

NOT FOR THE FAINT-HEARTED

Reflections on Canada's Election 2000

by Johan D.Tangelder.

On November 27, 2000, Canada's Liberal Party won its third consecutive election with its main strength coming from Ontario and Quebec. The vote splitting between the two parties to the right was a major factor in the huge Liberal win. The new Canadian Alliance became the official opposition with a strong Western based support. The Conservative and New Democratic Party barely managed to keep their official party standing. The Bloc Quebecois lost six seats to the Liberals. The results of the election left the country fractured, further increasing its balkanization.

As I reflected on the election campaign and its results, a sermon by Dr. D.M. Lloyd Jones came to mind, which he preached at the 1953 International Reformed Congress held in France. The text of his sermon was 1 Samuel 5:1-4, the story of the idol Dagon falling upon its face before the ark of the Lord. Our covenant God humbled and humiliated the god of the Philistines. In applying the story to the 20th century Jones said that he saw nothing except evidence of God humbling and humiliating our gods. One of the gods is the god of politics, the belief in the ability of men, by means of legislation, to solve our problems. Jones observed that with all our politics, and our international conferences, and all our other efforts and arrangements, we obviously and clearly are failing to solve the problems of mankind on the national or on the international level. And he noted, "our politicians, whom we tended to worship in the last century, have become discredited in the eyes of the masses of the people." Jones' observation has not lost its relevance. The November election campaign was negative, fractious, disgraceful, an exercise in cynicism and irrelevance, and appealed to the lowest common denominator. It further eroded the already tottering faith in the political system.

Many Canadians have lost confidence in politics and politicians. They heard how the Liberal party dispensed favors of one kind or another; patronage appointments of senators, judgeships, appointments to boards and commissions. And nothing can shake the electorate's belief in honesty, and integrity, and in principles, as to see politicians change their opinions without apparent reason in the rush

to obtain power. There are few countries in the world where one can reach a leading political function without the use of elbows. Canada is no exception. This election campaign was not for the faint-hearted. Prime Minister Chretien's campaign was a raw demonstration of "Machiavellian" politics, the conducting of politics entirely as though there were no other factors involved besides hanging on to power. Of course, the possession of power is not entirely negative. The power of persuasion is needed to govern. However, Chretien gave the impression that he was more concerned about personal power and party advantage than about principles.

Corruption

Voters are bribed with their own money. Balancing the budget was a normal practice until the liberal politicians discovered the political magic of winning votes with giveaways without losing votes with consequent tax increases. The months before the election became the liberal hour, promises for financial assistance came flowing in abandon. Accusations of financial ineptitude flew daily in the House of Commons prior to the election call. The allegations of the most troubling financial improprieties were centered in the Prime Minister's own riding. Chretien has been directly related to the Human Resources Development (HRDC) grants scandal. The *National Report* (Nov. 20, 2000) noted that companies in his riding received \$ 8.5 million in HRDC funding since 1996, a figure that exceeded all HRDC grants distributed in the three Prairie provinces in the same period. The case has been well documented. Chretien apparently thought there was nothing wrong with asking the head of the Business Development Bank to lend hundreds of thousands of taxpayers money to a constituent, who is a convicted criminal with a dismal business record. But the *National Report* also stated that "voters know Prime Minister Chretien practices large-scale graft, but they may not care." The election results showed that many voters didn't care. A sad commentary on the moral state of our nation. Regretfully, Chretien doesn't accept any responsibility for his inappropriate actions. Winston Churchill once remarked that there is no excuse for political leaders who fall short of their duty. And he said, "It is much better for parties or politicians to be turned out of office than to imperil the life of the nation."

Chretien is not the first Canadian prime minister to be tainted by scandals. But Canada's first prime minister, Sir John MacDonald, and his government accepted responsibility for their actions after it

had been revealed that the Conservative party had accepted election funds from the men who had obtained the charter to build the Canadian Pacific Railway. The government resigned in 1873. MacDonald returned to power in 1878.

