**Does Canadian Multiculturalism Survive through State Repression?**

PHIL RYAN

*Carleton University*

*Emma Ambrose and Cas Mudde argued in this journal that the absence of far-right parties in Canada can be attributed, among other factors, to “strong state repression of dissent” on multiculturalism policy. This article provides numerous examples of such dissent, to show that the state repression invoked by Ambrose and Mudde does not exist. The article also argues that certain “supply-side” explanations for the absence of a strong far-right apply to the Canadian case. It notes in particular how Steven Harper’s Conservative government occupied much of the political space that might otherwise have been available for far-right challengers.*

INTRODUCTION

In “Canadian Multiculturalism and the Absence of the Far Right,” Emma Ambrose and Cas Mudde seek to explain the lack of strong far-right political parties in Canada. They define these as parties that reject democracy itself, or at least challenge “liberal democracy, in particular pluralism and minority rights.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Ambrose and Mudde reject various hypotheses that invoke “demand-side and supply-side factors,”[[2]](#endnote-2) arguing instead that “the failure of the Canadian far right is primarily the result of the country’s unique multiculturalism policy, which is based on a combination of selective immigration policy, comprehensive integration policy, and strong state repression of dissent on these policies.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Were Ambrose and Mudde correct, Canadian multiculturalism would be normatively unacceptable: anyone who cherishes democracy could hardly support a policy that can only survive because the state represses criticisms of it.

But a non-existent phenomenon cannot be invoked to explain an existing one. This article will argue that Canadian multiculturalism has long given rise to vocal opposition: state repression of such opposition simply does not exist. The article will then suggest that Ambrose and Mudde too hastily rejected some alternative explanations.

REPRESSION?

The most curious aspect of Ambrose and Mudde’s state-repression hypothesis is that they fail to provide any evidence for it. Instead, they point to state regulation and control of matters *other than* opposition to multiculturalism. Canada, they tell us, has “one of the strictest and most rigorously enforced antidiscrimination legislation regimes in the world.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Moreover, “the Canadian government takes a very active and hard stance against acts of hate speech and hate crime.”[[5]](#endnote-5) This “could impact the ability of far right parties to develop, as opposition to immigration can easily be construed as hate speech.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Nowhere do Ambrose and Mudde identify controls on speech opposing multiculturalism policy itself. Their supposition is rather that one can only attack the policy by attacking immigrants, and that anti-immigrant discourse is constrained by the state. They are wrong on the first count, and exaggerate the facts on the second.

In *Multicultiphobia*, I examined long-standing conservative opposition to Canadian multiculturalism.[[7]](#endnote-7) Apart from best-selling attacks such as Neil Bissoondath’s *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*, I found an abundance of hostile coverage and commentary in Canadian newspapers. In 2006, one of the years studied in detail, negative coverage of multiculturalism in the *Calgary Sun* outweighed positive coverage by a factor of roughly 9:1. For two highly influential newspapers, the *National Post* and *Le Devoir*, the ratios were 8:1 and 2:1, respectively.

The negative coverage was not notably restrained or diplomatic. Here are some of the things newspaper readers might have read about Canadian multiculturalism over the years:

•Multiculturalism entails a “return to barbarity”[[8]](#endnote-8);

•“What Canadian multiculturalism promotes, arguably, is an apartheid-like exclusionism”[[9]](#endnote-9);

•Multiculturalism leads to balkanization[[10]](#endnote-10) and “has helped to create a tribal Canada with no political or moral centre”[[11]](#endnote-11);

•“Multiculturalism in many ways breeds Islamic radicalism among deracinated ‘born-again’ Muslims in the West. It foments the climate of grievance and honours the quest for radical authenticity”[[12]](#endnote-12);

•Multiculturalism is “the camouflage behind which Islamists all over the West hide their misogynist, homophobic and segregationist agenda”[[13]](#endnote-13);

•“Multiculturalism spells, ‘Hi, folks, welcome to Lebanon’”[[14]](#endnote-14);

•Multiculturalism has “created ethnic ghettos”[[15]](#endnote-15);

•“Official multiculturalism sends two messages to newcomers. One is: ‘Welcome! Don’t change, we love you just the way you are!’ The other is: ‘You’re coming to live in a country so confused and degenerate we’ve decided our culture isn’t worth preserving, defending or extending. We’ve got nothing to offer you but jobs’”[[16]](#endnote-16);

