

Neo-Conservatism, Neo-Liberalism and Canadian Social Policy

Challenges for Feminism

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This paper examines the growing influence of religious-based social conservatives on Canadian public policy. The increased influence of social conservatism poses new and formidable challenges to the formation of social policy, to gender equality goals and to feminist organizing. The paper argues that this trend has to be understood within the context of the political projects of both neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism, with the two operating in important respects in mutually supportive and symbiotic ways. It is important for feminists to come to a better understanding of how neo-conservatism has worked in tandem with neo-liberalism and what it means for the most marginalized communities. I conclude by arguing for the importance for feminist organizing to start from and address these and other marginalized communities, as well as to understand the links between neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism and what it means for gender relations.

Ce texte examine l'influence grandissante du conformisme à base religieuse sur les politiques au Canada. L'émergence de ce conservatisme social pose de nouveaux et sérieux défis à la formation d'une politique sociale, à l'égalité des sexes, à l'organisation féministe. Ce texte soutient que cette tendance doit être comprise dans un contexte de politiques à la fois néolibérales et néoconservatrices, deux mouvements dont les vues sont en symbiose et mutuellement solidaires. Les femmes se doivent de savoir que les néoconservateurs ont travaillé en tandem avec les néolibéraux et ce que cela signifie pour la plupart des communautés marginalisées. L'auteure ajoute que la cellule familiale doit être en lien avec le projet néolibéral qui favorise une base élargie pour les classes sociales. Alors que le gouvernement Harper parle d'un programme de « soutien aux familles », au même moment, plus concrètement, les politiques introduites rendent plus difficile le maintien des familles et des communautés au bas de l'échelle, notamment les mères célibataires, les minorités visibles et les émigrantes récentes. Je termine en enjoignant les organismes féministes de démarrer

leur tâche parmi ces groupes sociaux et autres communautés marginalisées, d'expliquer les liens entre le néolibéralisme et le néoconservatisme et ce que veut dire les rapports genrés.

Since the election of Stephen Harper's Conservative government in January 2006, neo-conservatives associated with the religious right have acquired new prominence and influence. The inclusion of a strong social conservative presence as part of the coalition that brought and sustains the Harper government in power has resulted not only in government support for a pro-business agenda, but also, to an unprecedented degree, the putting forward of social or neo-conservative goals. This includes strong support for traditional family structures, opposition to abortion and family planning, and getting tough on crime. Reflecting this influence, a wide-ranging series of measures touching on everything from reproductive rights to the counting of unpaid labour, pay equity to missing aboriginal women have significantly impacted women's rights, political voice and representation, and services for women. These developments pose new and formidable challenges to the formation of social policy, to gender equality goals and to feminist organizing.

In this article, I first outline the growing influence of the religious right within the Harper government and the policy community more generally. Secondly, I discuss a range of measures that have been introduced that both reflect this neo-conservative agenda, and more generally, that erode women's gains. Thirdly, I raise some conceptual questions, entering into the discussion about how we are to understand and interpret these changes. The major point of departure here is to examine the relationship between neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism, looking, in particular, at how it has been discussed in the feminist literature. Neo-liberalism, as has been extensively discussed, is essentially a market-based political ideology; one that

emphasizes reduced government intervention, free market forces, individual responsibility, and the extension of global capitalist relations. This is the agenda that has predominated globally for the last 30 years and has been followed, more or less, by Canadian governments since the 1980s. Neo-conservatism, on the other hand, has goals that appear somewhat in contradiction to those of neo-liberalism: it emphasizes social order, morality, traditional family structures, and (in contra-distinction to neo-liberalism's emphasis on reduced state involvement), a strong role for the state in upholding a particular moral and social order both through its support for religion and traditional family structures, and in a more coercive way, through its emphasis on law and order and the strong arm of the state.¹ It, too, has been present as an element within Canadian politics since the 1980s, but with the Harper government has gained much greater prominence and influence. The Harper government then contains elements of both a neo-liberal and a neo-conservative agenda. Understanding how these elements come together and where gender relations and women's organizing fit in relation to these trends is critical to understanding the challenges for feminist organizing in the current context.

There are three arguments that I draw out with respect to the relationship between neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism and its implications for feminist organizing and for understanding social policy developments under the Harper government. These are initial lines of inquiry indicating future areas of investigation. First, there has been a tendency within feminist literature to view neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism in terms of competing ideological discourses, or to focus on political subjectivities in order to understand the significance and the relationship between the two. While this discussion has been an important one, I would argue that we need to both understand women's lives and the material conditions that anchor those ideological discourses, and to bring in further the *politics* of the situation. This would involve looking at the relationship between neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism as *political projects*,² understood as projects taking place globally (though constituted through particular national and local coalitions with diverse national manifestations), grounded in the "messy actualities" of material life, and in particular, looking at the gendered, classed, racialized and ethnic dimensions of that politics. Secondly I emphasize the centrality of family and gender to the political projects of both neo-liberals and neo-conservatives, and as key sites through which the two projects work in mutually supportive ways. A third component of the argument is that the issue of family and household has to be seen as linked to the question of the larger class-based nature of the neo-liberal political project. While the Harper government puts forward an agenda of "stand up for families," at the same time, at a concrete level, policies have been introduced which make the sustaining of stable households and community difficult for those at the lower end of the scale, especially single mothers, racialized

minorities and recent immigrants. I conclude by arguing for the importance for feminist organizing to start from and address these communities, as well as to understand the links between neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism and what it means for gender relations.

