Adam Chapnick

Peace, order, and good government

The “conservative” tradition in Canadian foreign policy

“Values are at the heart of Canadian culture in the broad sense. And it is their values that deeply define Canadians—liberal values, of course.”

Pierre Pettigrew, Liberal MP, 1999

“This great Canadian mosaic, a non-nation-state, makes for a country that, in my view, reflects many of our liberal values.”

Pettigrew, Liberal minister of foreign affairs, 2004

The early 21st century has seen much of the Canadian public embrace what some scholars and policy practitioners are calling “the new liberalism.” A recent poll found that, when forced to choose among ideological labels, six

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in 10 Canadians self-identified as “small-l” liberal. This was twice the number that chose “small-c” conservative, and six times as many as selected socialist. The growing domestic consensus around liberal values is now significant enough, explains pollster Michael Marzolini, to justify the construction of a new national image. “Branding the [liberal] Canadian identity as unique and valuable,” he concludes, “could stimulate patriotism and connection.”

The increasingly popular concept of branding will be important to Canada, which has traditionally struggled to define itself both at home and abroad. Thanks to globalization and a revolution in information technology, it is now common for countries that lack distinguishing identities to adopt the persona of “brand states,” with geographical and political settings that seem trivial compared to their emotional resonance among an increasingly global audience of consumers.” Peter van Ham has argued reasonably that a state’s image and its international reputation have become “essential parts” of its “strategic equity.”

No longer content with the label of middle power, self-identified small-l liberal Canadian voters and government officials have begun to depict themselves and their country as proponents of what was known under the Mulroney Conservatives as the “new internationalism,” and is now commonly referred to as the “liberal internationalist” approach to world affairs. They claim, often with enthusiasm, that this uniquely Canadian style in external relations has been part of a national tradition dating back to the time of the Nobel Prize-winning Lester Pearson, if not earlier. “Concomitant with the [Canadian] liberal faith in freedom, equality and tolerance,” argues political scientist Erika Simpson, has been “a pervasive cultural belief in the ability of humans to find a compromise solution to all types of problems.” For approximately 60 years, Simpson seems to suggest, small-l liberal *domestic* values have remained liberal, and indeed Liberal, when transferred onto the international stage.

As much as Canadians might like to believe in a liberal tradition in foreign policy, and as much as it might help cement a place for Canada on the

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world stage as a compassionate or perhaps “model” citizen, it simply is not true historically. To suggest, as did Lester Pearson, that foreign policy is “after all, merely ‘domestic policy with its hat on,’” is overly simplistic. Admittedly, Canada’s Liberal party—an organization with a commitment to greater individual freedom on the domestic level—has dominated the federal political landscape since the mid-1930s, making it, arguably, “the most successful liberal regime of any country in the world.” On the international stage, however, Canada has had a much different history. The country’s so-called liberal internationalist values have hardly been liberal, or even Liberal. Rather, they have generally been reflective of the Tory underpinnings of a society founded on the principles of “peace, order, and good government.” There is indeed a tradition underlying the philosophy of Canadian external relations, but it is one derived primarily, although certainly not exclusively, from the values of conservatism. Today, as Canada becomes more liberal domestically, its foreign policy threatens to tilt the other way.

“Any complete description of Canadian political culture,” argue two political scientists in a widely used Canadian text, “would have to note the pervasive nature of liberalism, the commitment to democratic values and processes, the salience of federalism, the growing recognition of cultural diversity and the force of both Canadian and Québecois nationalism.” Small-l liberals believe that individuals are rational beings and that their sense of reason will eventually prevail over their emotional inclinations. This rationality, liberals maintain, and humankind’s ability to manage ill-conceived impulses, suggests that people are generally capable of looking after themselves. Liberals therefore promote and support individual freedom. They accept the need for a regulated political system “to keep order and protect an individual’s liberties from the coercion of other people,” but feel that government should be limited and accountable. This philosophy, argue

9 Gibbins and Youngman, Mindscapes, 29.
Canadian liberals, has formed the basis of government policy—both foreign and domestic—over the last 60 years.