•Because of multiculturalism, the majority, “concession after concession, continually retreats when faced with the demands of certain communities”[[17]](#endnote-17);

•Multiculturalism has “widened the distance between the two founding nations, and, by indulging whims of hyphenated ethnic minorities, increased divisiveness at home.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

All these attacks on multiculturalism were published in mainstream Canadian newspapers. None of them runs afoul of legal constraints on hate speech. Indeed, the attacks are not particularly hostile towards immigrants as such. Other attacks on multiculturalism, though, do take aim at immigrants. Not surprisingly, Muslims have been the prime targets:

•“This country is a democracy and democracy is founded on Christian principles.... If Muslims, or anyone else, doesn’t like living in a land filled with Christians or in a democracy they should get the hell out”[[19]](#endnote-19);

•“The success of the Western nations that were built on Christian ideals and philosophy has attracted people from other parts of the world... For these people to come with their own ideals and philosophies and to insist on imposing them on the general public is not acceptable”[[20]](#endnote-20);

•“Until recent times, the West has been spoiled by the loyalty of immigrants, even from hostile regions or cultures... In the last 30 years, a new type of immigrant emerged: the immigrant of dubious loyalty. Then, even more alarmingly, came a third phenomenon: the disloyal native-born, sometimes of immigrant ancestry, sometimes of Islamic conversion. The new immigrant seemed ready to share the West’s wealth but not its values. In many ways, he resembled an invader more than a settler or a refugee... we tried to turn this liability into an asset by promoting multiculturalism. We stopped ascribing any value to integration, and began flirting with the notion that host countries aren’t legitimate entities with their own cultures, only political frameworks for various co-existing cultures... Refugees from the East are no threat; colonizers are. That’s where current immigration trends and multiculturalism become a volatile mix.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

Fears of the Muslim minority have found their way from the op-ed pages into expert discourse. One Canadian immigration expert alleges that the Canadian Muslim community displays a “distaste for democratic values.”[[22]](#endnote-22) Testifying before a committee of the Canadian Senate, David Harris, former Chief of Strategic Planning of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, commented: “Mass immigration of Canada’s kind has potential adverse consequences for security and stability... As hundreds fly from Egypt’s upheaval to Canada, consider that 59 per cent of Muslim Egyptians prefer Islamists, radical Muslims, in charge, versus 27 per cent wanting modernizers... One in five Egyptian Muslims sympathizes with our al Qaeda enemy. Roughly 20,000 permanent residents came from Egypt in the past 10 years.”[[23]](#endnote-23)

Just as Canadian laws concerning hate speech do not prevent sharp criticism of multiculturalism, they do not prevent attacks on immigrants in particular. At the same time, they do *constrain* attacks on immigrants: Trumpish comments claiming that members of this or that immigrant group were often “rapists” could trigger legal action in Canada.[[24]](#endnote-24)

One might infer from this that Ambrose and Mudde have simply put their case badly: perhaps Canadian laws have not constrained attacks on multiculturalism, but have nevertheless deprived potential far-right parties of the rhetorical resources they require. Perhaps. At the same time, the success of France’s National Front under Marine LePen suggests that an intelligent far-right leader need not indulge in explicit hate speech in order to build a loyal following. Hate-speech constraints do not kill off the far right, but they may improve the far-right “gene pool,” so to speak.

RECONSIDERING “SUPPLY-SIDE” HYPOTHESES

Ambrose and Mudde reject various “demand-side and supply-side” hypotheses to explain the failure of far-right parties in Canada. The “demand-side” refers to the bases of potential discontent, such as high immigration and unemployment, that might lead many citizens to give the far right a sympathetic hearing. Ambrose and Mudde are on solid ground when they argue that Canadian conditions might have been expected to generate demand-side conditions favorable to the far right: while Canadian immigration levels historically fluctuated in response to labor market conditions, since 1990 successive governments have allowed persistently high immigration levels, with little regard for the unemployment rate or the general state of the economy.

