# POLITICS OF THE UNCONSCIOUS "NEW" CANADIANS

*Posted on May 1, 2011 by keghart.com*



**Category:** Opinions

# The Bigger Picture: Politics of the Unconscious "New" Canadians

May 28, 2011, by Viken L. Attarian

**An old "new" reality**

Ever since the May 2, 2011 Federal election, the Canadian media has been referring to how the Conservative Party has become the party of the "new" Canadians; how Immigration Minister Jason Kenney was the real strategist behind the majority handed to the Conservatives and how Ontario was essentially won by this "ethnic" vote, securing a "stable" four years for Stephen Harper to implement his political agenda.

# The Bigger Picture: Politics of the Unconscious "New" Canadians

May 28, 2011, by Viken L. Attarian

**An old "new" reality**

Ever since the May 2, 2011 Federal election, the Canadian media has been referring to how the Conservative Party has become the party of the "new" Canadians; how Immigration Minister Jason Kenney was the real strategist behind the majority handed to the Conservatives and how Ontario was essentially won by this "ethnic" vote, securing a "stable" four years for Stephen Harper to implement his political agenda.

I personally abhor the moniker of being a "new" Canadian, since I have been a citizen for close to a quarter century and have been diligently paying my taxes for longer than that. Many Canadians born here after 1989 are "new"er than me. And yet, as a long-time member of the Liberal Party of Canada and a Canadian by choice, I have witnessed this shift of the "new" Canadian / ethnic / immigrant vote from the Liberals to the Conservatives as described by the media. It was non-existent in the seventies (so I am told), a trickle in the eighties, a small stream in the nineties, turning into a torrent in the early years of the millennium and it has now become a flood that has all but drowned the Liberal Party.

Why has this happened? Is it really the genius of the Harper Conservatives to have cultivated this

immigrant "conservatism"? Has it always been there and was recently rediscovered? Is it something the Liberals did or did not do?

It is arguably a combination of all of the above, but also I think, there is something else that is radically different. That something is what the Liberal strategists have not only failed to realize, but have miscalculated due to their own narrow world-view imposed by the self-delusional concept of the "naturally governing party".

**Relationship to power: citizen vs. courtier or subject**

This new element has to do with the fundamental understanding of the role of state power and its relationship to individuals. In Western liberal democracies, at least on the theoretical level, the citizen does play a fundamental role and, it could be argued, that the citizen also holds some practical power as well. The main sources of this power are not only the constitution of the country in question, but also its legislative structure, the active presence of an opposition, societal and historical evolution, the in-country political traditions, the structural checks and balances, but most of all, the independent judiciary that can curb the power that the state wields.

As a contrast, the state in most developing countries is a source of power that is almost unchallenged. The state is either corrupt or despotic or both. In which case, the fundamental relationship of the individual with the state structure is not one of a citizen, but either of one who is ruled as a subject (regardless if the regime is a monarchy or not) or, if one belongs to the privileged elites, then that individual is, as rightfully pointed out by the great essayist John Ralston Saul, a courtier.

The courtier is someone who moves in the corridors of power with a very specific self-interest of benefiting from the existing structure. That self-interest can be in the form of personal benefit, or in the form of benefit to a group he or she represents or is a member of. The difference, as argued by John Ralston Saul again, is that the courtier is only motivated by self-interest, whereas the citizen is motivated by disinterest, or better known as the public or common good.

In most developing countries, the political involvement of individuals will therefore be mostly motivated by that self-interest. It is what fuels the military coups and often the running of political candidates who get "elected". Corrupt governments are the fertile ground for the enrichment of the politicians and the circles they belong to.

This view of government is what poisons the public attitude. This same view also assumes that state structures and government policies and programs are unchanging. Why? Because they are not there to serve the citizens, but rather the narrowly defined elites or special interest groups. Hence,

the issue is not about changing government to alter its fundamental orientation towards becoming a truly representative arm of all citizens, but rather a competition about which special group is supposed to benefit. In a sense, the most apt metaphor is one of criminal gangs vying for control of a territory. The inhabitants of that territory will never be rid of all gangs, but will only change the criminal boss. The "contract" stays intact and unchanging. Everyone continues to pay protection money, just maybe, every once in a while, to someone else.