Small-c conservatives are less confident in humankind's potential. They believe that emotion and irrational impulses are powerful and potentially destructive forces in society. Consequently, they feel comfortable granting states significant powers of intervention into the lives of their citizens. To conservatives, society must be understood as a collective whole, as opposed to the liberal "aggregation of individuals." They believe strongly in interdependence: all persons work and live together within a "natural hierarchy" which must remain relatively stable and controlled. Conservatives are cautious. They prefer order and evolution to radical change. Their governments behave practically, focusing on the possible as opposed to the ideal. Finally, conservatives presume that society is governed by an "objective moral order." To them, there is always a clear difference between right and wrong in human behaviour.¹⁰

In applying these definitions to traditional descriptions of so-called liberal internationalism, one cannot help but be struck by its ironically and blatantly conservative overtones. Political scientists David Dewitt and John Kirton, for example, have explained that to "liberal-internationalist authors," Canada's conduct in the world can be characterized as "a constant co-operative endeavour to enhance universal values through the steady development of a more institutionalized and just international order." "Under a liberal-internationalist perspective," they add, "Canada is guided by a commitment to a stable framework in which great powers, as full and unquestioned members, are allowed to play their special role.... This view of world order transformation—reformation—implies gradual, discretionary improvement in existing regimes and organizations while limiting more extensive change to areas where order remains undefined."¹¹ "Order," another academic has noted, "is a conservative value and middle-power internationalism is certainly about order."¹² Canada, he claims elsewhere, is by nature "a status quo power," better served by gradual change within the international system.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., 57-59.
¹¹ David B. Dewitt and John J. Kirton, Canada as a Principal Power (Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, 1983), 22, 27. Italics added.
During the golden age of what he terms "liberal internationalism," journalist and commentator Andrew Cohen explains that Canadian civil servants were taught to conduct themselves with "restraint, equilibrium, and moderation."[^14] Historian Norman Hillmer has gone further. "The post-1945 politicians and diplomats," he has maintained, "were practical and pragmatic, their goals moderate, their internationalism cautious, sometimes even reluctant."[^15] In 1986, a special joint committee of the senate and the house of commons reflected on how Canadians insisted on maintaining a strong role for a floundering United Nations in the international system as "a necessary foundation for international order." "Central to our concept of constructive internationalism," it concluded, "is an acceptance that means are limited and that careful and deliberate choices must be made about the timing, the kind and the degree of international action."[^16] Caution, collectivism, and international order: these have been the hallmarks of Canada's foreign policy tradition.

There is significant historical evidence to support the contention that Canadian foreign policy has generally been characterized by conservatism, particularly during the golden, or Pearsonian, era of the 1940s through the 1960s. Canada's functional principle is the most obvious example. Under Prime Minister Mackenzie King, Canadians argued that non-great power states should receive influence in the international system commensurate with their capabilities on an issue-by-issue basis. As for the great powers, they were entitled to influence all of the time. In the 1940s, Canada's foreign service officers, with Lester Pearson prominent among them, were active and complicit in establishing a permanent hierarchy in the new international system.[^17]

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[^16]: Special joint committee of the senate and of the house of commons on Canada's international relations, "Independence and internationalism," 27 May 1986, 18, 139.

The Canadian middle power argument, which emerged at much the same time, was no different. In seeking to differentiate the medium-sized powers from the small and the great, the Department of External Affairs once again sought to superimpose “a three-step hierarchy” on United Nations institutions responsible for security.

In 1948, as the reins of foreign policy were passed from King to Louis St. Laurent, Canada participated in a debate over the United Nations declaration of human rights. The Canadian approach was characterized not by excitement, but rather by caution. Historian John English reports that “Canada’s hesitations [to support the declaration] were broadly based, deeply felt, and widely shared within the Canadian bureaucracy.”

In 1950, the government in Ottawa hesitated again before investing a small amount of money in the Colombo plan, Canada’s first venture into foreign aid. Under John Diefenbaker, Canada was reluctant to commit to a peacekeeping mission in the Congo. During Pearson’s time in office, it hesitated again before agreeing to go to Cyprus. Ernie Keenes has similarly pointed out inconsistencies in the so-called liberal internationalist approach to Canadian foreign economic policy.