Ambrose and Mudde’s rejection of “supply-side” explanations, however, is too hasty. Sticking with the market metaphor suggested by their terminology, one might say that two key supply-side factors favoring the emergence of a far-right party are (a) an available market niche, and (b) low barriers to entry. Typically, the latter condition is met in “proportional representation systems with low electoral thresholds.”[[25]](#endnote-25) The Canadian system does not meet that condition, yet Ambrose and Mudde correctly note that “the party system has witnessed several successful newcomers, though mostly with a strong regional basis, since the late 1980s.”[[26]](#endnote-26) Despite being a plurality system then, the Canadian system, in Ambrose and Mudde’s view, is “open to massive electoral shocks and (geographically concentrated) challenger parties,” and thus meets one of the supply-side conditions for the rise of far-right parties.[[27]](#endnote-27) As for the market niche condition, Ambrose and Mudde argue that this too is met. Canada has witnessed an “ideological convergence of its main parties,” and “all main parties enthusiastically support Canada’s multiculturalism,” thus leaving “a lot of space to stand out for far right parties.”[[28]](#endnote-28)

In fact, supply-side factors are not as favorable to the emergence of far-right parties as Ambrose and Mudde believe. It is true that new parties can enter the Canadian political scene, but as is generally the case in a plurality system, there’s a price to be paid. During the tenure of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, two splinters broke off from the governing Progressive Conservative (PC) Party: the Bloc Québécois (BQ) and the Reform Party. In the 1993 election, the PCs and their two offshoots together won 48.2% of the popular vote, but only 37% of the seats in Parliament. The Liberal party under Jean Chrétien, with just 41.3% of the vote, took 60% of the seats.[[29]](#endnote-29) In 1997, the Liberals received just slightly more votes than the combined total of the PCs and Reform, yet won almost double the number of seats in Parliament.[[30]](#endnote-30) The plurality system had reminded everyone of its stern lesson: division at one end of the political spectrum usually helps the other end.

What happened next is relevant to Ambrose and Mudde’s second supply-side claim, that “all main parties enthusiastically support Canada’s multiculturalism.”[[31]](#endnote-31) As I noted in *Multicultiphobia*:

In its attempt to “unite the Right,” the Reform Party optimistically relabelled itself the “Canadian Alliance” in 2000. This rebranded Reform Party eventually swallowed the still-moribund Progressive Conservative Party in late 2003, to become the “Conservative Party of Canada.” So this “new” party was comprised of two components: i) Reform, well-known for its adamant opposition to multiculturalism; and ii) the detritus of the Progressive Conservative Party, responsible for passage of the Multiculturalism Act in 1988, but which had formally repudiated multiculturalism in 1996.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Despite this ancestry, the new Conservative Party did *not* directly oppose multiculturalism. Adapting to the fact that multiculturalism continued to enjoy strong popular support in Canada, the Conservative party displayed great tactical intelligence, expressing rhetorical support for multiculturalism, but a multiculturalism harnessed to social-conservative issues. The right’s traditional opposition to calls for affordable licensed day-care, for example, was now linked to a pro-multiculturalism discourse: a national day-care system, argued conservative politicians, would trample on the sensitivities of cultural minorities, who wish to raise their children according to their own “values, cultures and traditions.”[[33]](#endnote-33) Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper, for his part, claimed that “cultural communities” were opposed to gay rights, and declared same-sex marriage to be “an assault on multiculturalism.”[[34]](#endnote-34)

These comments point to a vital strategic shift on the Canadian right. Previously, right-wing opponents of multiculturalism had blamed it for allowing immigrants to freeze their identities and values, rather than adapt to their new country.[[35]](#endnote-35) Now, however, Harper’s party hoped to draw on those same “frozen” immigrant values to counter equality claims from women and gays.[[36]](#endnote-36) At the same time, the Conservatives moved to strip multiculturalism of its equality-promoting aspects. The Court Challenges Program, which had helped marginalized groups protect their legal and constitutional rights, was abolished in 2006.[[37]](#endnote-37) Further, the multiculturalism policy’s traditional emphasis on “removing barriers, racism and discrimination” was supplanted by a narrower agenda: combating anti-Semitism.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Given these shifts, it is not surprising that the importance of multiculturalism programs eroded during the Harper years. In 2008, responsibility for the policy was transferred from the Department of Canadian Heritage to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). Andrew Griffith, a Director General within CIC during the Harper years, argues that this shift had important consequences. Multiculturalism expertise and programs became scattered through CIC.[[39]](#endnote-39) Remarkably, programs to promote the long-term integration of newcomers were allowed to wither.[[40]](#endnote-40) Griffith concludes that such policy changes, over time, have brought the government “closer to the original Reform Party objective of 1996-97 of abolishing multiculturalism.”[[41]](#endnote-41)