Neo-Conservatism and the Religious Right: Reconstituting the Policy Community and Governance Framework

The election of the Harper Conservative government both reflects and further reinforces the growing influence of the religious right in Canada. While traditionally this right has had less of a presence in Canada than in the U.S., it now has considerable influence within the power structure, that is to say, in key posts within and around the government. In addition, there appears to be a growing web of connections between U.S. evangelists, those active in the religious right in Canada, right-wing Christian (or "faith based") lobby groups and key players within the Harper government.³

Indicative of this growing presence has been the large number of Conservative MPs with ties to the Christian right. At the cabinet level, this has included, for example, Vic Toews (Provencher, Manitoba) who was first appointed Attorney General and Minister of Justice, and is now Minister of Public Safety, as well as Jason Kenney (Calgary, Southeast), currently Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism. The latter is a noted evangelist who provides a point of contact for religious groups to gain influence in the government (McDonald 2006), and is also the key caucus member representing the Conservatives in their efforts to reach out to immigrant communities. Stockwell Day (Okanagan-Coquihalla), past President of the Treasury Board and active in the Conservative cabinet prior to the 2011 election (at which point he left federal politics), and former head of the Canadian Alliance party, was an active Pentacostal, former administrator of a private Christian school, and former chief spokesperson for an Alberta coalition of schools.⁴

A substantial number of backbenchers are also active in evangelical organizations and/or the religious right, and have assumed an important role since the election of the Harper government, for example, and, as discussed below, through the introduction of private member's bills or petitions on right to life and other issues. This includes Maurice Vellacott, (Saskatoon-Wanuskewin), with ties to Focus on the Family Canada⁵ and for many years co-chair of the Parliamentary Pro-Life Caucus; David Sweet (Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough-Westdale) former head of Promise Keepers Canada;⁶ Rod Bruinoose (Winnipeg South) elected chair of the Parliamentary Pro-life Caucus in December 2008 and vocal on pro-life issues;⁷ Brad Trost (Saskatoon-Humboldt), who introduced a petition in the House of Commons to stop the funding of Planned Parenthood by CIDA; and Gary Breitung (Yorkton-Melville, Saskatchewan) also active in the pro-life caucus and

outspoken on the issue. In 2006, the organization *Egale* identified 34 first-time Conservative candidates as closely identified with the Christian right and ten of these were elected (Valpy, Alphonse and Seguin). Marci McDonald (2006) estimated 70 evangelists in the 2006 Conservative caucus. The Abortion Rights Coalition estimated that 95 members (or 75 percent) of the Conservative caucus after the 2006 election were pro-life.⁸ While Harper himself is cautious in public statements, commentators have pointed to his own close connections to evangelist currents, his personal evangelist beliefs and commitments; and how he

these groups strongly put forward traditional notions of marriage and “family values,” are opposed to abortion, gay and lesbian rights and to the legal recognition of same-sex marriages, as well as to assisted human reproduction and stem cell research. They question the separation of church and state in Canada and argue that public policy should adhere to religious beliefs and doctrines (see, for example, Warner, chp.1).

The influence of the religious right is further evidenced through the growing connection between these evangelical groups, conservative think tanks, and central agencies,

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has made time for meeting with many faith groups (see McDonald 2005; see, also, Warner 171). The Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada (ARCC) includes him on their list of anti-choice MPs on the basis that he voted in favour of Bill C-484 (which, as described below, would have created a separate offence for killing or injuring a fetus during an attack on a pregnant woman) and that he voted against Dr. Morgentaler’s Order of Canada (Arthur). In his widely cited remarks at the 2003 Civitas meeting, Harper is very clear that in his view, while *economic* issues such as balanced budgets, free markets and so on are important, the economic battle has largely been won, and that the real concern is the “*social* agenda of the modern Left,” particularly the welfare state and the damage that is having on institutions such as the family, arguing that there is a need to give “greater place to social values and social conservatism” (Harper).

In addition, an increasing number of evangelical lobby groups, grassroots organizations and educational institutions have established a presence in Ottawa (Tam; see, also, Simmie; McDonald 2010; Warner chp. 7). This includes the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, the Institute of Marriage and the Family, a branch of the U.S.-based Focus on the Family, and the Institute for Canadian Values, founded by Charles McVety, also president of the Canada Christian College. The Canada Family Action Coalition, and Promise Keepers Canada (also with affiliations to the U.S.) are also active in policy issues. The Manning Centre for Building Democracy was founded by Preston Manning in 2005 and is described on its website as “a leading Canadian conservative do-tank.” As well as generating policy ideas and serving to “strengthen networking within the conservative movement,” the centre runs a number of political leadership schools, such as “navigating the faith-political interface.” Gwen Landolt and REAL women of Canada also remain active. Overall

within the bureaucracy. This can be seen, for example, in the case of Darrel Reid, former president of Focus on the Family Canada. Formerly the Director of Policy and Research for the Reform Party of Canada, and chief of staff to Preston Manning, Reid became the PMO director of policy and was appointed in February 2009 as Harper’s deputy chief of staff in the PMO. He subsequently became the Executive Director of the Manning Centre. In a 2002 article in the *Globe and Mail*, Reid notes that while social conservatives are “a loose and shifting group who come together on various issues at various times,” they have three primary concerns. First, they espouse conservative religious views and “take them seriously.” Second, “they value the institution of marriage and understand the family to be the cornerstone of our society. They further recognize that both are under attack. They believe the special status historically accorded heterosexual marriage is being eroded, and that a concerted effort is being made in the courts to undermine parental authority.” Thirdly, they question “our culture of unrestricted abortion,” the “brave new world of genetic experimentation” and tend to be pro-life. He stated his hope that “social conservatives from all our parties and traditions [would] begin to reinsert their most deeply held convictions into our nation’s political discourse.” Reid has been noted as being harsh on single mothers particularly those on welfare—who he believes are trying to avoid marriage—and as someone who believes that Christians are under “an obligation to change laws to reflect biblical values.” Another Christian educator Paul Wilson, also with a history of religious activism, took over from Reid as PMO directory of policy, so increasingly, it has been noted, there is a team of activists within the PMO (Diebel).