While these brief examples are unquestionably selective, they are consistent with the more general observations of Andrew Cooper in his comprehensive summary of Canadian foreign policy in the post-World War II period. After the war, he writes, “Canada chose to direct the bulk of its activities towards the art of the possible.” The Canadian diplomats’ “defence of order reflected a sensible conservatism based on the fear of mounting dangers.” On the whole, he concludes that since 1945, “Canadian governments have traditionally subordinated ‘reform’ and ‘equity’ to ‘order’ and ‘stability’ in the international system.”

Even if foreign policy is not just “domestic policy with its hat on,” these political decisions still relate to the situation at home. The links, however,


20 Andrew F. Cooper, Canadian Foreign Policy: Old Habits and New Directions (Toronto: Prentice Hall, 1997), 36, 80, 101.
predate the federal government's more liberal domestic policies of the 1930s and beyond. Rather, they connect back to what sociologists have referred to consistently as Canadian society's "Tory touch." In his classic 1965 analysis of social class and power in Canada, John Porter concluded that "[t]he most significant characteristic of the two parties which have held power at the national level in Canada is the fact that they share the same conservative values." Three years later, when Gad Horowitz analyzed the role of labour in Canadian politics, he did not deny that liberalism was "the dominant element in English-Canadian political culture," but he also insisted that there was "a touch of toryism" in English-Canada, stemming largely from a political system in which parties strove "mightily to build a façade of unity on all contentious issues and to avoid public disagreement like the plague."

Some analysts have interpreted that same Toryism as a product of Canada's historical need to differentiate itself from America. While liberalism flourished in what became the United States during the American Revolution, the Canadians, as Frank Underhill once said, "made the great refusal." They chose to stay loyal to Great Britain, and grew proud of that loyalty. Since America declared itself the land of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, Canada had to become something else. What resulted was what political scientist David Bell has called a "unique brand of conservative liberalism."

According to Seymour Martin Lipset, again thanks to their rejection of the American Revolution, Canadians adopted a different organizing principle. It was "Tory and conservative in the British and European sense—accepting of the need for a strong state, for respect for authority, for deference—and endorsed by hierarchically organized religions that supported and were supported by the state." The Canadian preference for international negotiation

22 Gad Horowitz, Canadian Labour in Politics (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), 19, 46.
and compromise—two characteristics often championed by liberal internationalists—stems, according to Lipset, from the country’s Tory traditions.

More than just a product of tradition, the conservatism evident in Canadian foreign policy has also been learned. It derives from what political scientist Denis Stairs has aptly called the “conventional processes of political socialization from the practice of politics in their domestic environment.” “Its ultimate origin,” he concludes, “lies in the application of the basic principles of liberalism to the governance of a polity composed of too few people, of too heterogeneous a composition, living in a space too large, with a topography too varied.”

A political philosophy of liberalism in a country like Canada, he explains, results in leaders who are wedded to brokerage politics, an approach to decision-making which manifests itself most clearly on the international stage. The part of the Canadian pluralist tradition that includes “the tactical importance of preserving freedom of manoeuvre” has indeed led to greater freedom for individuals at home. Internationally, however, it has translated into a policy of limited commitments—and at times almost blind devotion—to strong international institutions and general weariness towards potentially disruptive worldwide initiatives.

The history of conservatism in Canadian external relations has been obscured at least in part by a parallel tradition of liberal rhetoric in articulations of foreign policy. This outspoken governmental commitment to progress and freedom is often referred to as the national “voluntarist tradition.” Canadians, Thomas Hockin has suggested, “have been more attracted by the opportunities to forge moral principles into international relations.” They have “a tremendous faith in the possible results of sensitivity, goodwill, good intentions and hard work.”

Nevertheless, the tradition of moral concern has rarely translated into actual foreign policy activity.

Again, there is ample historical evidence to support the suggestion that Canadian foreign policy has had noble—and often liberal—intentions. Mackenzie King’s comments to the house of commons in 1944, for example, introduced parliament to what is known today as human security.

26 Stairs, “The political culture of Canadian foreign policy,” 685.


“Real security,” he said, “requires international action and organization in many other fields—in social welfare, in trade, in technical progress, in transportation, and in economic development.” Under Louis St. Laurent, Canadian negotiators ensured that the charter of what became the North Atlantic Treaty Organization included an article that promoted greater and more open cultural and economic ties among its members. About a decade later, John Diefenbaker was the only white Commonwealth leader to speak out firmly against apartheid in South Africa. In 1965, Prime Minister Lester Pearson boldly criticized the Johnson administration’s policy in Vietnam. Under Pierre Trudeau, the government in Ottawa launched the Canadian International Development Agency and strove to fulfill Pearson’s goal of allocating 0.7 percent of Canada’s GDP to foreign aid. “Moral principles mattered,” explains historian John English. “There was a moralistic and idealistic strain in the Liberal tradition.”

