God and politics

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When Liberal strategist Warren Kinsella used a stuffed dinosaur toy to mock Stockwell Day's belief in creationism, the televised message to the then-Canadian Alliance leader could not have been more clear: Canada is secular, and you're not.

Four years after the ploy helped seal Mr. Day's 2000 federal election defeat, Stephen Harper's Conservatives were beaten at the polls after they opposed changing the definition of marriage to include same-sex couples.

Experts say both incidents underscore the same lesson in this country: Religious issues won't help you win an election, but they might help you lose it.

"We don't wear religion on our sleeve here," says David Taras, political science professor at the University of Calgary. "We have the example of Stockwell Day, where religion did become an issue, and it seemed to frighten a lot of Canadians."

Nik Nanos, president of Ottawa-based polling firm SES Research, says socially conservative positions on issues such as gay marriage and abortion don't resonate with most voters. "You don't get as much traction out of social issues, at least not enough traction to win," he says.

The Conservative party thought it could get some of that traction among "new Canadian" communities in 2004 when polling showed that many immigrants were strongly opposed to same-sex marriage, but the bump in Tory support never materialized.

"They pitched to that constituency, and it didn't go anywhere," says Nelson Wiseman, a political science professor at the University of Toronto. "The Conservatives misread the polls ... People may have been opposed to same-sex marriage, but that didn't mean they would change their vote."

Mr. Nanos noted the two-term success of the Conservatives under Mike Harris in Ontario, who "steered clear of social issues" and focused on taxation and trimming government spending.

"That's probably closer to a winning paradigm for any conservative party in Canada," he says. "Stick to your knitting and don't talk about social issues."

But some social conservatives are not ready to cede the political arena to those on the other side of the ideological spectrum. Joseph Ben-Ami is executive director of the Institute for Canadian Values, a think-tank formed this past spring to increase the influence of religion and morality on public policy.

"Canadians don't have a true sense of the reasons why we take a social conservative position on certain issues," Mr. Ben-Ami says. "Part of the

problem is not that social conservative ideas have been carefully weighed and rejected, it's that social conservatives have by-and-large abandoned the public policy field, and as a result we have one-dimensional thinking on these issues."

Mr. Ben-Ami cites the abortion issue as an example. "Abortion is largely portrayed as a settled issue in this country, but poll after poll after poll shows the majority of Canadians don't support the position we have in Canada today, which is to say no regulation whatsoever," he says.

"It's not on their radar screens, because it doesn't affect most Canadians on a daily basis, but sometimes we make the mistake of assuming that because an issue isn't at the top of most Canadians' agendas, we don't want anyone doing anything about it."

Even if Mr. Ben-Ami's new organization succeeds in getting a better airing of socially controversial issues, it faces the challenge of preaching to a dwindling choir. According to the 2001 Census, 43% of Canadians said they had not attended religious services in the previous year, a sharp jump from the 28% who said the same thing in 1986.

It would help his cause if there were more people like Suzette Thompson, a 26-year-old student at Canada Christian College in Toronto who plans to make preaching her life's work.

"Sometimes I feel like right is becoming wrong and wrong is becoming right," she says. "If you're making a stand on something and you're not going to be grey -- you're going to be black or white -- then I think you are up for controversy and for people to question you."

"When I think about same-sex marriage and things like that, obviously it goes against my values and beliefs, but at the same time I'm accepting. I do extend love because I think that's what Christ would do," she says.

Ms. Thompson says she believes that social issues don't deserve to be marginalized to the fringes of public discourse -- a position echoed by Charles McVety, the president of Canada Christian College.

"I think people enjoy debating and discussing such issues, and I believe it's critical to motivate voters," says Dr. McVety, who believes political parties would be better served if they took clear positions on social issues, even if they are controversial.

"Will it lose them votes? Yes. Will it gain them votes? Absolutely," he adds.

Mr. Ben-Ami also suggests that conservatism shouldn't be neatly spliced into "fiscal" and "social" branches, since a significant chunk of government expenditures are invested in social programs.

"The debate ought not to be about whether or not we can afford [these programs], but whether they are good programs. You cannot escape the questions of social consequences and the character of the society we're creating. So really, the 'fiscal' conservatives are just saying 'We don't want to deal with those difficult issues.'"

"We understand these are controversial issues and in some cases very divisive, but that's what government is all about -- making tough decisions," he adds.

Mr. Taras agrees that there is a place for those with strong religious convictions in Canadian politics, saying "people with strong moral values can only add to the debate."

However, he has a caveat.

"To the extent that those people migrate to a single party, I think it's harmful to that party. If it's perceived that there's a 'religion party' and there's a 'secular party,' the secular party will be in power for the next 50 years."

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