Harper has also been active in appointing members to federal boards and offices. Melissa Haussman and Pauline Rankin, for example, note that ten appointments were

announced in December 2006 to the 13-member Board of the Assisted Human Reproduction Agency of Canada. “Four of those included people who had either made public statements on behalf of or been associated with the social conservative position on reproduction, stem cell technology and abortion.” Concern was expressed that “a number of members [of the Board] had made pro-life and specifically anti-embryonic stem cell comments in public fora, and this was troubling, given that part of the agency’s remit is to make stem-cell research policy.”

The Neo-Conservative Policy Influence

The impact of neo-conservatives has been apparent in a wide range of areas from childcare and income-splitting for tax purposes to maternal health initiatives, pay equity, the counting of unpaid labour and an emphasis on crime and law and order. A range of these measures is discussed below.

The care of pre-school children was highlighted as early as the 2005 first national policy convention of the new Conservative Party (Prince and Teghtsoonian). The Convention asserted a core neo-conservative concern: that policies should “give parents who choose to stay home to take care of their preschool children the recognition and financial support they need to carry out this important task” and that “parents are in the best position to determine the care needs of their children, and that they should be able to do so in an environment that encourages as many options as possible, and in a manner that does not discriminate against those who opt to raise their children in family, linguistic, and religious environments” (CPC qtd. in Prince and Teghtsoonian 182). Consistent with this, during the 2006 election Conservatives put forward a discourse of “choice,” arguing that whereas the Liberals and NDP would “build a massive childcare bureaucracy” their view was that “the best role for government is to let parents choose what’s best for their children ... whether that means formal child care, informal care through neighbours or relatives, or a parent staying at home” (CPC 31). In their election platform issues to do with child-care (as well as health care, “security” for seniors, post-secondary education and same-sex marriage), fell under the rubric “Stand up for Families” (CPC 28-33), while social policy as a concept essentially disappeared.

Once elected, the Conservatives rescinded the bilateral childcare agreements that the previous Liberal government had signed with the provinces⁹ and introduced the *Universal Childcare Benefit*, providing all families with a taxable \$1,200 allowance per year for each child under six (see Prince and Teghtsoonian; Bezanson 2010; Rinehart). This policy, designed to be used for a broad range of purposes including “occasional babysitting or child care help from a grandparent or a neighbor” (Prince and Teghtsoonian 187) addressed social conservative demands to provide increased state support and funding to the stay at home parent. As a Caledon Institute study points out, because of the way it is taxed, the new program favours households with one

earner and a parent at home. Specifically, the benefit is taxable in the hands of the lower-income spouse so that if there is a stay-at-home parent with no income then there is less tax payable and the benefit is higher (Battle). The study calculated that one-earner couples earning \$200,000 would receive \$1,076 out of the \$1,200 per year; whereas a single parent family earning \$30,000 would only receive \$301 per year and a two-earner couple at \$30,000 would receive \$199. In other words, those at the upper end of the income scale with a stay-at-home parent—those, as Dianne Rinehart points out, who already have plenty of choice—benefit the most, while those at the bottom end of the income scale, who most need assistance for child care, receive the least.

The October 2006 announcement that senior couples would be able to split certain pension income such as from private pensions, RRSPs, and deferred sharing plans when calculating income for tax purposes similarly supported the traditional single-breadwinner family of concern to social conservatives. Again, the ability to split declared income for tax purposes is of benefit to a relatively small group of family/households where one spouse receives large amounts of income from private pensions and RRSPs, and the other has stayed at home and receives little income. With respect to this program, the Caledon Institute calculated that well-off senior couples with \$100,000 in pension income would save \$7,280 a year, while a couple with a private pension of \$20,000 a year would only save \$310 in federal income tax. Seniors living alone and filing individual returns, those whose income is so low that they pay no income tax, and couples where each earns similar income all gained nothing. Like the childcare plan, this measure is a move away from a progressive income tax structure or a redistributive social policy based either on universality or targeting to the poor. Rather it redistributes income upwards, providing additional money to those who are the most wealthy. While the program is costly in terms of revenue foregone, it is of benefit to only a small few at the top, while the many seniors living modestly at or near the poverty line, including the many single elderly poor women, gain little or nothing at all. In addition, this measure represents a significant change in the basis of Canada’s income tax in that it makes the family, rather than the individual, the basis for calculating taxable income. For women, this results in a loss of independence as they are no longer viewed as autonomous individuals in their own right but as part of a family unit. It assumes a sharing or pooling of family income when this, as feminists have pointed out, does not necessarily happen. As the generally lower earning spouse, it creates a disincentive for women to be in the paid labour force through their working-age years. All this leaves women in a vulnerable position, with few resources in their own name. In addition, this measure is likely to exacerbate racial inequalities as, it has been pointed out, Canada’s economy and labour market are increasingly stratified along racial lines and poverty rates are far higher for racialized families than for non-racialized

ones (see, for example, Galabuzi; Block and Galabuzi). The latter groups are less likely, then, to fully benefit from an income-splitting policy as described above.

In March 2011 the government announced that in 2015-16 income-splitting would be further extended, allowing parents to split, or share, up to \$50,000 of their household income for tax purposes (Chase). While it is estimated that this program will cost the government \$5 billion a year, again, it is one where only the wealthiest will benefit. It provides benefits to a relatively small number of households while single parents, unattached individuals, families with no employed or self-employed members, or families with two low incomes would not benefit at all (Weir; Zerbisias 2011).

