

## **New Canadians, Old Values?**

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MICHAEL ADAMS AND AMY LANGSTAFF

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Politicians who open their mouths about ethnicity and sexual mores may get bitten, say pollsters  
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Who would have thought? The community responsible for Toronto's gay pride parade, reliably the opposite of dull, finds itself at the centre of a legislative debate that has become boring. Canadians are beginning to experience same-sex marriage fatigue just as their elected leaders finally get around to officially discussing it.

The debate, though vociferous, is boring because it's so predictable.

Conservatives ranting, Liberals muttering about the Charter, young urbanites shrugging their approval, old ranchers shaking their heads, and immigrants -- but this could get interesting after all. Where are new Canadians in all this? Stephen Harper thinks he knows, and has taken a chance by coming out swinging against the Liberals' same-sex marriage legislation, trying it as a wedge issue to separate new Canadians from the Liberal Party they usually support by default. Even as he drives that wedge, Mr. Harper is also trying to build a bridge: between his older, Western, rural, social conservative supporters, and the 18 per cent of Canadians who are foreign-born. Betting that immigrants to Canada have brought conservative social values with them from their countries of origin, Mr. Harper is positioning the Conservatives as the party of traditional values and traditional families. He thereby risks alienating more centrist members of his party, fiscal conservatives repelled by the plain homophobia of some Conservative MPs, and even libertarians who think the state should stay out of the bedrooms of the nation. He certainly won't woo many young Liberals into Conservative ranks with aggressive social conservatism. For Canadians under 30, ever more diverse, the importance of minority rights is assumed: Their motto could be "the Other 'R' Us." Moreover, in light of Mr. Harper's endorsement of the Liberal budget, same-sex marriage is emerging as the only sharp philosophical cleavage between the government and the official opposition. Playing his side of that cleavage gracefully will be crucial to Mr. Harper's fortunes in the coming months, maybe longer.

John Ibbitson recently wrote that he believes Mr. Harper's strategy will backfire: that immigrants are smart enough to know minority groups need to stick together and support parties that will protect the rights of even the least popular among them. This makes sense as an argument from political self-interest, but as Karl Rove and George W. Bush have shown in the United States, sometimes values (especially visceral ones) can trump self-interest. What are the values of Canadians not born in this country? Our data indicate that Mr. Harper, in one area, has hit the nail on the head. Values profiles of foreign-born Canadians and those of Canadians who identify

as Conservatives match up almost perfectly on matters of gender, sexuality, and the traditional family. Immigrants, like Conservatives, are more likely than other Canadians to believe that men should be men and women women, that real families are headed by married heterosexuals (even common-law unions fail to satisfy these two groups), and that when it comes to matters sexual, restraint and propriety should rule the day.

Based on this information alone, Mr. Harper's father-knows-best pitch to immigrants should be a slam dunk.

But values are not just deep; they're broad. While political pundits often use the word values as shorthand for the now-famous U.S. term "moral values" (meaning same-sex marriage, abortion, capital punishment, and so on), values in fact extend much further than that. And on most values, new Canadians look very different from Mr. Harper's base.

To begin with, immigrants are less attached to nationalism and regionalism than are Conservatives. Predictably, immigrants feel their identities are mixed (they tend to agree with statements like "I feel I am more a citizen of the world than a citizen of my country").

Although they may be happy to live in Canada, they don't feel their Canadian citizenship is fundamental to their identity. And they're much less attached to the region where they've settled than are Conservatives like Mr. Harper, who left a Toronto suburb to end up in Calgary.

On a related note, immigrants are vastly more interested in cultural pluralism than are Conservatives. This isn't just a matter of seeking tolerance and friendly immigration policies for their own groups; new Canadians are enthusiastic about interacting with diverse others, agreeing with statements like "I learn a great deal from meeting people who are different from me," and, "Other cultures have a lot to teach us; contact with them is enriching." Conservatives are more likely than immigrants and Canadians in general to say they are not stimulated by diverse others and their cultures.

Third, values profiles show that new Canadians, like Liberals, are either neutral or positive on matters of environmental protection.

Conservatives are decidedly negative. Immigrants are more likely than Conservatives to say that they try to buy products that are eco-friendly, that they worry about catastrophic results of environmental degradation, and that environmental protection should be a major priority, up there with economic growth.

Finally, new Canadians are much more likely to favour active government than are Conservatives. Many immigrants came to Canada in part for the economic protections they knew it would afford, so it is not surprising that they are much more likely than Conservatives to believe that government is part of the solution, not part of the problem. In this belief, they are strikingly similar to Liberals.

At the other end of the scale, Conservatives are much more likely than other Canadians, including the foreign-born, to be resigned to poverty (that of others, at least) as a fact of life -- not as a problem the government should work actively to solve.

Overall, then, the values-match between Conservatives and new Canadians is patchy at best, with more patches of difference than of similarity. Mr. Harper's efforts to harness strong feelings about same-sex marriage to gain political ground are understandable, and in some ways his strategy is sound. But values research indicates the union of Conservatives and new Canadians may be one arranged marriage that just doesn't take.

Michael Adams, author of *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values*, is president of the Environics group of companies, where Amy Langstaff is a research associate.