So it is incorrect to say that “all main parties enthusiastically support Canada’s multiculturalism,” as Ambrose and Mudde claim. Further, Conservative party strategy reduced the potential market niche of further-right parties in other ways, ways that took into account the constraints of the electoral system. To form a government in Canada, a party generally has to win more parliamentary seats than any other party. Many of Canada’s 338 federal electoral ridings now have a substantial proportion of voters who are immigrants, children, or grand-children of immigrants. This makes a blanket anti-immigrant appeal politically inexpedient: while it might succeed in particular ridings, it would hurt the party overall. A right-wing party, then, must find more targeted ways of satisfying its core constituency. The Conservatives did this through a stream of “publicized actions that mean less than meets the eye,” to borrow Murray Edelman’s memorable description of the strategy of “political spectacle.”[[42]](#endnote-42)

Thus, rather than portraying immigrants themselves as a threat, as do parties on the European right, the Conservatives vowed to address the threat of particular immigrant *practices*. When re-writing the guide used to prepare immigrants wishing to apply for citizenship, the government added this solemn warning: “Canada’s openness and generosity do not extend to barbaric cultural practices that tolerate spousal abuse, ‘honour killings,’ female genital mutilation, or other gender-based violence. Those guilty of these crimes are severely punished under Canada’s criminal laws.”[[43]](#endnote-43) The fact that all these practices are illegal did not stop the government from enacting its “Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act” in 2015, criminalizing them a second time. During the 2015 election campaign, the Conservative party further promised to establish a “tip line” that people could use to inform on neighbors suspected of engaging in “barbaric practices.”[[44]](#endnote-44)

In its final year, the Harper government confronted another “threat”: that of niqab-wearing women. After a court struck down a policy dictating that women must show their faces during citizenship ceremonies, Harper declared in parliament that the niqab is “rooted in a culture that is anti-women.”[[45]](#endnote-45) It was hard to see this as anything but an attack on Islamic culture as a whole. Moreover, the government knew very well that it was tapping into a rich vein of opposition to multiculturalism, quite unrelated to any supposed concern for the well-being of niqab wearers.[[46]](#endnote-46)

So the Harper government was able to mobilize sentiments associated with multicultiphobia while claiming to be motivated by egalitarian concerns. The issue surfaced again during the 2015 election, and for a time it seemed that the Conservatives could surf a wave of xenophobia to reelection. In the event, however, the Conservatives were *too* adept at occupying the political space that would otherwise have been available to far-right parties, and in consequence lost much of their more moderate support. The 32% of the popular vote taken by the Conservatives in the 2015 election was the second-worst showing by the right as a whole in Canadian history.[[47]](#endnote-47)

CONCLUSION

Much of Ambrose and Mudde’s analysis is solid; this article has focused only on points of disagreement. One of the key elements of their explanatory hypothesis is quite mistaken: opposition to multiculturalism has not been repressed in Canada. Some supply-side explanations for the weakness of the far right, moreover, are relevant to the Canadian case. The electoral system continues to represent a strong disincentive to the emergence of parties at either end of the political spectrum, and the Harper Conservatives skillfully reduced the potential market niche of far-right parties, while retaining sufficient support from moderate voters... until late 2015.

This strategy may tell us something about the future of electoral politics in much of the Western world. The tactics of the Harper Conservatives, like those of an avowedly right-wing leader such as France’s Marine LePen, suggest that appeals to the far right may become increasingly sophisticated, that subtle “dog-whistle” politics may yield more widespread electoral success than the bluster and bombast of a Donald Trump. Time will tell.

NOTES

Phil Ryan is Associate Professor in the School of Public Policy and Administration, Carleton University. He is the author of *After the New Atheist Debate* (2014) and *Multicultiphobia* (2010), both from University of Toronto Press.

