, organic thing.

But as Coyne noted at the recent Manning conference, power has its costs. I almost look forward to Coyne's speech to the Broadbent Institute Conference in ten years: "There once was a party that you could count on to seek government subsidies for industry: but you are not that party. That party could be counted on to wrench concessions for the working class from majority parties: but you are not that party."

While I find it hard to lament the impending death of some of the NDP's positions, I think all of Canada loses when one party, and especially when all parties, stop speaking their minds clearly, and start speaking only to politically winnable issues.

A mass migration to the middle of politics might be a positive move—it eliminates the crazy ideas from political discourse (which exist on both the right and the left)—but it also comes at a cost. We'll no longer have debate—we'll no longer have *real politics*—about both means and ends, the type of politics that the NDP excelled at forcing on an otherwise sleepy House of Commons.

While it's too early to tell at this point, a centrist NDP might cost us all the last shreds of actual debate in our House of Commons, and will lead to a political culture dominated by the narcissism of minor differences. And, if the United States has anything to teach us, it's that minor differences make for ugly politics.

Socialists and So-Cons in the Same Boat Now

—Ray Pennings—

The election of Thomas Mulcair as NDP leader (and leader of Canada's official opposition) this past weekend has been rightly observed by most as a preference for power over principle. Brian Dijkema has already argued in this space that Mulcair's victory was part of the "mass migration to the politics of the middle." There is, however, another way of looking at it.

Was it a choice between power over principle, or was it an acknowledgment that the politics of incrementalism is the only way to implement principle in our post-ideological age? Was it perhaps an implicit recognition of the limits of politics and the fact that our political leaders can only work within the framework of a cultural consensus?

There is a sense in which Mr. Mulcair's challenge isn't that different from that which Prime Minister Stephen Harper faced over the previous decade. On his road to power, Mr. Harper had to overcome the fear of a hidden "scary agenda," generally understood to include social conservative priorities on marriage and life issues. In order to overcome public skittishness regarding these issues, Mr. Harper made absolute pronouncements that he would have nothing to do with this agenda. By and large, the social conservatives have stayed with him, not having anywhere else to go. There are, arguably, very small incremental policies put into place which may appease this constituency, but it continues to be clear that for this government, social conservative issues are politically toxic.

But there are stranded idealists in both parties. Those in the NDP who are proud of the label "socialist" are soon to find themselves in a similar position within their own party. (It should be remembered that only a decade ago, the party dealt with a "New Pol-

itics Initiative" which advocated a hard left turn for the party. One-third of delegates to the 2001 convention supported this direction and the profile leaders of that movement remain active in the party today.) The party needs them and their commitment, so will do its best to find ways to throw a bone or three their way, but if the agenda is *getting power*, socialists are to the NDP what so-cons are to the Conservatives—"scary agenda" baggage that does not sell well publicly. Mr. Mulcair is likely to do with them what Mr. Harper did with the so-cons.

These largely ignored constituencies will tell you it's not a fun place to be. They are forced to stay friends with those in power, selling loyalty for only the solace of a small bone from time to time. The alternative is undignified marginalization, cast off as a political nuisance irrelevant to the real pursuit of power.

For those who look for their answers from politics, all of this is very disillusioning. It is equally disheartening for those who loftily uphold concepts such as justice, freedom, and equality, and seek to have them realized through politics. However, if the maxim is true that *politics follows culture* and that in a democratic system, what is politically possible is only what has been made culturally legitimate, the impact may be to direct those "true believers"—whether they be socialists or so-cons—to their more important task.

If you want to see your beliefs put into practice in a democratic system, you need to win the hearts and minds of enough of your neighbours that your ideas become politically acceptable. This is primarily a cultural, not a political task. But for now and the foreseeable future at least, socialists and so-cons are in the same boat as they assess what next steps they might pursue to see their ideas reflected in public policy.

Truly, God Never Abandons

—Brian Dijkema—



Pope Benedict XVI meets Cuba's president Raul Castro in Havana.
Photo: Adalberto Roque via The Telegraph

Pope Benedict left Cuba yesterday and nothing changed. The state is still run by a communist gerontocracy; it remains an officially atheist state; Good Friday is still not a public holiday; hundreds of political prisoners remain in jail or under close surveillance; there is still no respect for civil society, no trade unions, no independent newspapers, no recognition of property rights, no independent political parties; and the most basic of human rights are still not respected.