In the area of reproductive rights the social conservative agenda has been given considerable visibility through the introduction of private members' bills. Bill C-484, *An Act to Amend the Criminal Code* (injuring or causing the death of an unborn child while committing an offence) also known as the *Unborn Victims of Crime Act*, was introduced by Conservative MP Ken Epp in November 2007 (ARCC). It would have created a separate offence for killing or injuring a fetus during an attack on a pregnant woman, giving legal personhood to fetuses as victims of crime and, it was feared, opening the door to the recriminalization of abortion. In 2008, Maurice Vellacott introduced, for the third time, his private member's bill, C-537, to "protect the conscience rights of Canada's health care workers" and which sought to ensure "that health care providers will never be forced to participate against their will in procedures such as abortions or acts of euthanasia" (Hausmann and Rankin 245). In 2010, Rod Bruinooose introduced Bill C-510, *An Act to Prevent Coercion of Pregnant Women to Abort*, again giving the fetus legal status. While these bills have not passed, they have been considered a step in re-opening the abortion debate. In March 2012, Stephen Woodworth introduced a motion to have a parliamentary committee examine if the criminal code definition of human beings should include fetuses (ARCC).

While in Canada the abortion issue has not gone beyond the introduction of private members' bills, this issue has been addressed via Canada's funding in the developing world. Canada, for example, in announcing its 2010 G8 maternal and child health initiative, made clear that it would not include the funding of abortions, with International Cooperation Minister Bev Oda stating that, "the government would consider funding family planning measures such as contraception, but not abortion under any circumstances" (CBC News, "No abortion in Canada's G8 maternal health plan"). The Conservative government has also limited funding for Planned Parenthood, arguing that it "operates overseas with the help of funding from CIDA ... and within Canada to provide teens and women with information on a wide range of reproductive issues including contraception and abortion."

Private members' bills have also been used to challenge provisions in the *Divorce Act*. Bill C-422, *An Act to Amend*

the Divorce Act was introduced in June 2009 by Maurice Vellacott and endorsed by Rob Nicholson (Niagara, Ontario), the federal Minister of Justice (Zerbisias 2009). Coming out of lobbying by Fathers' Rights' groups, it would have eliminated the concepts of custody and access from the federal *Divorce Act* in favour of a presumption of equal parenting (Cross). Women's organizations have opposed this and similar legislation, arguing that it "at best ignores and at worst denies many of the realities of families in this country" (Cross 1). Fathers' Rights groups became active at the time of the 1997 amendments to the *Divorce Act*¹⁰ which included the introduction of Child Support Guidelines requiring non-custodial parents to spend a pre-determined table amount on child support. The exception to this was if children were spending at least 40 percent of their time with each parent. A presumption of equal parenting, then, has considerable financial implications, making it far easier to bypass the payment of child support. While seemingly gender-neutral, such a measure would potentially have serious negative consequences for both women and children. It ignores women's continued and ongoing major responsibility for caring for children, and their history within the family as the primary caregiver. In addition, it ignores issues of power, control, and domestic violence, which an assumption of shared parenting would exacerbate as it necessitates ongoing contact and negotiation and would give an abusive parent an element of control over both women and children. As Pamela Cross notes in her analysis of the bill for the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL): "What shared parenting does is give men more power and control over their children and their children's mother without requiring them to contribute to their children's support or upbringing" (12).

While espousing the virtues of traditional family structures with a stay-at-home parent, social conservatives have objected to measures that recognize unpaid household labour, arguing that this constitutes state interference in private family matters. When the mandatory long-census was cancelled in July 2010 questions on unpaid work were deleted.¹¹ The inclusion of a question on unpaid work in the 1996 census, as Meg Luxton and Leah Vosko have described, had been the result of a long ten-year campaign by a diverse range of women and women's organizations concerned to make more visible the contributions, both economic and social, made through unpaid labour in the home, and to thus increase the recognition and respect for home workers. Given the intensive lobbying campaign and the work involved in bringing recognition to this form of work, its removal from the census has to be seen as a reversal of women's efforts to have their work recognized and valued. It both further ensures the invisibility of women's work in the home and obscures the extent to which work in this sphere is increasing as social services are cut back.

Women's right to income equality has also been a target. As part of the 2009 budget the Conservatives introduced a new *Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act*, which

meant that, for women in the public sector, in addition to the usual pay equity criteria (skill, effort, responsibility and conditions of work) work was to be assessed according to “market forces” and “the employer’s recruitment and retention needs.” It made more restrictive the definition of a “female predominant” job group and workers lost the right to challenge gender-based wage gaps under the Human Rights law. Rather than an absolute right, “equitable compensation” became a matter to be bargained for collectively (and thus potentially bargained away). Further, unions were prohibited from assisting individual members with pay equity complaints.¹² These changes, it has been argued, significantly undermine the federal government’s commitment to equal pay for equal value.

Women’s ability to comment on or oppose these changes has become more difficult as other measures have targeted organizations designed to advance women’s equality and have undermined women’s grassroots and advocacy organizations. Within the first eight months of taking office, the Harper government significantly cut funds for women’s and other equality-seeking organizations. This included, in the fall 2006, the elimination of the Court Challenges Program (which had provided an important role in funding constitutional challenges for equality rights), as well as the elimination of funding for the Law Commission of Canada. Cuts were made to the Status of Women Canada, with new guidelines prohibiting groups that received funds from engaging in any advocacy or lobbying activities. Twelve out of 16 regional offices of the Status of Women Canada were closed, and the Policy Research Fund was terminated (Hausmann and Rankin; Brodie). The word “equality” was removed (although subsequently re-instated) from the list of goals of the Status of Women Canada. NAWL lost its funding and was forced to close in September 2007. Overall, since 2006, more than 30 women’s organizations and research bodies have had their funding cut or been “defunded,” including CRIAW, New Brunswick Coalition for Pay Equity, Réseau des tables regionales de groupes de femmes du Quebec, Alberta Network of Immigrant Women, Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH), NAWL, Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC), Ontario Coalition for Better Childcare, South Asian Women’s Centre (Toronto), Conseil d’intervention pour l’accès des femmes au travail,¹³ Match International, an aid organization that supported women’s rights in the developing world, and Sisters in Spirit, an Aboriginal women’s project that had led the way in research regarding missing and murdered Aboriginal women.

