

FEATURE

Politics figured out? True confessions

by Ken Yasenchuk
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So you've just finished reading Barbara Amiel's defence of conservatism, *Confessions*, and you think you've got politics all figured out eh?

Certainly *Confessions* makes some interesting comments on alleged inconsistencies that what Amiel calls "left liberals" have made.

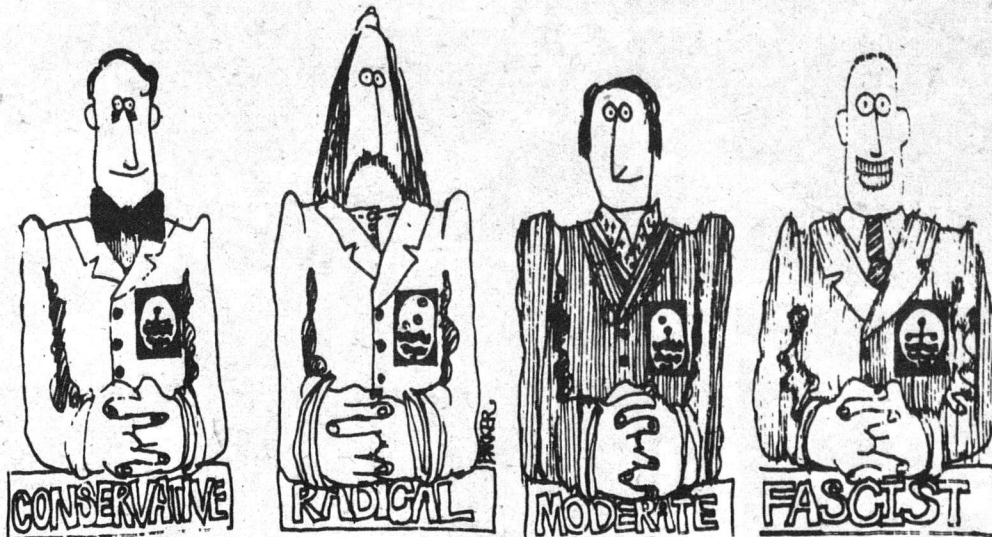
But what about the hypocrisies latent in the general attitude of representatives of the right? Why do they tend to discredit the popular image of the conservative as simply a concerned citizen who seeks the welfare of all groups in society through a strengthening of the rights of the individual against "big government" and rampaging bureaucracy?

Clearly there are some who are genuinely concerned about the growth of government bureaucracy and these concerns are just. But then again, there are elements which are discordant about right-wing politics which render this image rather implausible.

Leftists will explain such inconsistencies in conservative behavior by viewing rightists simply as representatives of their own particular social group or class. It is this conception of the conservative which I will try to demonstrate here.

The traditional conservative stance on seatbelt legislation and helmet legislation for motorcyclists is a good example. Right-wingers will crusade actively against such laws, defending the right of the individual to decide for himself whether to suffer the discomfort of wearing a seatbelt or a helmet. Quotations from Mill's *On Liberty* are flung about, the general idea being that one should have the right to do whatever one wants to do as long as others are not harmed.

This is a fine principle. As well, it is nice to think that one should be able to buy his fluoride in a mouthwash rather than to have it forced upon him in a



public water supply.

But unfortunately the conservative defense of the individual stops there. Things that might make people feel threatened, like the marijuana issue, certainly don't prompt quotations from *On Liberty* at all. These issues, ironically enough, inspire nervous calls for tighter government regulation and enforcement. The chamber of commerce in Hythe, Alberta recently called for the death penalty as a punishment for drug dealers in order to discourage rampant trafficking. (Gracious! How bad can the drug problem be in a place like Hythe, Alberta?).

In the nineteen sixties the ultra-conservative, ultra-wealthy William F. Buckley Jr. suggested that marijuana smokers ought to be conscripted to work camps to be re-educated so that they might once again join the mainstream of society.

Here in Alberta, the bastion of the laissez-faire, macho cowboy philosophy, "where a man can be what he wants to be" to quote a beer commercial, we have had the lowest rate of marijuana discharges together with the highest rate of arrests in the entire country.

Where's John Stuart Mill when you need him?

With respect to taxation, the traditional conservative argument is the less the better, while in

cities dissimilar to Calgary, where there is a higher proportion of renters, this may not be a just argument.

To be civil, it should be mentioned that Calgary, a city with a high proportion of lower middle class property owners, there could conceivably be such a thing as genuine "populist" conservatism. This is certainly not typical however.

Conservatives, especially in the United States, advocate greater arms spending to protect

our much valued democratic freedoms. Whether such spending is necessary or desirable is beside the point. To quote the 1980 Republican party platform, greater arms spending is necessary to correct the mistakes of the Carter administration that stood paralysed in the face of an inexorable march of Soviet or Soviet-sponsored aggression."

But where are they when the very foundations of our democratic way of life are threatened from within?

Right-wingers in Canada often turn a blind eye to mail openings and other infringements of people's civil liberties.

More specifically, and perhaps more outwardly frightening was the mute reaction many conservatives had to Watergate. At a time when the government of the United States was being corrupted and the democratic tradition itself was placed in serious jeopardy largely through the activities of the president himself, Bill Buckley issued the following comment. It was clearly contrary to fundamental American political ideals:

"In defense of the office of the Presidency, he (Nixon) must not be removed. Censored, yes humiliated, yes. But to remove the president is to remove the Sovereign."

Monarchies are nice, but in their place!

The political right would fare much better if they were more consistent in their arguments. These arguments are sound in many ways, but if basic principles of liberal democracy are applied to some groups in society but not to others, then the right leaves itself open to criticism, mistrust and accusations of elitism.

After all, campaigning for freedom of choice with respect to seatbelt legislation while at the same time advocating tough prison terms for marijuana users and even public execution for dealers is not exactly consistent. Is it?

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