So was Benedict's visit a failure? That depends on your expectations for his visit. Many people—including this writer—had hoped that Benedict's visit would finally tear open the small vents in the regime's dark curtain, first opened by John Paul II in '98, and let the breeze of freedom flow over that stifled island. Many Christians on the island would have settled for considerably less. They would have been content with a chance to meet the leader of their church, or the chance to attend a mass led by the Holy Father.

None of these things happened. The loyal opposition on the island, including Nobel Peace prize nominee Oswaldo Paya and the courageous ladies in white were prevented from even attending the open air mass in Cuba's Revolutionary square. They remained at their homes, guarded by state authorities. In their stead went people from the state universities and those "encouraged" to go by the regime itself.

The itinerary for the trip seemed to play into the regime's hands and, from the perspective of those seeking justice—here and now—the visit might be considered a failure. Instead of visiting the poor and oppressed, the pope visited with the rich oppressor. Could it get any worse?

That depends, in turn, on your religious outlook. It was certainly disappointing for anyone expecting real or even symbolic signs of change on the island and in the regime. But seen through Augustinian lenses—the type of lenses worn by many of the Christians on the island, and worn even by the pope himself—the trip was a success even if it was disappointing.

From a strictly practical perspective, there is very little the pope can do to coerce or cajole the Cuban government into doing anything; even something as simple as changing his itinerary. To borrow a devil's phrase, Benedict has no divisions.

But the pope does wield considerable force—directive force. His sermons and speeches prior to and during his visit showed considerable strength, compassion, and a confidence that one side—the side he represents—would win. Why? Because, as he said in his statement prior to entering Cuba, "the Marxist ideology no longer corresponds with reality."

His homily at the Plaza de la Revolución, was even more powerful. Evoking the Israelite exile and persecution in Babylon, he encouraged the faithful to remember that "truly, God never abandons his children, he never forgets them. He is above us and is able to save us by his power."

As those other persecuted followers of God in Babylon discovered, and as the Castros will discover, morally bankrupt regimes are bound to fall. It happened to Nebuchadnezzar, it happened to Caesar, and it will happen to Castro. Reminding people of this reality sets our eyes on greater expectations.

Does Canada Have Social Conservatives?

—Robert Joustra—

With Ontario's provincial, and now Canada's federal budget tabled, there is the inexorable rush of commentary, lobbyist posturing, and interest group press releases. At least some of those will fit into the mould of what many have come to call *social conservative*. But this federal budget, in particular, has needled out some fault lines between social conservatives. Some are happy, and some are certainly not. Why?

The term *social conservative* is beginning to lose integrity in Canada, if it ever had any. In many ways, like *evangelical* and *conservative*, it's a term which is coloured almost beyond utility by the American context. None of these labels mean the same things across the border. Or across many borders, as *The Economist* wrote recently about Rick Santorum's social conservatism.

The Economist argues, for example, that moral permissiveness on the part of the state does not necessarily correlate with the collapse of social virtue, especially trust. Volunteerism, self-organization, and charity of all kinds can thrive in a society in which the state has thin or permissive moral law.

Mind you, this is not especially new, since it has only been quite recent in the history of the state, itself a rather new invention, that its mantle has come to include concern for this broad array of social and cultural issues. The state has grown in size and scale, as increasing aspects of human welfare have come to be demanded of it. In Canada, we tend to demand more pragmatic, economic results from our government, though far less moral leadership.

In America, the reverse tends to be true. Both of those things profoundly change the type and expression of conservatism, social or otherwise.

That difference goes a long way to explaining why Canadians are polling with more conservative attitudes than ever, but with a significant rift between those preferences and what they expect to see legislated. It would be fair to say that Canada has more distinction than America between personal conviction and public policy.

Certainly this government would agree, having followed the polls immaculately on this count. It works to cultivate a relatively stable, managerial personality, while being totally hands off moral issues. Gay marriage, euthanasia, legalized prostitution and of course legalized heroin may all well have happened by the time this Conservative government retires.

It sounds like a total route of social conservatism.

Unless by *social conservatism* we mean simply *private moral persuasion*, apparently most Canadians are in fact social conservatives. But if we mean a legislated series of moral objectives, then social conservatism in Canada is an endangered species, if not totally dead. And passing with it are strong moral arguments of many kinds that might exceed a prudent, managerial approach to federal politics.

Canada has travelled a long way from the ancient Greeks. They called the end of politics *justice*; our 24-7 pundits call the end of politics *budgets*.

Which seems to poll well. For many of Canada's social conservatives, which is to say for most Canadians, a government that keeps its head down and the GDP up hits us right where we're at.