As sincere as it might have been, the rhetoric rarely led to concrete action or results. In his memoirs, Mackenzie King’s close military advisor (and admitted Tory), Maurice Pope, explained how he had come to respect a prime minister whose government was “more truly conservative than the one of that name he had defeated in 1935.” In practice, Canadians hardly supported NATO’s article 2 in the organization’s early years. Even after his public remarks helped force South Africa from the Commonwealth, John Diefenbaker refused to condone economic sanctions against the apartheid regime, elected not to cancel the Canada-South Africa trade agreement of 1932, and allowed the sale of military supplies to South Africa to continue.


After he criticized Johnson's Vietnam policy, Lester Pearson continued to allow Canada to contribute to the war indirectly by supplying the United States with military equipment through the defence production sharing agreement. Finally, in spite of his initial focus on international financial and humanitarian assistance, by the end of his time in office, Pierre Trudeau's dollar commitment to foreign aid had declined dramatically (thanks largely to financial problems at home). Canada has never reached the target of 0.7 percent of GDP.

The economic challenges of the 1970s and 1980s took place during a period of great liberal domestic achievements, highlighted by the establishment of the charter of rights and freedoms in 1982. The charter took power away from the Canadian state and made all levels of government more accountable for their actions. For individuals, it was emotionally empowering and might well have contributed to a greater desire among the general public for more direct influence in external affairs. For the state, it accelerated the end of formal discrimination in the workforce; it likely helped make abortion more accessible; and, more recently, it has facilitated the recognition of gay marriage.

In the midst of these changes, the rhetoric of liberal internationalism also reached new heights. In reflecting on the 1986 parliamentary foreign policy review, co-chairs Senator Jean-Maurice Simard and MP Tom Hockin called their 11-month consultation with the Canadian public "an exercise in participatory democracy." "Issues of war and peace, trade, development, and human rights," they declared, were "no longer the exclusive preserve of a small elite." Canadian foreign policy was to be "guided by an approach based on constructive internationalism." "In an interdependent world," they argued, "international responsibilities should be interwoven with Canada's basic national aims." 35

In 1992, Conservative Foreign Minister Barbara McDougall labelled this approach to world affairs the "new internationalism." In what was now the post–Cold War era, global and regional security issues could not be separated from the domestic realm; "viable structures for the preservation of peace" had become dependent on "an understanding of, and respect for,
human rights and democratic principles." In their analysis of what they called this “good governance initiative,” Paul Gecelovsky and Tom Keating branded the policy “liberal internationalism, Conservative-style.”

In 1993, the Chrétien Liberals replaced the Conservatives and set out to remodel Canadian foreign policy in a distinctly Liberal and, by implication, liberal image. In an essay written after he had retired from public office, Lloyd Axworthy, who served as Canada’s most outspoken foreign minister in a generation between 1995 and 2000, explained that it was “a unique liberal task to help write the primer on global citizenship.” Under the Liberals, he argued in another essay, foreign policy had undergone an “internationalization of conscience,” made possible by the integration of non-state actors into the policy process. The current foreign minister, Pierre Pettigrew, also has recently discussed Canada’s approach to world affairs in the context of Canadian “liberal values” and the “small-l liberal ideology [that has] shaped Canada since its inception.”

Internationalist accounts of Canadian foreign policy from the 1980s through today have described an emergence, or perhaps a re-emergence, of an approach to international affairs characterized by a commitment to individual rights, multilateralism, and a faith in fundamental liberal principles such as pluralism, freedom, and equality. They have generally fused capital-l Liberal government policy with small-l liberal ideology to portray Canada as a proactive, concerned global citizen. Most importantly, they have linked liberal policies at home to a liberal internationalist approach abroad.