While funding for women’s advocacy and service organizations has been cut, extensive funds have been spent elsewhere, including for the military, and the law and order agenda. For example, the government did announce \$10 million to address violence against Aboriginal women but this largely went to law enforcement and the creation of a new National Police Support Centre (Department of Justice). In addition, while women’s groups have had

their funding cut, federal funds going to faith-based organizations appear to have been increasing, including in the areas of youth employment programs, women’s services and federal stimulus spending (McDonald 2010: 355; Theilheimer; Canada News Centre 2011a, 2011b; Human Resources and Skill Development Canada).

Conservative government policies, then, have taken on and been centrally opposed to the issues that feminists have struggled for and won hard-fought gains over many years, including childcare and care work in general, reproductive rights, the right to be remunerated equally for their work and the right, more generally, for women to lead independent and autonomous lives where they are free to make the choices they might feel are best for themselves, their children, their families and their communities. It is a very active state both in policies implemented and in the extensive dismantling of structures, programs and institutional supports built up by women and women’s organizations over the last 30 years. It is exacerbating inequalities among and between women through the implementation of policies that redistribute benefits to the most wealthy. It is a coercive state, not simply in terms of the increased law and order agenda, but also potentially in the curtailing of rights, for example in the area of reproductive rights, and in the attempt to impose narrow and hierarchical notions of morality and social order. The withdrawal of funding from women’s advocacy and research organizations, the re-directing of funds (for example with regard to violence against women), the possible increased use of funds going to faith-based groups is all profoundly altering the organizations of civil society, state-civil society-citizenship relations, and the nature of the policy community. This is making it increasingly difficult for the most marginalized groups to have a voice. It is silencing and making increasingly invisible both their struggles and the larger relations of power and exploitation. All of these changes have very profound implications for gender relations, women’s organizing and their ability to be active political participants.

Feminist Debates: Conceptualizing Neo-liberal and Neo-conservative Approaches

How are we to understand these changes and how do feminists begin to address this challenge? Certainly a part of the answer to the Conservative party success, as others have noted, lies in the specificities of the electoral process and politics more generally, including the rise of the Reform Party with its populist base, Harper’s ability to tap into and hold together a coalition drawing on prairie and rural social conservatives and central Canadian fiscal and economic conservatives (see, for example, Hausman and Rankin, “Framing the Harper Government”) while reaching out to new immigrant communities,¹⁴ the shift of some elements of the religious population from the Liberals to the Conservatives (Diebel 2009), as well as the realities of the single member plurality system which has

allowed Harper to form a government while consistently obtaining considerably less than the majority of the vote. Harper's talents and acumen as a political strategist and his determination to impose his agenda are evident both in the electoral arena and in his choice of appointments in the bureaucracy and other key institutions.

Beyond this, however, the success of the Harper government and the coalition that it draws on also has to be seen within the context of the overall shift to neo-liberalism that has taken place over the last 30 years, both globally and with its particular Canadian manifestations. In this

Using a discursive analysis aimed at "exploring the influence exerted by ideology" she identified diverse strands of neo-conservatism, noting three types of arguments that were put forward by those opposed to federally regulated childcare. Institution-oriented arguments were advanced: in the U.S., it was argued that childcare regulation would entail too much "big government" bureaucracy; in Canada, it was argued that childcare was under provincial jurisdiction and that the federal government therefore had no role to play. Market-oriented arguments were also used: in the U.S., they could be seen in arguments around restraining

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regard, it would be helpful, for example, to have a better understanding of how in the Canadian case the trend to neo-liberalism has interacted and worked together with a neo-conservative movement that has centrally been concerned with women's reproductive and equality rights and with dismantling the infrastructure that women and women's organizations have built up over many years. While a full discussion of these questions, and of the relationship between neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism, is beyond the scope of this paper, I would like to begin to address the question by looking at the contributions of feminist scholars to the debate and suggesting areas for further investigation.

Feminist Contributions to the Debate

Feminists have made important contributions in drawing attention to the highly significant and increasing influence that neo-conservatives have had on policy debates in Canada. While neo-conservatism has become more prominent with the Harper government, it began to make an appearance as a political force in Canada as early as the 1970s and grew in significance in the 1980s.¹⁵ As neo-conservatives began a long battle, seen throughout the 1980s and 1990s at the level of parliamentary committees dealing with issues such as childcare, taxation and same-sex marriage, feminists intervened and undertook analyses of the changes that were taking place. I examine below the arguments of three different authors, each writing a decade apart. Taken together, this group of writing provides a window on how the situation and the debates evolved, as well as on how feminists have conceptualized the rise of neo-conservatism, and its relationship to neo-liberalism.

Katherine Teghtsoonian provided an important early analysis of neo-conservative ideology as expressed in the 1980s childcare policy debates in Canada and the U.S.

welfare expenditures (in the context of the introduction of workfare, where childcare would be needed); while in Canada, market-oriented arguments came up in the context of support for for-profit centres. In both countries, social-conservatives made the now-familiar argument that federal regulation of child care would constitute an intrusion into the family sphere, that parents were the ones best able to make decisions on behalf of their children and that they should have the right to choose how their children were raised.