The courtier behaves like the gang member. The courtier seeks power and control for self-benefit and is an active opportunist. What about the subject? The subject seeks to survive and also benefit the most from the existing structure, essentially to feed off the scraps of the courtiers and elites, because the subject has no stake in government and state structures. Subjects are therefore passive opportunists; they believe that they cannot change anything; therefore, the most logical outcome is to pander to the elites and to try to look as well after one's own interest.

In the metaphor of systems theory, courtiers and subjects seek only to sub-optimize, while the whole structure could come crashing down. They are the blindfolded managers busy creating the best narrow section in a factory assembly line, not caring what they are producing, nor whether the product is well-designed at all, or even if anyone wants the product at the output. They could monopolize the whole of the company resources just to be super-efficient in their narrow subsection. They always assume that their work is the most important and relevant and that resources will always be there to let them complete their quest. This is the permeating approach of self-interest.

Democracy is the antithesis of the above. Democracy is agreement about the common good. It is about an informed disinterest practiced by citizens who are actually interested in the societal "optimization" as a whole, not for its individual sectors or groups within. Why? Because citizens believe that a society is much more than the sum of its parts, and that the common good has value for all, as well as for future generations. Citizens never assume that state structures and policies are eternal because they know that they need to continuously defend them by their active and informed involvement. Citizens are not involved for the short term, not even for a period comparable to their lifetime, but rather continuously.

The long-term erosion of democracy in favour of corporatism has taken away our self-view as citizens. For those who have lived most of their lives as subjects or courtiers in developing countries and have little or no in-depth understanding of these issues, their political worldview is profoundly tainted against imagining themselves as citizens. This makes these so-called "ethnic" constituencies ripe for corporatism because they already have such a behavioral and historical frame of reference to relate to.

This is the real discovery of Harper and Kenney. Ideologically, Canada has never had a party in power that is so blatantly corporatist. The real Progressive Conservatives believed in the public good and in the disinterested citizen. What we have in place today is nothing of the sort. It is the Western-based Reform Party that now has a majority which believes in the dismantling of government and has raised the banner of across-the-board privatization. The only thing in common with the Conservative Party that has historically governed this country is just a name. The issue is that "new" Canadians have no historical memory of the original to fall back on. They see the state either as subjects or as courtiers; an institution to benefit them as individuals or as a tribe. And that is just fine with the Harper Conservatives, because corporatism is their raison d'être.

This is also what the Liberal Party of Canada not only failed to realize, but in fact, at a very high-level and fundamentally as well, encouraged the erosion of the concept of citizenry by its own approach to politics. The courtier behavior is found all over the Canadian recent political landscape, examples include the defection of Liberal MP Wajid Khan to the Conservatives in exchange for privilege, the counter defection of Belinda Stronach to the Liberals in exchange for a cabinet post (and a potential run at the leadership), the appointment of the tribal separatist demagogue Jean Lapierre to key Liberal positions in Parliament and government, the blatantly overt influence peddling of Rahim Jaffer, the husband of Conservative MP Helena Guergis and on and on. This is also what we see in Quebec provincial politics, where the governing "federalist" Liberal Party appoints individuals with acknowledged separatist political viewpoints as senior bureaucrats and even to provincial cabinet posts.

This blatant disregard of the policy platforms of the party, of the desire of the membership and of the political activism at the grassroots level, undermines the democratic institutions of the political parties relegating them to become machineries to seize power. Therefore they attract courtiers. Ideas become secondary to ideology, policy activism gets turned into propaganda, debates become popularity contests between media personalities and cynicism grows within the ranks of the party supporters but, most importantly, within the population who see no alternative but to, at best, vote in protest. At worst, they get resigned to the narrow mercantilist viewpoint imposed on them by the special-interest groups robbing them of their role as citizens.