1. Emma Ambrose and Cas Mudde, “Canadian Multiculturalism and the Absence of the Far Right,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 21: 214 (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 217. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 214. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ambrose and Mudde, “Canadian Multiculturalism,” 229. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Phil Ryan, *Multicultiphobia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Jean-Marc Léger, “La souveraineté comme voie d’accès à l’universel,” *Le Devoir* (4 July 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. W. Baird Blackstone, “Multiculturalism Is a Dividing Force,” *Vancouver Sun* (27 May 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Marc Thibodeau, “La SSJBM propose sa déclaration d’indépendance,” *Le Devoir* (11 March 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Paul Russell, “The Week in Letters,” *National Post* (28 Aug. 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Jonah Goldberg, “Canada’s Learned the Price of ‘Nice’,” *National Post* (9 June 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Tarek Fatah, “Hypocrisy Masquerading as Diversity,” *National Post* (14 June 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. George Jonas, “The Outsiders,” *National Post* (3 Jan. 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Mahfooz Kanwar, “Burka Veiled Threat to Canadian Culture,” *Calgary Sun* (24 Sep. 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ian Robinson, “Ominous Face of Multiculturalism Revealed,” *Calgary Sun* (11 June 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. André Racicot, “Lettres: L’angélisme naïf,” *Le Devoir* (13 June 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Salim Mansur, “Liberal-speak Leaves Nation Divided,” *Calgary Sun* (8 Jan. 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Licia Corbella, “Divided Loyalties,” *Calgary Sun* (18 June 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Kim Lian Khoo, “Multiculturalism Destroys,” *National Post* (29 Aug. 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. George Jonas, “A Question of Loyalty,” *National Post* (10 March 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Daniel Stoffman, *Who Gets In?* (Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 2002), 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Senate of Canada, *Proceedings of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology* (3 Feb. 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Still, consider this rant published during the 2006 World Cup, which was celebrated with street parties throughout Toronto: “I live at College and Ossington [in downtown Toronto], and have had to put up with some annoying s‑‑t lately. So I just want to say: F--- you to the entire country of Portugal. You drunken whistle-blowing trash throwing f---- you.” Angela Murphy, “The City,” *National Post* (6 July 2006). Even Donald Trump might not indulge in language like that. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ambrose and Mudde, “Canadian Multiculturalism,” 220. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. www.parl.gc.ca/parlinfo/Compilations/ElectionsAndRidings/ResultsParty.aspx (accessed 4 Oct. 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. By 1997, the BQ’s ideological evolution meant that it could no longer be considered part of the electoral Right. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ambrose and Mudde, “Canadian Multiculturalism,” 220. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ryan, *Multicultiphobia*, 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. House of Commons, *Debates* (15 Feb. 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. House of Commons, *Debates* (16 Feb. 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. See, for example: Neil Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2002), 43; Jack Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1998), 16; Richard Gwyn, *Nationalism without Walls: The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995), 199. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. The strategy was on display right to the last days of the Harper government. In the 2015 election campaign, his party placed ads in Chinese and Punjabi community newspapers warning that a Liberal government would be “putting brothels in our communities.” Mark Gollom, “Ads claiming Trudeau supports brothels target ethnic social conservatives,” *CBC News* (15 Oct. 2015), http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada-election-2015-negative-ads-ethnic-media-1.3270527 (accessed 18 Oct. 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Another below-the-radar policy shift symbolized the Conservatives’ view that immigrants should stop thinking of themselves as rights-bearing citizens: the Canadian Charter of Rights is no longer distributed to new citizens at citizenship ceremonies. Andrew Griffith, *Policy Arrogance or Innocent Bias: Resetting Citizenship and Multiculturalism* (Ottawa: Anar Press: 2013), 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 92. This seems foolhardy since, as Ambrose and Mudde correctly note, integration efforts helped reduce the potential for a right-wing backlash against immigrants. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Griffith, *Policy Arrogance*, 100. It should be noted that this claim is not made by a public official resentful of political meddling with his favored program. To the contrary: Griffith’s overall position is that the Conservatives had a legitimate democratic mandate to re-orient policy, and that officials were not sufficiently respectful of this fact. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship* (Ottawa: Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Eric Andrew-Gee, “Conservatives Vow to Establish ‘Barbaric Cultural Practices’ Tip Line,” *Globe and Mail* (2 Oct. 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. House of Commons, *Debates* (10 March 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. The government commissioned an internal poll that showed widespread support for the niqab ban. Those who support the ban were asked to identify the main reason for their position. Answers suggesting unease with multiculturalism (e.g. the niqab shows “disrespect for our cultural norms”) outweighed the view that the niqab is “detrimental to women” by a factor of 22:1, http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/pwgsc-tpsgc/por-ef/privy\_council/2015/047-14-e/tables.htm (accessed 12 Nov. 2015) [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Based on official data at: www.parl.gc.ca/parlinfo/Compilations/ElectionsAndRidings/ResultsParty.aspx (accessed 12 Nov. 2015) [↑](#endnote-ref-47)