Canada's New Culture of Disrespect

No Canadian can feel good about the election. The Prime Minister of Canada debased himself with his disgraceful, fear-mongering, name-calling, mud-slinging, negative campaign. He compared Stockwell Day, the Canadian Alliance leader, to a crooked car dealer "who has two sets of books." Canada's foremost abortionist, Dr. Henry Morgentaler, a Liberal supporter, warned Canadians that Day cannot be trusted. He accused Day of having a "hidden agenda" to ban abortion (based on Day's 1995 comment that abortion is wrong even in cases of rape or incest). Elinor Caplan, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, demeaned herself with her vitriolic and insulting charge that the Alliance was supported by "Holocaust deniers, prominent bigots and racists." Alexa McDonough, the leader of the New Democratic Party, was in the same negative league as the Liberals when she compared Day to a cockroach.

Canada takes pride in its tolerance, freedom of speech, and its readiness to welcome as new citizens people from every tribe and nation. But the election campaign 2000 revealed that a new and troubled phase in Canadian history has begun - **the culture of disrespect**. This movement has gone from benign neglect of Christian ideas to active opposition, hostility and discrimination, as witnessed in the academia, the business world, and the government. Orthodox Christianity, with its transcendent truth claims, is considered a threat to tolerance and stability. Ian S. Markham, who teaches theology at the University of Exeter, England, observes that contemporary threats to plurality do not come from religion but from secularism. He states, "The secularist, who has given up the quest for truth and therefore moral debate and rational dialogue, is the greatest danger to tolerance." The smear campaign and the vicious attacks against Day's Pentecostal beliefs proves him right. Norman Spector, former chief of staff to Conservative prime minister Brian Mulroney, wrote in a *Globe Mail* article that the Canadian Alliance made a fundamental error in selecting Stockwell Day. The error? Not that he is a Christian or that he is religious; "it is that his brand of Christianity creates a discomfort level with mainstream Canadians.

Moreover, Day's public record in Alberta shows that he acts on his beliefs." In other words, secular fundamentalists do not trust religion when people take it seriously. But they may act on their worldly religion, a system based on the controlling belief that nothing transcends this world and that people bear no responsibility to higher authority. The secular agenda then may be pushed through legislation, but evangelical Christians must hide their views in the closet, well removed from politics, science, and serious philosophy. They are even expected to be "tolerant" and "civil" about being gagged in public life. But any religion that is forced to become private is forced to become irrelevant. Times have changed. In recent history Canadians had no problem accepting church going politicians. For example, for many years the NDP, Canada's socialist party, was led by Tommy Douglas (1904-1986) He was an ordained Baptist minister until the end of his life. He kept his place on the reserve list of ministers at the Calgary headquarters of the Western Baptist Union.

Bitter criticism of opponents is not a modern phenomenon. The invective poured on Dr. Abraham Kuyper by the Dutch liberal establishment knew no bounds. The liberal aristocrat H. de Beaufort called Kuyper: "A vulgar rabble-rouser, a uniquely shameless fanatic, a devil's brew of vanity and capriciousness, a journalist and chatterer, an irresponsible party man, a would-be dictator, a poser, a sermonizer, an opera singer." But Kuyper and his Christian Anti-Revolutionary Party stayed the course. Although the political vitriol has changed little, Christians are no longer given a public voice. In Canada Christian views proclaimed and advocated in public are treated with disrespect or outright opposition. Secular fundamentalists are convinced that the Christian religion is either irrelevant or harmful to the cohesion of social order. The Toronto establishment branded Day as a vulgar creationist. John Loring declared in a *National Post* article that the Alliance leader's stance on creationism was in conflict with scientists. He was concerned about Day's lobbying for provincial (Alberta) funding for Christian schools that reject the teaching of evolution. He implied that Day's creationist's approach on the federal level may threaten "the funding of academic research in a broad way of disciplines, including biology, genetics and other fields that trace their origins back to Darwin." In other words, Darwinists presume their view of origins is beyond debate. They think that orthodox Christians are heretics and infidels in their refusal to surrender to the modern mindset. Believers in divine creation are looked upon as dinosaurs, on the same level as the flat earth society.

