

All wind. No change; A decade ago, Canadian Conservatives met in Calgary under the banner 'winds of change,' with an agenda to overthrow big government. Now, they're in power. But government keeps getting bigger. What went wrong?

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In Halifax this weekend, a small group of Canadian ideological activists --mostly of conservative persuasion -- will attend an annual private event known as Civitas. The history of this group, founded 10 years ago by social conservative William Gairdner, author of such works as *The Trouble With Canada*, has been to act as an uncertain meeting point for a little Who's Who of people with often clashing world views, from radical libertarians to paleoconservatives to Neo-cons and theo-cons and followers of other conservatisms too numerous to mention.

It should be a time of celebration for Civitas attendees in Halifax. The loose collection of people who attend its annual meetings more or less overlap with the group of conservatives who a decade ago launched the Unite the Right movement. Civitas, in fact, was formed in 1997 to carry the torch lit by the Winds of Change conference, the David Frum-led meeting in Calgary in May of 1996 that aimed to launch a united conservative alternative to the Liberals.

"The political left is dead in English Canada," declared Mr. Frum in a Financial Post column in early spring of 1996. On the theory that Canada was then moving to the right, the Winds of Change conference aimed to bring together conservatives --old Tories, new Reformers and others -- into a new coalition. Ted Byfield, on the eve of a unite-the-right meeting in spring, 1997, wrote in the Post that the task "is to unite the right, so that in combination they will be able to diminish Big Government and the paternal state that both the neos and the theos oppose."

As the Civitas-Winds of Change- Unite the Right crowd gathers in reunion in Halifax on the weekend, one assumes the celebration will be muted. A wake would be most appropriate.

The Conservative government now in Ottawa bears no resemblance to the smaller-government, tax-cutting, anti-leftist promise held out at the Winds of Change meeting a decade ago, where Stephen Harper spoke. Ted Byfield's talk of diminished Big Government has given way to policies that increase the role of government. Instead of less government we have Bigger Government.

The last Tory budget was a sweeping continuum of Liberal spending, devoid of tax cuts. New spending records are being set by a Finance Minister who believes business is doing so well it doesn't need tax cuts. Conservative support for farm marketing boards and ethanol subsidies fly in the face of sound free-market principles that Conservatives claimed to support. Flirting with "nation" status for Quebec goes way beyond anything heard at Civitas and Winds of Change sessions. The new green agenda, while skillfully pulling away from Kyoto, is filled with rank distortions and meddlesome programs.

Even the Western Standard, published by Winds of Change organizer Ezra Levant, recently ran a cover story: "The End of Reform: Raising Taxes, Implementing Kyoto, Paying Quebec -- Is This What They Meant By 'The West Wants In'?"

What went wrong? The Winds of Change was all wind and no change.

The problem is that, at base, the conservatives assembled around Civitas have no common foundation or uniting principles. The only idea that holds Canadian conservatives together is a simple one: power. The Liberals had it, they didn't. Now that conservatives have power, they have nothing to fall back on beyond the need to hold on to power.

Conservatives are not people who dislike government, even big government. One of the archetypes of Canadian conservatism, in many respects, is Conrad Black. Mr. Black has many fine qualities, including outstanding insights, but free market economic ideas are not among them. His biography of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, subtitled "Champion of Freedom," is, to say the least, an idiosyncratic take -- for a conservative -- on a president who practically invented, and certainly implemented, Big Government.

"Roosevelt's third great achievement," writes Mr. Black, "was the reinvention of the American state." To bring the United States out of the Great Depression, Roosevelt turned to government spending and intervention, his New Deals. "He involved the government in many areas where its presence had been limited or nonexistent -- industrial recovery, reflation, large-scale workfare programs, Social Security, reform of financial institutions, rural electrification, flood and drought control, stabilization of farm production and prices, conservation, refinancing of home mortgages and farm loans, reform of working conditions, public sector development and distribution of hydroelectric power, generous treatment of veterans, as well as the repeal of Prohibition."

Well, at least one of Roosevelt's multitude of initiatives is worth drinking to. The Black thesis is that Roosevelt's greatness came from his magnificent skill in co-opting the left, then on the rise in depressionera America. "Roosevelt stole the arguments of the left, enacted very diluted legislative versions of them and deprived the left of any possibility of political success."

The Harper Tories are playing the same Rooseveltian game. The similarities are stark in environmental

policy, where extreme green rhetoric is being hooked up to policies that are at least less extreme than programs coming from the Liberals and their allies. The trouble with such clever manoeuvring is it does nothing to curb the growth of Big Government, let alone roll it back. The Tory green plan is a major expansion of government in the economy and entrenches carbon economics as national policy.

As Mr. Black well knows, the massive state interventions launched by Roosevelt, while mild by comparison to what the communists had in mind, nonetheless established big and growing government as the foundation for U.S. and Canadian policy for decades. The first versions of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, part of Roosevelt's war on big business and "the money changers," Mr. Black says "were generally recognized as an intelligent and necessary reform." Ironically, Mr. Black's current problems with U.S. authorities are the direct product of those initial intelligent reforms, expanded dramatically under a succession of administrations.

The rationalization of Roosevelt's Big Government excesses as necessary to ward off worse policies are identical to the thinking that today dominates the Harper Conservatives. More than once I have been told by Tory insiders that there comes a time when principles and ideas must be put aside for the sake of attaining power and holding on to it.

The worrying thing, for those of us with more of a free-market bent than your average conservative, is that the quest for power may have been the main objective in the first place. In retrospect, it seems that the ideas, such as they were, played a secondary role.

What else can explain the current activities of some of the original Winds of Change organizers and Civitas members. In 1996, a young man by the name of Kory Teneycke Young helped found Winds of Change along with Mr. Levant and Mr. Frum. Today, Mr. Teneycke Young is head of the Canadian Renewable Fuels Association and chief lobbyist for ethanol subsidies. He got 'em. Another early player, Ken Boessenkool, is now a public-relations executive who lobbies for a drug company that stands to benefit from the government's \$300-million budget plan to fund a cervical cancer vaccine.

Another Civitas regular and former president of the group is Tom Flanagan, the Alberta university professor who was once Mr. Harper's intellectual guru and co-author of the speech Mr. Harper gave at the original Winds of Change meeting. Mr. Flanagan is a true believer in the Black version of Rooseveltian strategy: It takes Big Government to beat back Big Government. In an op-ed in The Globe and Mail recently, Mr. Flanagan seemed to be trying to send a warning to any think-tanks and pundits against being too critical of the Harper Tories and their failure to cut taxes.

It was a stunning piece, which ended with this analysis: "Too many years out of power have given conservatives an anti-government mentality." Funny, I thought the anti-government mentality came first, and that the objective was to get into power so as to begin reducing the role of government. Mr. Flanagan's phrasing betrays the opposite, that the anti-government mentality was just a facade, a ploy to get into power. The result of this cynical, Rooseveltian policy, in my view, is the Tories dismal standing in the polls today.

At the Civitas meeting this weekend, maybe they'll get around to some of these issues. Sorry I can't be there.

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Black & White Photo: / Former U.S. president Franklin Delano Roosevelt. ;

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