Looking at the situation in the 1990s, Brenda Cossman presents a picture of the changes taking place at a discursive and at a material level as women are faced with playing a contradictory role as both caregivers and financial providers for their families. Her major focus is on competing neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideology and discourses and she examines these in the context of three key debates of that decade: same-sex challenges to spousal definitions in family law; the federal *Divorce Act* that was amended in 1997 and Ontario's restructuring of welfare provisions. She argued that in the debates around these issues neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism presented competing visions. The neo-liberal vision recognizes individual rights and the right to privacy (for example with respect to gay marriage) and individual responsibility (for example with respect to the *Divorce Act* and child support guidelines), but overall emphasizes fiscal restraint and individual self-reliance, individual liberty via the free market and a reduced role for the state (Cossman 179). Its project, she argues, is primarily an economic one of reducing the role of the state and transferring public responsibilities to the private sphere. With respect to the issue of same-sex marriage, for example, a major concern was the alleviation of "the burden on the public purse" by shifting the obligation to provide support to spouses, now more broadly defined.

With the amendments to the 1997 federal *Divorce Act*, similarly, much of the concern for neo-liberals was to address the question of child poverty in a way that would not incur costs to the state, by increasing private, parental responsibility and by strengthening child support laws. In the area of social welfare law, the neo-liberal put the welfare mother to work, redefining “single mother” as a potentially employable worker.

The neo-conservative vision, on the other hand, emphasizes the re-articulation of the traditional family, community, authority, social order, and tradition. The neo-conservatives argue that family has been eroded in the new “permissive culture” since the 1960s, that this is linked to a range of social problems, and that the traditional family needs to be rebuilt. Neo-conservatives see the welfare state, daycare, divorce, affirmative action, abortion, gay rights as responsible for breaking down the moral basis of society, and argue that the family and traditional gender roles should be strengthened. In all three areas, they sought to strengthen the traditional family: by opposing same-sex marriage, by seeking to prevent divorce in the first place, and by urging the welfare mother to find a spouse and make him pay.

Cosman argues that the two strategies are, in essence, contradictory: the neo-liberal strategy is “eroding the significance of family and constructing individualized, degendered market citizens”; the neo-conservative strategy is “intensifying the significance of family and constructing gendered subjects, economically dependent on a male breadwinner” (211). Overall, looking at these debates in the 1990s, she argues that what is resulting is a new gender order with complex and contradictory strands; in this new order “neo-liberal and neo-conservative discourses of gender and family are vying for position.” Neo-liberalism is in ascendance, but she argues that social conservatism has a continuing influence and that the discursive struggle over the new gender order is ongoing.

Janine Brodie, writing in 2008 after the Harper government came to power, also focuses on the question of ideology, discursive formations, along with an emphasis on identity and political rationality:

Political rationalities, as governmentality theorists explain, are shifting and always contested “procedures for representing and intervening.” They embody particular ways of seeing the social and political terrain, and privilege specific vocabularies, styles of truth-telling and truth-tellers. In so doing, political rationalities fashion and reward commensurate subject positions as well as legitimize and institutionally embed specific idioms of claims-making, forms of political engagement and zones of conflict. (147)

Brodie looks at the transition from post-war social liberalism to twenty-first century neo-liberalism as a transition from one political rationality to another, involving

“fundamental changes in identity formation and political practice.”

Brodie argues that the discourses of post-war social liberalism, while based on a male breadwinner gender order also “prescribed that all citizens could make claim to a measure of equality, social security and collective provision as a right of citizenship” (151). It was the latter, she argues, that opened up spaces for women and women’s organizations to make claims in the name of equality. This space was eroded, however, by the ascendance of neo-liberal political rationalities emphasizing “the self-sufficient and genderless individual” and that questioned the very notion of gender equality. She frames the discussion in terms of a clash between the previously dominant, now residual political rationality (social liberalism) and the emergent, now dominant political rationality of neo-liberalism. Statements by Oda and the Harper government are presented not so much as coming out of a competing neo-conservative paradigm, but rather as coming out of “a prolonged war of attrition between dominant neo-liberalism and the residuals of social liberalism” (Brodie 157).

Teghtsoonian, Cosman and Brodie provide important insights into the emergence and growing significance of neo-conservative discourse, the arguments put forward, the strategies used over a 30-year period (to gain influence, for example, at the level of parliamentary committees) and the tensions that it has encountered both with neo-liberal discourse and with the preceding “social liberalism.” Cosman draws attention to the complex, dynamic and at times contradictory process of reconstituting a new gender order, involving changes in the family and women’s role within it at both a material and discursive level. These insights need to be drawn on, but in addition, our understanding of neo-liberalism and the question of the relationship between neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism need to be revisited in the context both of the further development of a global (though crisis-prone) neo-liberal agenda and the coming to power of the Harper government with its aggressive introduction of a wide range of measures. In coming to a better understanding of the changes taking place with the Harper government I would like to suggest three avenues for further consideration: a need for greater consideration not just of ideology, but also of material conditions and political projects; of the complex interactions between neo-liberals and neo-conservatives on issues to do with family and gender; and how issues of family and household are linked to the larger class-based nature of the political project. These are discussed below.

Materiality, Politics, Neo-liberalism and Neo-Conservatism

The focus for the most part in the three articles discussed above is on competing ideological or discursive struggles or political subjectivities; what emerges is essentially an ideological struggle between neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism (or neo-liberalism and the previous

social-liberalism) to define the parameters of an emerging new order. While this provides important insights, there are many questions left unanswered and that need to be further addressed. Why is it that one political rationality became dominant at a certain moment? Why does another emerge? What is the role of gender, gender relations, and women's organizing in that process? While more research would have to be done to identify the specific processes and dynamics, I would argue that rather than seeing the women's movement solely as responding to the spaces opened up or closed down by a governing ideology, it

project and to come to a better understanding of what it means for diverse groups of women.