40 Pettigrew, speech at the 2004 Scotiabank-AUCC Awards for Excellence in Education.
Recent critiques make it clear, however, that the alleged idealism, and by implication liberalism, have been “as much convention as committed.” Moreover, as Canada has become increasingly liberal at home, the internationalist rhetoric has begun to translate into a more radical, almost messianic, conservatism, what the former ambassador to the United States, Allan Gotlieb, recently called “a missionary impulse which drives us to export our values to the less fortunate peoples of the world.”

In 2003, Andrew Cohen’s *While Canada Slept* looked past the idealistic rhetoric to point out the self-interested, cautious nature of Canadian foreign policy. Canada served as a peacekeeper to build up its own self-image, not to save the world. It tied foreign aid to national economic development, as opposed to focusing on the needs of developing countries. And it cut funding to its military while at the same time boasting of its important contribution to the maintenance of international order. Certainly, there remained a “streak of moralism” in Canadian foreign policy, but it was an empty streak, reflective of a country that was losing its place in the world. Cohen’s analysis exaggerated the impact of liberal beliefs in the early Cold War period, but it is difficult to dispute his depiction of the conservatism of the present day.

Even less cynical analysts have admitted (perhaps inadvertently) that the Canadian approach to international affairs is, and has been, more conservative than liberal. Oxford academic Jennifer Welsh has recently noted “three disturbing truths about Canada”: Canadian leaders avoid firm international stances, they articulate their approach to world affairs cautiously, and they shun active leadership in world affairs. Welsh also discusses Canada’s “traditional preference for moderation” in foreign policy and its “inherently conservative” approach to external relations. In spite of what she calls Canada’s “moral obligation to the world” and Canadians’ ability to serve as model citizens in the

41 Cooper, *Canadian Foreign Policy*, 102.


43 Cohen, *While Canada Slept*, 159.

44 As Denis Stairs has explained: “The ‘internationalists’ inside the foreign service in the 1940s and 1950s shared little of the unbridled faith in progress that inspires so many of their counterparts outside the foreign service today.” Quoted in Stairs, “Liberalism, Methodism and statecraft,” 680.

international community, she cannot but concede implicitly that to do so would require Canada to abandon its conservative roots.

The more critical have gone much further, focusing primarily on a shift in pronouncements of the Canadian role in the world from a prior emphasis on peace and order to one on good governance. In the Mulroney era, Gecelovsky and Keating explain, the Canadian government began to assert “both the right and responsibility of external agents to intervene to protect or restore specific political and economic practices.”

Essentially, suggests Stairs, Canadians began “to think of themselves [more and more] not as others are, but as morally superior. They believe, in particular, that they subscribe to a distinctive set of values—‘Canadian’ values—and that those values are special in the sense of being unusually virtuous.”

A recent position paper by Kim Richard Nossal for the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute has made the point most clearly:

Among the many values the government in Ottawa claims to be championing abroad are the values of liberalism. But the government trumpets this without the [slight] hint of irony, ignoring the fact that presuming to tell others how to live their lives is deeply illiberal... since it involves Western governments and international financial institutions telling others how they must...organize their communities.... The irony, of course, is that Canadians themselves tend to despise such paternalistic and imperialistic practices when they observe [them] in others.

Nossal goes on to suggest that this approach to Canadian foreign policy is new, and represents a departure from its liberal tradition. And indeed, 1986’s “Independence and internationalism” did conclude that “Canada is not—and should not be—in the business of exporting its own

institutions." Nevertheless, it would be more accurate to suggest that contemporary articulations of Canadian foreign policy are encouraging a move away from the country's traditional conservative roots to a more radical conservatism, with potentially disturbing implications. From an emphasis on the conservative values of caution, moderation, and respect for collective order, Canadian rhetoric has become more enamoured with the equally conservative belief in the existence of a moral hierarchy and in the right of governing powers to intervene aggressively to control states and societies that cannot always be trusted to manage themselves effectively.

Conservative or illiberal, the new rhetoric need not necessarily cause such significant alarm. Both history and current public opinion polls suggest strongly that the less aggressive form of the Canadian conservative tradition in external affairs is likely too strong to be altered in any meaningful way. William Hogg's recent analysis of the various Canadian foreign policy reviews of the last 60 years has shown that "[i]n essence, foreign policy in Canada does not change, even when international and domestic contexts do." Stairs has explained why: "What governments do in foreign policy is a function of not only how they think and what they prefer, but also of the conditions they face. That being so, we are often treated (perhaps more often than we would like to admit) to similar strokes from different folks."

