

BEYOND POPULISM? THE FUTURE OF CONSERVATISM IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

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Do I always draw the short straw at these Estoril Political Forums, namely the most difficult question, or does it just seem that way? This year that question is “Conservatism: the Challenges Ahead.” This question rests on what is, unfortunately, a highly dubious presumption: that conservatism both exists and will continue to exist. At least In North America today, neither can be taken for granted.

The principal ailment ravaging conservatism in North America is the oft noted one of rampant political polarization. Since the overall topic of our conference is restoring the democratic consensus, I will treat my narrower topic as an aspect of that broader one. Anyone who studies these matters, or even just reads about them on his favorite Twitter feed, knows that neither of the major American parties is at all conciliatory. While less true of Canada’s major parties than of America’s, it is truer even of them than it used to be.

Canada, unlike the U.S., has a party called the Conservatives (Tories for short). In the 1990’s, however, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney reinvented the Tory party as a bulwark of multiculturalism. I say reinvented, but in fact already in the late Fifties Prime Minister John G. Diefenbaker had reinterpreted monarchism so as to anticipate this change. He promoted the then still youthful Queen Elizabeth II as monarch of all the Canadian people, meaning of all the ethnic groups that made up what came to be called the Canadian mosaic. While personally quite conservative, Diefenbaker, like Mulroney after him, sought to reinterpret conservatism and its icon the monarchy to accommodate the Canadian democratic consensus. If this meant casting that consensus as more conservative than it was, it also meant recasting conservatism as more democratic than it had previously been. These weren’t your grandparents’ Tories.

By thus shifting toward the centre Canada’s Tories were responding to the usual challenges to conservatism in a healthy liberal democracy, those arising from the bosom of a broad political consensus. Successful American conservative politicians (such as Eisenhower, Nixon, and Reagan) they practiced a similar strategy. None sought the repeal of the welfare state or a return to the former conservative mainstays of isolationism and nativism. (The lone Republican Presidential candidate who preached such recidivism, Barry Goldwater, would be routed by Lyndon B. Johnson in the election of 1964.) So my point so far is a simple one: that conservatism, in its primary political incarnations the Republican and Conservative Parties, has succeeded best in both great North American democracies when it has eschewed intransigence in favor of acquiescence in the prevailing liberal democratic consensus.

With the growing prominence of populism in the politics of both countries, this picture began to change. Would it be misleading to speak of a new populist consensus replacing the previous non-populist one? And to view this new consensus as the greatest challenge confronting conservatism? For while populism may as easily tack right as left, neither the leftist nor the rightist version is conservative. To ascribe conservatism to Donald Trump would be as unfair to it as to him. Conservatism however conceived implies the cultivation of restraints on the will of the people and its leaders. Populism implies the opposite. Conservatism seeks to conserve, to consolidate, and, where appropriate, to improve in a

measured and orderly fashion. Populism seeks to disrupt. So whereas conservatism lends itself to deference to a prevailing consensus, populism sets out to subvert one.

While Trump is the Great Disrupter today, he is not the first Republican to play that part. In the Fifties that dubious honor belonged to Senator Joe McCarthy, but more recently there was Newt Gingrich, speaker of the House from 1995 to 1998, and a power for much longer. Gingrich promoted the Tea Party within the Republican Party and its so-called Contract with America. There can be differences in style that amount to ones of substance: new to Gingrich's style was a blatant incivility. He played the unwitting John the Baptist to Donald Trump's Jesus. The Tea Party was an odd duck, a forerunner of populism whose main clientele was affluent suburbanites. Eventually Trump would placate this group with his enormous tax cut, thereby incurring deficits that filled true conservatives with horror.

