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Reflections Left

An examination of the evolution of a political movement

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In Tommy Douglas' "Mouseland," when a government consisting of black cats became too oppressive, the more numerous mice were able to vote in a government of white cats. When dissatisfied with that government, they would vote the black cats back in on the promise of change. They even tried a government of striped cats, but the problem was that a government of cats was rarely going to act in the interest of mice. With this fable, the first leader of the New Democratic Party was attempting to describe Canadian democracy, and he viewed the NDP and its forerunner, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) as fundamentally different from the two "old line parties," Conservatives and Liberals.

Instead of eradicating capitalism, the NDP eradicated all mention of socialism at its 2013 Montreal convention, but it had been "waffling right" since its beginning. In a prophetic move, ex-CCF federal leader Hazen Argue crossed the floor of Parliament in 1961 after losing the leadership of the "New Party" to Douglas with the explanation, "If I'm going to join the Liberals it will be through the front door." From this historic perspective, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberals did not outflank the NDP "on the left" in the 2015 federal election, the NDP finally outflanked the liberals "on the right" with the promise of a balanced budget, minimal expansion of social programs, and disavowal of socialism.

Trudeau and current NDP leader Jagmeet Singh cannot claim to be part of the "New Left."

The CCF's Regina Manifesto calling on farmers and workers to not rest until capitalism was replaced with a cooperative commonwealth was an example of "Old Left" politics based on class struggle. The New Left held that the revolution could come from students and intellectuals instead of the working class who had not, in any event, been marching to overthrow the economic system for decades. This was, of course, Marxist revisionism, but Trudeau and Singh are not about revolutions in any form. Singh even promised to keep the "fat cat" Liberal Party in power should the 2019 election end, as it did, without any party winning a majority. How he could make this promise and still maintain the label "Left" would be puzzling to anyone steeped in the traditions of old or new Left politics. Some history is in order.

France's 18th century National Assembly was divided from left to right by shades of political thought to prevent fist fights between parliamentarians. The monarchists and clericalists who believed in divine revelation were made to sit to the right of the president while the socialists, democrats and republicans who believed humans discern what is true sat on the left. Those on the left viewed their ideas to be the wave of the future, so they defined themselves as "progressives." Those on right took the label "conservative" because they wished to conserve established values.

The Left included individualists who chafed at the control exercised by church and monarchy, but it also included collectivists who hearkened back to an imagined more egalitarian primal trib-

alism. Marx derided these socialists as “utopian” and offered a more scientific dialectical process predicting that a stateless collectivist and modern society would evolve from class conflict. Marx’s claim to be scientific was not based on hypotheses testing and experimentation, but on careful observation and reason. This is science without the scientific method, similar to that practised by classical Greeks.

Humanists will recall that Karl Marx called religion, which provided a supernatural justification for existing class structure, “the opiate of the masses,” so when in the 1980s I met a committed Christian who headed the Communist Party in Saskatchewan, I thought of him as a bit of an aberration. He presaged a shift in “left politics” away from the rationalism of the Enlightenment.

What is represented by the terms Right and Left in political discourse necessarily shift with time. Conserving established values in the 21st century is quantitatively different from conserving established values in the 18th. For example, the work of the democrats in extending the voting franchise to those without property at the beginning of the 20th was “left-wing” in its time, but universal adult suffrage is now an established value to be conserved.

What of those who might wish to dissolve democracy and re-institute the divine right of kings? Marxists coined the term “reactionary” to describe people who wish to implement structures discarded through the march of time. Thus, Islamic State, in advocating a return to a medieval societal structure, is “reactionary.” Those who describe it as “radical” are engaging in lazy speech that inadequately describes the true nature of the ISIL enterprise and conflates futuristic ideas with those of the distant past. Twentieth century fascism was concerned with emasculating trade unions, restricting perceived excesses of democracy, restoring an old class structure and restoring the influence of the Catholic Church in daily life. Its manifestation in Germany included collaboration with Protestant, particularly Lutheran churches, a rolling back of the rights obtained by Jews during a period of democratization, and a restoration of privileges of the old Junkers class lost during a period of moderniza-

tion. Fascism could therefore also be described as reactionary. Both radicals and reactionaries may be extremists, that is, outliers with respect to the body politic.

Leading Jewish intellectuals prior to the Second World War, like Adler, Einstein, Luxemburg, Freud, Arendt and Marx, tended to be secular and politically left-wing. The emancipation of Jewish people would be accomplished by uniting with other working people locally and internationally in building a classless and egalitarian society. Hitler ended that dream for most Jewish people. Their retreat into a religiously based nation state can be seen as a form of tribalism that is conservative in nature. Interestingly, while North American conservatives were predominately anti-Semitic prior to World War II, they have been the state of Israel’s most ardent recent defenders. In contrast, many people who currently identify with “the Left” have been critical of Israel, but candidates with such views were banned from running by all three of Canada’s major political parties in the 2015 general election. By this measure, none of the major political parties in Canada can be considered “Left.”

As the NDP drifted rightward, it replaced calls for the end of capitalism with calls for redress for constituencies of victim groups within capitalism. Redress might include organizational funding, individual compensation, official apologies and affirmative action. Democratic socialists thought capitalism could not accommodate such measures. They were wrong. By the 1970s, laws were passed making discrimination on the basis of sex, race and other proscribed areas illegal. Funding was allocated for education, targeted job creation, language retention, legal costs, and organizational expenses. Capitalism did not fall. Designated victim groups who were gaining privileges within the existing economic system had less interest in changing that system.