In this respect, a methodology that starts from (or at least that gives us a better picture of) the material conditions of women's lives, what that enormous increase in inequalities that has accompanied neo-liberalism has meant for women, what is happening in the most marginalized communities and the impact of neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies there would help provide a better picture of the challenges confronting women, and in particular, of how issues of race/ethnicity/immigration intersect with

A methodology that starts from the material conditions of women's lives, what that enormous increase in inequalities that has accompanied neo-liberalism has meant for women, what is happening in the most marginalized communities and the impact of neo-conservative policies there, would provide a better picture of the challenges confronting women.

could be seen as going the other way: that the neo-liberal and especially the neo-conservative political project is also centrally a response to the *successes* of the women's movement and to the nature of the demands being made. A major concern of both neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism has been to respond to the political, economic, social and demographic changes brought about by the massive entry of women into the labour market, to the changes in family structures and power relations that those changes entailed, as well as to the feminist organizing that was tied up with those changes.

Similarly, I would argue that we have to not just examine "ways of *seeing* the social and political terrain" (although this is important), but also to come to a better understanding of how that *terrain itself* is shifting; to emphasize not just the vocabularies and styles of truth telling, but also the "messy actualities of material life," the power and power relations that are being reconstituted through the advancement of neo-liberal and neo-conservative agendas; to understand how ideology is linked to and anchored in particular political projects with economic underpinnings. Numerous authors have stressed the distinction between neo-liberalism as an ideology (of free markets and a reduced role for the state), and the reality of neo-liberalism as a political project aimed at re-establishing the conditions for capital accumulation and reasserting the power of the economic elite under conditions where finance capital has acquired new prominence (see, for example, Harvey; Dumenil and Levy; Peck and Tickell). Following this, for women and feminists, it is also important to reflect further on the differences between the ideology or myths of neo-liberalism (free markets, reduced state intervention, the "self sufficient and genderless individual") and the reality on the ground; to give greater consideration to where both gender and race fit within neo-liberalism understood as a political

gender and class, and of the particular challenges faced by minority women, single mothers, recent immigrants, and others in the current era. Numerous studies have shown that both recent immigrants and racialized minorities face particular labour market barriers, discrimination, and low income (see, for example, Block and Galabuzi; Block; Galabuzi; Picot). The impact of neo-conservative policies on minority women and communities needs to be further brought into view.

Family, Gender and Women's Bodies in the Neo-liberal and Neo-Conservative Project

The second component of the conceptual argument that I would like to suggest, which is also an area for further reflection and investigation, is the centrality of questions of the family, gender, women's bodies, and patriarchy to both the neo-liberal and the neo-conservative projects. If neo-liberalism is seen more as a political project designed to reassert the power of the upper class (rather than as an attempt to actually implement a particular ideology), neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism may be seen not so much competing or contradictory strategies, but rather, as working together in interconnected and mutually supportive ways (see Brown).¹⁶ As a number of authors have pointed out, as the welfare state has been dismantled neo-liberals have relied on the family to take increased responsibility for social reproduction and basic caring needs. The neo-conservative emphasis on traditional families also reinforces the value of this sphere as the location where caring takes place (see Cossman; Luxton; Vosko) and as Brenda Cossman notes, "what appears is a mutually reinforcing relationship between the neo-liberal fiscal project of reducing state spending and the neo-conservative project of rearticulating the traditional family" (174). In addition, it has been noted that neo-liberalism, with its destruction

of community and institutions of the welfare state and its promotion of an aggressive competitive individualism, creates a kind of social vacuum that provides fertile ground for neoconservatism. It may be the case that for neo-liberalism to succeed politically it has had to address the insecurities and precariousness faced by families, but has done so via an alliance or dialogue with neo-conservatives. These are both avenues to explore further.

The examination above of policies introduced by the Harper government over the last five years suggests, however, that the interconnections between the neo-liberal and neo-conservative projects and the way that gender is implicated go beyond this. The reassertion of patriarchy and the loss of autonomy and political power for women that has been a part of the neo-conservative project, the attempt to restrict reproductive rights and women's ability to have equal income, or any income at all, the loss of equality institutions and political voice for women involves the encouragement of a particular kind of authority structure and hierarchy. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, hierarchy within the family as promoted by the "family values" agenda helps legitimate and reinforces exclusion and hierarchy within society as a whole. Further consideration also, then, needs to be given to the ways in which the encouragement of patriarchal control and hierarchies—of class, gender, race, of those perfectly able to compete, and those who might have other challenges—may benefit and become key parts of, neo-liberalism¹⁷ understood as a political project involving a reassertion of power and wealth to a small elite and the disempowerment of those at the lower end of the scale. Further consideration also needs to be given to the differential impact of policies such as a possible restriction of reproductive rights for different groups of women with differential access to income and resources.

Family, Household and Class Relations

A third component of the argument is that the issue of family and household has to be seen as linked to the question of the larger class-based project with its gendered and racialized dimensions. As we have seen, many of the policies (childcare, income splitting and so on) are double-edged, appearing to support family values and family structures, yet in effect re-distribute benefits upward to those at the upper end of the income scale with relatively few benefiting. What is striking about the Harper government is the contrast between, on the one hand, the rhetoric of family values and "stand up for families" and on the other hand, the policies introduced which make the sustaining of basic relations of family, stable households and community so difficult for those at the lower end of the scale, especially single mothers, minorities, temporary migrant workers, and recent immigrants (see, for example, Arat-Koc; Bezanson 2006; Swift). The neo-conservative approach to family, with its focus on "family values" and its obscuring of the reality of most households/families in this respect fits with the larger neo-liberal project of the re-assertion

of class power; or, put another way, the re-assertion of that class power is occurring not only through the growing power and wealth of the elite classes, but through the fragmentation of community and family for those at the lower end. Again, this is an area for further investigation.