In spite of Canadians' openness to a more liberal society at home, the national political culture has remained conservative in its approach to the situation abroad. In 2001, Ipsos-Reid pollster Darrell Bricker and Globe and Mail columnist Edward Greenspon concluded that "the Tory streak that runs through the centre of most Canadians constitutes a dominant national trait.... The classic Tory principles of peace, order, and good government continue to resonate." A 2004 poll conducted by POLLARA for the

49 "Independence and Internationalism," 104.
Canadian Institute of International Affairs suggested that, even in the midst of apparently increasing interest in world affairs, “domestic matters such as the state of health care or the omnipresent sponsorship scandal overshadowed Canada’s attention to international relations.” Another 2004 survey, this one prepared by the Innovative Research Group and co-commissioned by the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute and the Dominion Institute, found that 81 percent of Canadians felt that it was “wrong for any country, even Canada, to push its values on other countries.” Moreover, in spite of an increasingly strong preference for active participation in world affairs, Canadians still “do not appear to be prepared to sacrifice domestic priorities for the greater international good.”

Two analysts have recently offered explanations for the apparent contradiction. One suggests that Canada is home to “two distinct strategic cultures.” The first is generally idealistic, and has helped shape “the liberal internationalist image of Canada.” The second is more cautious, rational, and perhaps even conservative. Another commentator argues that Canadians have “a split personality.” They advocate both “realist and romantic approaches” to foreign policy.

The reality is likely more complicated, but less inconsistent. Canadian rhetoric in world affairs is reflective of the national image. It represents the rather naive belief that liberal policies at home must have necessarily translated into liberal internationalism abroad. Furthermore, Canadian value-laden pronouncements in external affairs have never been meant to be taken entirely seriously. As Lester Pearson explained in his memoirs, at times, Canadian internationalism is “less a call to action than a prayerful and undemanding expression of our idealism and our hopes, a kind of satisfying ritual like the automatic repetition of the Lord’s Prayer.” His explanation is consistent with the findings of another POLLARA poll, published in 2003. The survey found that only one third of Canadians genuinely

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57 Pearson, quoted in English, “A fine romance,” in Donaghy, ed., Canada and the Early Cold War, 86.
believed “that people in general feel a sense of community with others—most believe they are only out for themselves.”\textsuperscript{58} Throughout history, when faced with the choice between what Henry Angus once called “peace plus sovereignty” or “peace plus international justice,”\textsuperscript{59} Canadians have always made the conservative choice. When genuine, immediate national interests are at stake, justice—it seems—can be someone else’s responsibility.

This conclusion does not necessarily condemn the Canadian role in the world to irrelevance, nor does it support the contention that Canadians are a mean-spirited people. Rather, as Angus proposed in 1934:

> Perhaps a defence of inaction can be found without exposing Canadians to the accusation of hypocrisy, if they are intelligent, or self-deception, if they are stupid. A line which is fine but clear can be drawn between hypocrisy and reluctance to abandon ideals the moment one realizes that it is impossible to live up to them.... Hypocrisy begins only if Canadians defend, on grounds of high morality, a policy of drift which is dictated by political necessity.\textsuperscript{60}

There is nothing inherently wrong with Canada’s conservative tradition in foreign policy. The country is small, wealthy, and relatively safe. It is distinguished by a particularly diverse citizenry that encourages a brokerage politics approach to national governance. While such a political culture discourages ambitious international leadership, it does permit pragmatic and effective contributions to world affairs. At the same time, the national domestic scene is undergoing a profound period of liberalization and it has become increasingly tempting to speak of exporting these “Canadian values” abroad. Such efforts to brand Canada as “liberal-internationalist” misrepresent the Canadian past—as well as liberal-internationalism itself—for the sole purpose of inflating national pride. They are dangerous, worrisome, and invite a shift towards a new type of conservatism that is more unCanadian than anything that has come before it.

\textsuperscript{58} Marzoloni, “Polling alone,” in Aster and Axworthy, eds., \textit{Searching for the New Liberalism}, 96.


\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 272.