Victim politics became a substitute for class politics. Special interest groups who feel themselves aggrieved can ally with any party. Mr. Trudeau’s formula as prime minister has been to make official apologies for real or imagined historical wrongs with the intention of increasing support for his government within those

designated communities. The compensation then awarded without judicial process may be viewed as a modern form of political patronage. Allegiance of sufficient victim groups will result in a majority. Is this kind of politics “Left” or “progressive?”

Many self-described “leftists” designate Muslims as a “victim group” and use the pseudo-psychological term “Islamophobia” to describe people who are seen as opposed to that religion. The Quebec secularism law proscribing the wearing of identifiable religious symbols by judges and teachers while in their official capacities has been described by this term; however, anecdotal evidence supplied by the president of the *Association humaniste du Québec* illustrates the need for such legislation. In response to a student-generated question, a teacher who wears a veil said she did so because she is a “good Muslim.” The student then told her mother who does not wear a veil outside of their home that she was not a good Muslim. This can be psychologically devastating to moderate or emancipated Muslims. Thus, by our definition, pseudo-leftists in this instance are reactionaries serving to support the enforcement of medieval and sexist norms. Of course, were the secularism law applied only to Muslims and not to all religions, then it would be discriminatory and we would oppose its application on human rights grounds. To date, those alleging such discrimination have done so in the absence any such evidence.

The notion that Muslim women will voluntarily want to wear a hijab in the practice of their professional duties is an assumption based on ascribed identity. I had the pleasure of watching a Munk Debate in which Georgetown University’s Michael Dyson referred to University of Toronto psychologist Jordan Peterson as a “mean, mad,

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white man.” Dyson assumed he knew these things about Peterson by knowing his race and sex, and by knowing he was not part of “the Left.” When Peterson replied that the Georgetown professor did not know him, Dyson doubled down on his attack and invited the University of Toronto professor to attend an indigenous Amerindian ceremony and a black church service to learn something about non-white cultures. Dyson lost the debate (and the audience) when Peterson revealed that he was adopted into an indigenous family and has experienced many

indigenous ceremonies, but he would take up Dyson’s offer to attend a black church service.

Victim politics reduces the individual to an identity applied to membership in an ascribed race or designated minority. In my research, I demonstrated that such stereotypes can result in the stigmatization of Canadian men in certain occupational and social roles (Robertson, 2018), and it appears that Peterson was subject to such a stereotypical attack by Dyson. Victim politics has engaged a racist turn.

In running against Singh for the leadership of the federal NDP, Manitoba Member of Parliament Niki Ashton used a clip from “To the Left,” a song recorded by Beyoncé. While the title of the song fit with Ashton’s campaign theme, its use was panned as “cultural appropriation” by representatives of a “Black Lives Matter” group, and it was immediately removed from her campaign. It so happens that the song was co-authored by a person of Scottish ancestry, but perhaps Black Lives Matter was applying a “one drop rule” to songwriting – if a song is authored by someone with only a little non-white ancestry, then Caucasians are not allowed to use it. Conversely, non-whites face fewer re-

strictions. A Cree speaker entered the 2019 National Aboriginal Music Awards using a musical genre unique to the Inuit called “throat singing.” Inuit complained that this was cultural appropriation, but contest organizers ruled that as an aboriginal the Cree was free to make this appropriation. The notion that a person is or is not allowed to perform certain practices based on their ascribed race will be offensive to people who oppose racism.

The Ontario Law Society was recently embroiled in a controversy involving a move to force law firms to hire people from designated victim groups that was later reversed. As one columnist pointed out, if there are too few lawyers from those designated groups, then there must be too many lawyers with Jewish ancestry. Is the overrepresentation of Jewish lawyers in Ontario the result of some kind of conspiracy? That anti-Semitic trope has been tried before by people who called themselves “socialist.” A more reasoned explanation is that a variety of historical factors has shaped Jewish culture to emphasize achievement in professional occupations. Any move to make it more difficult for Jews to become lawyers in Ontario would have the effect of penalizing people with high achievement motivation. Indeed, there is a class action case in the United States based on the reality that people of Asian ancestry must now achieve at higher levels than any other racial group in order to gain admittance to US universities.

As a former board member and president of the Saskatchewan Association on Human Rights involved in discussions leading to the first affirmative action programs in the province, I take exception to the idea of quotas assigned to designated minority groups in education or hiring. The idea of affirmative action, as originally conceptualized, was to remove systemic barriers to education and hiring, but achievement would rest

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on individual ability and motivation. This is in keeping with the Enlightenment value that every person is an individual free to determine their goals based on their abilities and priorities. Russian president Vladimir Putin has recently opined that these classical liberal values are now obsolete because westerners have rejected them. Given the behaviour of our governments and regulators, he may have a point, but humanists like me are not ready to give up the fight for those values.

In abandoning socialism, the NDP was implicitly saying that the idea of class politics was wrong. Irrespective of the economic arguments involved, a sociological effect of class politics was to unite people across races, genders, and religions. It was progressive in that it envisioned a new society built on egalitarian principles. The shift to identity politics involves entitlements based on tribal group membership. The idea of rearranging economic chairs based on genetic entitlement is hardly “Left” and can, at best, result in new elites who, like elites in bygone eras, view themselves to be entitled. A truly progressive movement would be seeking common ground among “the mice” in Douglas’ metaphor, using rational discussion with people as individuals without the ascription of collective identity. The NDP has evolved into a party of striped cats. •

Reference:

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