Yet Gingrich and Trump are hardly the only Republicans who have bolted conservatism. Indeed, who in American national politics could still be described as conservative today? Numerous members of the Federal judiciary, including many appointed by Trump, remain the conservatives they have always been. (He had little choice but to appoint conservatives to the bench: populism has never enjoyed a constituency among judges.) The legislative branch, however, is almost devoid of conservatives. Neither party is currently hospitable to them. Just ask Liz Cheney and Adam Kitzinger. Having opposed, as conservatives have always done, the ascendancy of demagogic populism, they were effectively expelled from the Republican Party. Among Senate Republicans only Mitt Romney, Liza Murkowski, and two or three others still hold the conservative fort, relying on their impregnable positions inside their respective states. The rest of their colleagues have sullied themselves with Trumpism. No-one can predict with confidence the post-Trumpian future of the Republican Party or of conservatism as a school thought. So effectively has Trump, never a conservative himself, taken his wrecker's hammer to all that formerly defined the movement.

So too in Canada the old conservatism is moribund and has been losing ground to a right wing populism as impatient with conservatism as with any other established ideology. This is particularly the case in the prairie province of Alberta, long the anchor of Canadian conservatism. You can only scratch your head as so-called conservatives out there blaze new trails in political absurdity. As for the Federal Conservative Party, having failed signally under successive leaders who pursued the older politics of trying to be all things to all voters, it has swerved to the populist right – although only to a soft version of it. Its leader, Pierre Poilievre, has endeavored to be populist enough to distinguish himself from the leaders before him but not enough to frighten uncommitted voters. He may well win the next Federal election, less because of the confidence he commands than because the Liberals have been in power for too long. (A recent poll has shown that 40% of Canadian voters would prefer him as the next Prime Minister, more than enough to secure his victory in Canada's multiparty system. Yet while there has never been bipartisanship in Canadian politics (that the system is Parliamentary has precluded it except during the two world wars) there is clearly more of a consensus among Canadian voters than among American ones.

If there is bipartisan agreement on any issue in American politics today, it is that there is no going back to the old Republican Party nor therefore to the old conservatism. Trump's principal rival for the next Republican Presidential nomination has accused him of not being Trumpist enough. Yes, that's right: Ron DeSantis is campaigning as the Real Donald Trump.

What then is the greatest challenge that conservatism in the North American democracies will face in the coming decades? If there no going back, then it must somehow contrive to move forward. It must reinvent itself if not completely then mostly. In the short term American conservatism will have to retain its populist core inherited from Gingrich and Trump. This in common with the Democrats, who have also moved in a more populist direction. The spirit of populism is abroad in the land. Yet conservatives in both countries will also have to find ways of distinguishing themselves from populism, and even from those of its positions that echo traditional conservatism. For American conservatives these include both isolationism and opposition to immigration. While both positions were once common among conservatives, the most thoughtful ones abandoned them some time ago. They have come to recognize that globalism is essential to American security. This argues for continued energetic support of Ukraine, as well as for continued engagement, political, military, and economic, in the project of defending freedom against authoritarianism elsewhere. Yet these are policies that Trump and DeSantis have questioned (and that Trump when in office flagrantly betrayed). Similarly with immigration, conservatives, however justified their discontent with the policies of the Biden Administration, must recognize (as Trumpist populism does not) the necessity of immigration to the vitality of modern societies. As for tariffs and other instruments of so-called economic nationalism once beloved of conservatives, conservative economists had long since blown the whistle on them.

Yet it is precisely these outworn attitudes of isolationism, nativism and protectionism, updated and revived by Trumpian bombast, that anchor the electoral appeal of the populist right. It would therefore be difficult for true conservatives to reclaim the Republican Party from its addiction to them. And since America is a two party country, their failure to do would leave conservatives where they are now, with no stronghold but the Federal judiciary and a few hardy websites and newspaper columns.

There is irony in conservatism finding itself in this situation. On the one hand, to persist in what you have inherited seems the conservative thing to do. On the other, as I have argued above, populism is inimical to conservatism as previously understood or as any sensible person would understand it. Since populism always proves phony in the end, perhaps Americans will grow sick of it sooner rather than later. Until they do, their conservatism is in for a bumpy ride. Canada, boring as usual (outside Alberta, at any rate), has not moved as close to the brink and so should find it easier to retreat from it. Does conservatism in either country have enough in its tank to rise to the challenges to consensus posed by popularism and polarization? Time will tell, as only it does.