**What do immigrants seek in their adopted homeland?**

To understand what "new" Canadians seek, it would be helpful to refer back to the three roles of subject, courtier and citizen, in that order. And perhaps in no case is it better illustrated than in the issue of the evacuation of Canadian citizens of Lebanese origin fleeing the Lebanese-Israeli war of 2006. This was arguably the largest peace time evacuation effort ever undertaken by the Canadian government, moving over close to 15,000 citizens who had been residing in Lebanon during the war. It should be noted that at the time, according to the admission of Foreign Affairs, close to

40,000 citizens had registered with the Canadian embassy. The evacuation effort, therefore involved slightly over one third of all who had registered. Even, it is estimated that a large percentage of Canadian citizens never registers with the Canadian embassies abroad. So the real number of Canadian passport holders in Lebanon at the time was likely close to double the number of registrants. Considering that according to Statistics Canada figures, the Canadian Lebanese community numbers about 144,000 (2001 figures), this would suggest that, even conservatively, an astonishing ratio of anywhere between 1/3 to 1/2 or even more of Canadians of Lebanese origin actually do not live in Canada.

The cost of this massive evacuation undertaking was estimated at slightly more than $95M to the Canadian taxpayer. This brings it very close to the suggested amount involved in the infamous sponsorship scandal of about $100M (as per the Auditor General, Sheila Fraser), which has cost the Liberal Party so dearly and has arguably destroyed its potential for ever governing Canada again in the near to mid-term future. Massive waste in the tens of billions spent on dubious hi-tech military toys aside, both amounts are relatively puny compared to enormous federal budgets, and yet, nothing incenses the taxpayer more than stories of illicit spending of their money. Subsequent anecdotal evidence suggested that most of those who were repatriated to Canada were not temporarily in Lebanon, but were in fact there permanently and have since returned there. In fact, the French Radio Canada had a whole episode of its investigative program *Enquête* dedicated to the fraudulent misrepresentations of such dubious "citizens", many of Lebanese origin, who have acquired citizenship through bypassing of the Canadian laws, misrepresenting their residency, even collecting social benefits while never having lived here at all, through the use of a whole network of shady "consultants" who create false information and data trails to deceive the authorities.

Now my point is not to demonize Lebanese-Canadians, I am one myself after all. The fact is that I know many Lebanese who are in reality actively engaged as citizens in the utmost democratic sense of the word. Many are my friends and colleagues within and outside the Liberal Party of Canada. My point is that this specific incident has unearthed the large scale attitude of the "new" Canadians towards the country. This is not an attitude of a citizen engaged in disinterest to build a better future for society. It is the attitude of the subject, trying to benefit the maximum from the status quo, even doing it fraudulently if need be. The state is solely a source of benefit and there is no personal sacrifice, not even the basic act of paying taxes locally.

As a further illustration of why this is so and how old habits die hard, it should be noted that Lebanon itself is the ultimate example of a tribal society of self-interest. Its touted "democracy" by the West is a sham, as loyalties lie only to one's religious denomination first, local chieftain second, and to whatever other kleptocracy is in power as third. In fact, such political divisions are part of the unwritten constitutional agreements with each of the three key government positions of the President, the Prime Minister and the Speaker of Parliament allocated to the three largest religious

denominations exclusively, and all government and military senior positions divided up according to a dubious census from 1943 and allocated to one of nearly twenty different communities. Merit has no place. It is the ultimate legitimized discriminatory hiring practice. One has only to question as to what would happen if the Government of Quebec or Canada decided not to hire immigrants, or officially declared that positions are reserved based on one's religious or linguistic origin. Such a government would be torn to bits first by the media, then by the opposition and it would undoubtedly fall soon afterwards. Such a society is by definition, a fertile breeding ground for subjects and courtiers.

Subjects and courtiers have no use for the concept of citizenry. Most "new" Canadians of today are interested to be either a subject or a courtier. This was not the case throughout the 1940s, 50s, 60s or even the 70s. In post WWII, immigrants who came from Europe had seen and lived devastation. They were interested in building not only a future for themselves and their children, but also a new and just society based on self-sacrifice. Why? Because, most could not have survived the war had it not been for the sacrificial disinterest of the liberator soldiers, or the societal support mechanisms that were necessary to live through the dark times. They had seen how corporatism had led directly to fascism. Many were also issued from the worker movements and understood that there was a potential to build a society founded on fairness. They also saw that opportunities of the post-war prosperity could only be secured for the longer term if the government, their government, reflected their values, for most of that period, those values were reflected in the Liberal Party of Canada. For those few who came in from developing countries during the 50s to 70s they had experienced the great struggles of liberation from colonialism, they has witnessed and fled violence, they been part of the great social and anti-militaristic upheavals of the period that resonated around the globe. In short, they too experienced the value of social activism and the concern about the public good.

