

Right-wing think tanks multiplying in Canada

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When Donald Rumsfeld left the Bush Cabinet, he quickly found a new job at Hoover Institution, one of dozens of powerful and wealthy right-wing think tanks (such as the Heritage Foundation, the Hudson Institute and American Enterprise Institute) that wield tremendous influence in US politics.

Canada's best-known counterpart is the Fraser Institute, founded in 1974. Over the years, it has been joined by others, including:

- the Manning Centre, created by Preston and his wife Sandra to train people how to succeed at conservative politics;
- the Ottawa-based Institute for Canadian Values, which has as its executive director Joseph Ben-Ami, a former political organizer for Stockwell Day.; and
- the Ottawa-based Institute for Marriage and Family, created by Dr James Dobson's powerful US Focus on the Family (Canada), to provide socially conservative research and advice.

The Work Research Foundation denies that it is "affiliated" with the Christian Labour Association of Canada, although though two of its seven board members, and several of its staff, are drawn from that organization.

Now meet the Hamilton-based Work Research Foundation (WRF). In mid-October, the WRF sponsored a lecture by Dr Paul Marshall, Senior Fellow Hudson Institute, at Ottawa's exclusive Rideau Club. His topic: "God, International Affairs and the Global Economy."

On hand to facilitate this lecture, on the 15th floor of a downtown office tower, was WRF's vice-president of research, Ray Pennings, an unsuccessful Canadian Alliance candidate in the 2000 federal election. His colleague, senior researcher Russ Kuykendall, is a former legislative assistant to Manitoba MP Inky Mark and a graduate of the Alberta Bible Institute in Calgary.

Paul Marshall's talk reflected the position of the Hudson Institute, which, in its own words, is particularly interested in the war on terror and the future of Islam. A corporatist institution, it is also concerned with market reforms and the 21st century welfare state.

Marshall said that the role of religion has been all but neglected in international relations. That lack of knowledge is dangerous, he said, and was one reason that the US was caught off guard

on September 11, 2001. He also talked about what he called the "striking relationship" between religious freedom and economic prosperity, particularly in Christian countries. On the other hand, he posited that "closed systems" such as those found in many Muslim countries stunt economic growth.

Marshall didn't say much about Canada, although he did take a passing swipe at Louise Arbour, formerly a Supreme Court Justice and now the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. He stated that in Canada one can be fined for speaking out against homosexuality, but he provided no example or corroborating detail.

Although Marshall's talk was predictable, his presence in Ottawa was somewhat puzzling. Who, exactly, is the WRF and why did it feature a talk by someone from the Hudson Institute?

The WRF describes itself as a Christian-inspired think tank that seeks "an alternative model for industrial relations policy." The group was created by the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC), which in turn arose from the Christian Reformed church about 50 years ago. The CLAC describes itself as both a "bona fide trade union" and an "alternative labour movement" — one based on Christian social principles. It claims to support no political party.

The CLAC claims to have 43,000 members in five provinces, with a concentration in Alberta and southern Ontario, and describes itself as having the third largest union presence in Ontario's long-term care sector. The CLAC is no fan of the Canadian Labour Congress. The labour movement, in turn, sees CLAC as essentially a company union (or worse), which is making inroads into Alberta's notoriously anti-union tar sands industry.

The WRF insists that it is an independent organization and is sensitive about its ties with CLAC even though two of its seven board members, and several of its staff, are drawn from that organization. The WRF recently admonished a sympathetic religion writer who had written that the two organizations were "affiliated."

Peter Menzies, a former publisher of the Calgary Herald, is a senior fellow of the WRF, and acting in that capacity he wrote a recent op-ed article in The Globe and Mail warning the Alberta government not to raise royalties in the tar sand sands. Menzies also has a consulting company and lists as clients two other conservative think tanks — the Manning Centre and the Fraser Institute. The Fraser Institute's senior research fellows include Preston Manning, Mike Harris and Ralph Klein.

Conservative think tanks have been very profitable ventures in the US. [The National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy 1999 report, \\$1 Billion for Ideas: Conservative Think Tanks in the 1990s](#) concluded that, "the conservative policy establishment is perhaps the key generator and purveyor of public ideas." Follow-up reports in 2004 ([Axis of Ideology: Conservative Foundations and Public Policy](#)) and 2005 ([Funding the Culture Wars: Philanthropy, Church and State](#)) traced the funding and influence of the ever-expanding field, in greater detail.

In Canada, too, the Fraser Institute has expanded beyond its initial Vancouver base to open

offices in Calgary, Toronto, Montreal, and Tampa, Florida. The Institute offers tax-deductible receipts for donations, in the US as well as in Canada.

Together with the Manning Centre, the Institute for Marriage and the Family, and the Institute for Canadian Values, the Fraser Institute anchors a matrix of conservative organizations whose personnel attend each other's conferences, write for each other's newsletters and appear as spokespersons on sympathetic media to discuss the latest budgets, elections and court cases.

These organizations share a deep suspicion of government, an antagonism toward social programs and a dislike for the labour movement. They have taken ideas once considered to be on the fringe right and moved them into the mainstream debate.

News media regularly cover Fraser Institute news releases on topics like "Tax Freedom Day", wait times in health care, and report cards on public schools. These terms frame the public debate and overshadow questions of corporate responsibility, human rights, and education as the foundation of democracy.

The emergence of all these organizations might indicate that Canada is now seen as fertile territory for the think tank industry. If so, we all (and unions especially) should brace for an onslaught of "free market" propaganda. The challenge for progressive groups is provide better information and to distribute it widely within the community.

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