Family, then, within the neo-liberal and neo-conservative project is important for a number of reasons: as the primary site where social reproduction takes place (and this more so all the time), the family/household and the social reproduction more generally are structured in such a way as to encourage low-wage work. In addition, while family rhetoric is important in addressing the insecurities caused by neo-liberalism, in reality, the family/household become a key location where dislocation and fragmentation of lower class and community solidarities occurs. The project with respect to family put forward by neo-conservatives is a class and racialized as well as gender-based project, providing support for *some* families, while making the sustaining of basic community and family structures very difficult for others.

Conclusion

This paper outlines and raises questions about the implications of the rise of a religious neo-conservatism for social policy, and for women's organizing. It calls for a methodology in addressing Harper's policies that addresses the relationship between the larger projects of neo-liberalism and neoconservatism. In doing so it is important to focus on the links between the ideological discourse and the material conditions of women's lives, bringing more into view the lives and interests of marginalized communities. This would involve pointing out the contradictions between, on the one hand, the neo-conservative rhetoric of "stand up for families" and the reality of growing inequalities, and, on the other, the very difficult situation facing many households, families, and communities as a result of policies that make it very difficult to maintain basic household survival. More of an approach of solidarity with the most marginalized is important, but so too I think is re-claiming the terrain around family, households, community and women's strength and autonomy, as well as to build more of a vision of what we would like to see, and more of an openness to different kinds of families and households and different kinds of community.

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¹On the distinction between neo-liberalism and neoconservatism, see Brown; Cossman. There is a considerable literature that examines the question of neo-conservatism in Canada. See, for example, Teghtsoonian; Luxton; Harder; Cossman. See, also, Brodie; Haussman and Rankin; Bezanson (2010); McDonald (2010); Warner.

²The notion of neo-liberalism as a political project has been convincingly put forward by Harvey; Dumenil and Levy; Connell.

³On the growing influence of the religious right in Canada, see, for example, McDonald (2010), as well as her earlier articles in *Walrus* magazine (McDonald 2006, 2005); Tam; Warner; Buzzetti 2011a, 2011b.

⁴McDonald quotes him as saying “God’s law is clear... standards of education are not set by government, but by God, the Bible, the home and the school” (2010: 31).

⁵Focus on the Family is “a global Christian ministry” that believes that “Christians have a responsibility to promote truth and social policy that improves the strength and health of the family, as God designed.”

⁶Promise Keepers is a “Christian organization ... committed to helping men to keep their promises to their spouses, families, churches, communities and nation.”

⁷Soon after he was elected, Rod Bruinooge submitted an opinion piece published in the National Post explaining why “it is essential for a society to value its unborn citizens.”

⁸After the 2008 election, the absolute number of pro-lifers went up to 98, although they made up a smaller percentage of the overall caucus (68 percent) (see Haussman and Rankin). The Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada estimates that as of May 2012, 61 percent of the Conservative caucus are anti-choice.

⁹The Liberals had introduced a \$5 billion childcare plan, all ten provinces had signed bilateral agreements, with three of them (Ontario, Quebec and Manitoba) signing a five-year funding agreement.

¹⁰On the connection between neo-conservatives and father’s rights groups at this time, see Cossman (194-200).

¹¹This question asked Canadians how many hours a week they spent doing unpaid housework, looking after children or seniors without pay and so on (Scofield; Lahey; Zerbisias 2010).

¹²Unions will be fined \$50,000 if they assist a woman in making a pay equity complaint. Public Service Alliance of Canada, news release, “PSAC says ‘pay equity’ bill threatens women’s rights”, February 2009; Canadian Labour Congress, “Statement by the Canadian Labour Congress to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance Hearing on Bill C-10 Regarding the *Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act* Provisions of the 2009 Budget,” February 23, 2009

¹³Zerbisias (2011) provides a partial list of 20 some women’s organizations that had funding cut. A number of groups have maintained lists of cuts to women’s organizations. See, for example, Ad Hoc Coalition for Women’s Equality and Human Rights (www.womensequality.ca); Canadian Federation of University Women Advocacy Blog, “Major

federal government cuts impacting women in Canada since 2006, posted on the CRIAW website (www.criaw-icref.ca).

¹⁴On this point, see, for example, Ibbitson and Friesey; McDonald 2010: 35,39-40).

¹⁵The 1980s saw the emergence of groups such as REAL Women, as well as new political parties such as the Christian Heritage Party (at the federal level) and the Family Coalition Party (at the provincial level in Ontario and BC), and groups such as the “Family Caucus” within the federal conservative party. The Reform Party, drawing on a significant neo-conservative base was formed in 1989 and made its electoral breakthrough in 1993.

¹⁶While Brown also focuses on the question of political rationalities, she makes an important point, which can be understood more generally, about how the two projects can work symbiotically.

¹⁷On gender dynamics, masculinity and neo-liberalism, see Connell. On how neo-liberalism is raced and produces racialized bodies, see Roberts and Mahtani; Galabuzi.

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DAWNELLE HARRISON

The falling of a performance

Losing my soul bit by bit
Is a performance.
Like most everything else,
I do it exceedingly poorly.
I may possess an ill-fated
Profession like a whore who
Is bound and tied to survive
From the dollars of hundreds
Of dullard, gold-ringed men.

My essence needs to be restrung
Like a degenerating guitar
Gathering dust the way
A cobweb takes over
A corner lot.

I do believe that vertigo
Has caught me in its
Hurried fists like a
Firefighter rescuing a child
And making the world
Right again,
If only for a fleeting instant.

Dawnelle Harrison was born and raised in Washington state. She possesses a B.A. in Business Administration from the University of Washington. Her first chapbook, Voyager, received great reviews. In her new chapbook, Love & death, she knits two topics together that are never far from one's mind. Her third book, The fire behind my eyes, is available on amazon.com. She now resides in Sandpoint, Idaho with her cat, Casanova.