**What do the numbers say and what do they lead us to conclude?**

If we fast forward to today, we see that the strong social safety net built by all Canadians over the course of the twentieth century is now being used by sectors of the population that have never contributed to building it, nor even behave that they value it sufficiently that they want to be engaged in maintaining and improving it for future generations. Apart from the intrinsic value of holding a Canadian passport, our Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement programs, the universal and no-direct-cost healthcare system, relatively inexpensive higher education and all the panoply of taxpayer-funded services are all a dream come true for anyone in the developing world saddled with the burden of caring for a medium-sized family and a double set of aging parents or grandparents.

According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, from 2000 to 2009, over 1.3 million immigrants

were admitted to Canada. A yearly average of slightly more than 10% of that number consisted of refugees, almost half came in as economic immigrants, and about 40% came in the class of family reunifications i.e. spouses, children and parents of the economic immigrant category, about a quarter of this last category are parents of the original immigrant (i.e. 10% of total immigration numbers). The information gets more interesting if we count that from 1980 to 1995 over 2.7 million immigrants were admitted with similar distributions. This would mean that the overwhelming majority of "new" Canadians come here for purely economic reasons; a large sector of that population arrives as a direct family or extended family of the original immigrant. Assuming no illegal immigration (a tall order indeed), over the past 30 years anywhere between 5 to 6 million immigrants have been admitted to Canada, which would mean that about 500,000 to 600,000 parents would have been part of that group. Assuming, again conservatively that the average economic immigrant's age is about 35 years old, then it would place their parents' age to about 55, the immigration process itself adds at least another 5 years to process the files of parents, so they would arrive in Canada are at least 60 years old if not older and would start collecting OAS and GIS within a handful of years if not months, while benefiting from the health care system immediately upon arrival. This would also suggest that because of the demographics and life expectancy, those same parents of economic immigrants would draw on the social safety net for about two decades. The cost of the OAS and GIS amounts would be an astonishing $6B per year alone, not counting any health care costs; all going to support individuals who have had zero or negligible economic contribution to the country.

Again, I am not arguing for curbing immigration or even disallowing such benefits. I happen to believe that immigration policies and rules, as well as those governing the social safety net are what have made Canada one of the leading countries in the UN Human Development Index. It is a place where people aspire to come and build a better future, precisely because of them. That is the positive side. On the negative side, these same policies, in of themselves, have perhaps encouraged the thinking among immigrant groups that this is the land of plenty where all one needs is to just get in, and on that fact alone, Canada is relatively easier than most Western countries to immigrate to.

What this would suggest is that our generous approach to managing our social needs encourages precisely the behavior that the incident of the Lebanese has unmasked. I am arguing that such subject-like behavior is the natural outcome of many factors, including our own official policies, the socio-economic conditions of countries that have been the source of immigrant populations, and a lack of understanding of these high-level relationships by the policy makers. Fundamentally, it is also the failure of the Liberal Party of Canada not only to grasp these shifting realities, but in fact actively encouraging courtier behavior by its own internal attitudes of strangling healthy debate, focus on power instead of ideas, neglect of the grassroots, nepotism and so on, all of which are arguably the only lines of defense against the larger factors that I outlined above. In fact, by its own focus on courtier/power relations, the Liberal Party of Canada has actively accelerated its own demise; it has set an example that courtier/subject behavior is the one that is ultimately more

important for it and therefore to be rewarded. From a party of great achievements of building Canada, it has actively engaged in erasing its own memory. Why? Because actions always speak louder than words. It is not important to say what you stand for, it is also important to act accordingly. Leadership is only by example. After all, no one would want to go to a dentist who has rotten teeth and gingivitis.