Television

Television has become the chief method of presenting political ideals. But it kills political knowledge and debate. It doesn't call one's attention to ideas, which are abstract and often complex, but to personalities. The success of the TV leadership debates between the five party leaders hinged on the quick sound-bite and retort. Party policies were not discussed. There was a lot of posturing but no content. TV manipulates. It makes the viewer think that he knows because his eyes have seen it. But what he sees is an the image of a politician an advertiser has decided we should see. Thirty-second political commercials which use visual imagery don't inform. They market a candidate. They call for an emotional response. Some people look good on TV, others don't. It has nothing to do with someone's character. Neil Postman observed that "in the world of television and other visual media, 'political knowledge' means having pictures in your head more than having words."

The media have done an incredibly poor job in fairly reporting the positions of the political parties. Secular newspapers journalists revelled in fear-mongering, smearing the Alliance in any way possible. Canada's so-called neutral national taxpayers-supported CBC TV and radio excelled in obnoxious anti-Alliance bias. It took upon itself to determine which religious beliefs render candidates suitable for office. The CBC ridiculed Day's version of creationism. In the eyes of the CBC, Day is unfit to lead the nation because of his beliefs. But the beliefs of the Muslim, Sikh or Jewish candidates were not interrogated. Chretien's and Joe Clark's versions of Roman Catholicism were not scrutinized.

Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

The anti-Christian statements expressed by electoral candidates concerning the beliefs of Day are a matter of grave concern for all evangelical and Reformed Christians. In response to the attacks on Day's beliefs, Gary Walsh, president of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC), declared that although the EFC takes no partisan position, it cannot "ignore the blatant bias of some journalists and even some politicians in denigrating the leader of the Canadian Alliance because of his faith commitments." Walsh also remarked that when a prominent Liberal candidate, such as Hedy Fry, challenges the statement of fundamental belief, "Jesus is Lord," as a statement of religious intolerance, it

relegates evangelical faith and indeed, the faith of a majority of Canadians, to the margins of society. “This statement is central to our faith,” argues Walsh. “To restrict it from the public square flies in the face of all our guarantees of freedom of religion and expression found in the Charter and human rights legislation.”

A Compelling Vision

Throughout the campaign no candidate of Canada’s major political parties offered a compelling vision of new directions for the country. Instead of trying to focus on ideals, they appealed to the fears and anxieties of Canadians, and ultimately to the state of their pocket books. Elaine Storkey, director of the Institute for Contemporary Christianity in London, England, points out that politicians have become part of our consumer culture, selling themselves, their party, and their brand image, carrying out opinion surveys to find out what voters want and thereby offering a largely distress-relieving choice, not vastly different from the choice of detergents in the local store. But this lack of vision presents a tremendous challenge for Christians. We need to state clearly that the Triune God is sovereign. He still speaks. He cannot be silenced. Why should we not express righteous anger and engage ourselves in battles against the secularization of society? I believe we should. We must not allow secularists to set our agenda regarding our faith and actions.

When Abraham Kuyper addressed the First Christian Social Congress in the Netherlands in 1891, he set out with the basic question: “What should we, as confessors of Christ, do about the social needs of our time?” He sought to apply the Calvinist principle of *semper reformanda* to the public square. He offered a vision to his nation. Although we live in a different time and nation, the vision has not lost its relevance. Politics, government, education, science, art, and the stewardship of the environment should be continually scrutinized and brought into line with the teachings of Scripture. We must also discuss the family, the homeless, poverty, the lack of an abortion law, euthanasia, genetic engineering, pornography, capital punishment, defense and foreign policy. Christian politicians should also state clearly that human beings are more than consumers. They are God’s unique image bearers. The Bible is still our window on God’s world, it calls us to bow obediently to its full authority in every sphere of life. Christians can make a difference through humble submission to the inerrant Scriptures and

an obedient, godly lifestyle.

As responsible Christian citizens we ought to engage ourselves in politics, yet we must constantly remind ourselves that we are pilgrims and strangers here on earth. We are seeking justice and healing in a fallen world, but a perfect world won't come until the Lord comes in glory. Then and only then will the "god of politics" - in whom so many put their sole trust - be publicly judged and humbled by the living God.

We may be dismayed about Canadian politics and politicians, but we should still support our leaders in prayer. The apostle Paul told Christians living under the rule of the evil emperor Nero, persecutor of Christians, "I urge.. that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone - for kings and all those in authority, that we may live quiet and peaceful lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Tim.2: 1,2). We don't have to affirm the program of the party in power or its leaders when we remember the latter in prayer.