

# **Christian right sets up shop**

## **ANALYSIS / Welcome to post-SSM trench warfare**

Gareth Kirkby / Capital Xtra / Thursday, July 14, 2005

Something changed in Canada during the national debate over same-sex marriage. We now live in a new period of religious anger. Of extremist rhetoric. Of evangelical absolutism. Our community needs to get ready for US-style trench warfare as a new generation of religious Canadians start to flex their still weak, but growing, muscles in the public square.

A sleeping giant has been awoken by Canada's debate about same-sex civil marriage rights: the Christian right. Their engagement in the political arena threatens to change a lot in Canadian politics over the next generation. Perhaps - if we don't figure out how to deal with this - this emerging religious extremism will wreak the same havoc upon civil debate in this country as in the US, where religious extremists hijacked the Republican party and re-wrote the nation's agenda in biblical terms.

It's new for us. Canadian fundamentalists had largely disengaged from politics over the past two decades as they became increasingly alienated by the pluralistic and secular nature of Canada since the Charter Of Rights And Freedoms began playing its magical tune in our society. But the idea of gays getting to use the term "marriage" to describe their sinful relationships - well, that got their attention, and with it their voices, money and even bodies for demonstrations. And it also gained them the support of those US fundamentalists, who have been pouring money and resources into the Canadian fight.

Just 10 weeks ago, some 8,000 people converged on Parliament carrying signs trumpeting their religious beliefs and challenging the separation of church and state. Same-sex marriage for many of these extremists was proof that the decadent rot of city cores was threatening to spread outward to their suburbs, towns and farms and contaminate their holy families. It wasn't about equal rights at all, they insisted, it was about moving away from God and inviting His wrath to rain down upon this nation. Meanwhile, evangelicals and socially conservative Catholics organized to ensure their choice candidates won Conservative Party nominations in Nova Scotia and British Columbia.

Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper has reached out to social conservatives in other religious and in all minority communities. True, the vicious strategy has produced only mixed results: some Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and even Christian groups expressed outrage at Harper's assumptions that their cultures were homophobic; some groups even came out in public support of same-sex marriage, understanding that the same Charter that protects queers from discrimination also protects visible, cultural and religious minorities. While their response tempts me to a rendition of

Solidarity Forever, I'd be dreaming in technicolour. Fact is, Harper hit a chord of approval among bigots within minority cultures just as surely as he hits a chord with bigots within the dominant cultures. And maybe that's his real strategy: to split minority communities politically, to peel away social conservatives from their minority community's bloc vote for the Liberal and NDP parties.

There's more to the political fallout than a political re-alignment of minority communities. Focus On The Family, for example - the extremist "family values" organization headquartered in Colorado Springs, Colorado - poured millions of dollars into Canada in a blatant attempt to influence our political agenda by derailing Bill C-38. They set up shop on Parliament Hill for the duration of the bill's debate, and say they've now grown roots and will stay right there. And they're spending \$280,000 to create the Canadian Centre For Marriage And Family.

That's scary stuff for all of us who believe in the separation of church and state. But there's more: a new think-tank, one that its supporters hope will do for social conservatism what Vancouver's Fraser Institute did for economic conservatism and globalization. The Fraser Institute was viewed as wacky and extremist in its early days. Two decades later it's quoted almost daily in newspapers and sees its perspective enshrined in law and government policy throughout the nation.

"Canada's religious right is preparing to launch a social policy think-tank aimed at promoting traditionalist values that have been coaxed to the fore by the recent same-sex marriage debate," noted the Ottawa Citizen on May 26. The Institute For Canadian Values is backed by some of the most vigorous opponents of Bill C-38, charming people like Charles McVety, president of Canada Christian College, and Joseph Ben-Ami, formerly of the B'nai Brith, but now dedicated to putting us in our place.

In the last six months, we've seen the Evangelical Fellowship Of Canada organize a mass letter campaign to convince politicians to oppose Bill C-38. Perhaps you answered the phone one day to get a message instructing you to call your MP right away to try and stop the legislation? Ministers distorted the truth about the bill in their pulpit rhetoric. Bishops and priests instructed good Catholics to get active in opposing the legislation.

Christian conservatives are re-engaging in the political process. And many of them have found their leader in Tristan Emmanuel, an evangelical who founded, and now works full-time for, an organization called Equipping Christians For Public Life. Christians have too long concentrated on saving souls and ignoring the public square, he told the Globe and Mail Jun 13. Emmanuel believes that Jesus commands Christians to be politically engaged, "to focus on the next election."

He's not homophobic, he explains. But he does see homosexuals as "sexual

deviants." And, he says, "tolerance doesn't mean that we'll shut up, zip up and go away. And tolerance doesn't mean we'll stop being political and use the democratic process to gain the upper hand, influence society and see the dawn of civility return to America or Canada."

Charming. And a glimpse of the future. Just imagine how hard it will be to get through future legislation on issues important to gays and lesbians, bisexuals and trans people. How much harder will we have to work to put shackles on Customs to stop them from targetting our books and bookstores? How much more difficult will it be to amend the sex laws to fully legalize bathhouses and ensure our youth have the right to choose how and when they express their sexuality? How much more troublesome will it be to amend Bill C-2 in future to add better protection for artists and writers doing work about coming out?

Can you imagine the battle about to take shape over allowing prostitutes to safely practice their trade? Imagine how these people will react to the idea of trans rights and a discussion about the artificial gender lines that our society has drawn and policed. How about marijuana laws? And how long before they start pressuring for changes to abortion laws, such as removing it from the list of medical procedures covered by health care? I can hardly wait for their future battles to get more socially conservative judges on the Supreme Court Of Canada. And just imagine the rhetoric we'll encounter as we try and get gay curriculum content and anti-homophobia education in the public school system.

The landscape of Canadian debate is being re-engineered by social conservatives on a scale we haven't experienced here for decades. US groups are setting up shop here and Canadian groups are adopting US-style confrontational activism.

Truly, it bears asking: was Bill C-38 worth the pain we'll all face in the future? Not because we ought be afraid of political backlashes - that fear was the silent call of the closet, of shame, in past times. But because there's still lots to be accomplished, much that could have been accomplished without re-awakening this giant of religious reactionary politics. And now we may spend decades fighting rearguard actions against evangelicals and others who think they have a direct connection to what is Right and what is Wrong, thanks to personal conversations with their Gods.

They're here, they're angry, get used to it.