**Ignorance and the unconscious "new" voting realities**

Subject and courtier behavior cannot be completely eradicated in democracies. The issue is really a question of degree. It appears though that the courtiers have won out because they vastly outnumber everyone else. That is certainly the case in all of our governing structures, and it is certainly the case among immigrants. Immigrant populations would likely need to undergo a generational change to be able to convert into an active citizenry. The real issue is that we see today a massive shift against the citizenry in Canadian society at large and therefore an undermining of democracy, so the "new" Canadians will likely not experience any democratic structural practice, they will only witness its dismantling. This is true especially with the Harper majority in place today. What was their first act when they achieved this status? They eliminated the per vote subsidy to the political parties and put that amendment in the budget, so that it will not even be debated as a separate bill. This is corporatism in practice par excellence. Politics and power can now only be funded by those who can afford to do so, the disenfranchised voices do not matter, in fact the majority voices, who voted against Harper, do not matter. It is these same corporatists who would eliminate services such as legal aid, taxpayer-funded linguistic minority challenge rights, and slowly dismantle every single brick of what makes Canada what it is, its just and equitable social fabric built through the past century.

John Ralston Saul argues that such Western societies constitute the Unconscious Civilization because they have no memory. This is a very important point also for "new" Canadians. By definition, they have no historical memory of what Canada is. By experience, they assume that whatever we have as social policies will not change. Why? Because they never did in their home countries, the current Arab spring notwithstanding (it being arguable whether there will be substantial social policy change after the "success" of these revolutions).

"New" Canadian subjects and courtiers fail to realize the democratic contributions made by citizens, through the two governing forces are what have made Canada what it is, the progressive policies of the historical Conservative Party but mainly of the Liberal Party of Canada.

This is by no means an argument for historical entitlement to the confidence of voters. However, there is no realization that the elements of the current Canadian social fabric, eroded as it is, have all been implemented by Liberal governments of this country which acted in the democratic interest or

the self-disinterest of the fully engaged citizenry of the times. These include such tenets of democracy as the Supreme Court of Canada, the first woman MP, the Office of the Auditor General of Canada, Canada's important contribution to the founding of the United Nations, the creation of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the creation of the UN Peacekeeping Mission, the international Ottawa Accord banning land mines, the Canada Council for the Arts, the whole of the social safety net, from family allowances to OAS and GIS payments, to government funding of post-secondary education, to universal health care, full equal rights for women in all domains, official bilingualism, the Canadian flag, the world's first race-free immigration system, the world's first national domestic communications satellite, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the National Gallery of Canada, the Canadian Museum of Civilizations, even the elimination of a $42B annual deficit and gun registry legislation. All of the above have been achieved by Liberal governments, not only at costs to the taxpayer, but also because of important social struggles participated in and often led by the citizenry concerned with the public good.

The "new" Canadians have no memory of most, if any, of the above. They see the above constructs as state services that have been there since the beginning and that will continue to be there. They do not realize that only citizens practicing democracy can build such institutions, but that they also must defend them for posterity. The longer term survival of these achievements can only be guaranteed by an active engagement of the disinterested citizen, not by the corporatist pursuits of the courtier, or by the abuse of self-benefit of the subject.

It is the inexistence of this memory that makes the "new" Canadians into intellectually corporatist conservatives, essentially ripe for the picking by Harper and Kenney. And that is exactly what happened.

As for the Liberal Party of Canada, over the past decade, it had disintegrated into the same corporatist practices, turning its back on its tradition of disinterest and engaging the citizenry. It has thus alienated and destroyed the only bastion of defense against this societal unconsciousness. It is at that moment that the battle was lost.

**A way forward**

I would suggest that the Liberal Party of Canada, by being handed this historical defeat, now has a unique opportunity. It is so far removed from power that its wrong focus should disappear. It also has an opportunity to rid itself of the rampant courtier attitude and hence the courtiers themselves.

This can only be done if the new leadership takes the time to listen to the grassroots. Mr. Rae has to go back to the citizens in each of the 308 ridings. He has to go back to finding the disinterested citizens willing to reengage in democracy, as members, supporters, volunteers, donors and

eventually candidates. That should be the only measurement yardstick of the political position.

But this time, it has to be real, not the false ideological positions of the elites in power. Courtiers out of power, or out of the hope of power, have nothing to attract them. They will abandon ship, likely even move to Harper. And that should be just fine.

Mr. Rae and his successor must seek selflessness, imagination and courage. Citizens by definition have the first and, given the opportunity, will demonstrate that they also have a lot of the other two.