

Can populist energy be constructively harnessed for productive purposes?

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 25, 2024

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Preston Manning is the former leader of the Reform Party of Canada and a former leader of the Opposition.

In many parts of the world, bottom-up populist movements and parties, usually formed as a reaction to the policies and actions of elitist governments and their academic and media allies, are reshaping the politics of countries like Britain, France, Italy, Poland, Romania, Germany, Argentina and El Salvador – with more to come.

And of course, in the recent U.S. election, where the unruly bottom-up populist forces currently represented by Donald Trump and JD Vance defeated the elitist Democratic establishment of Obama-Biden-Harris, we have yet further evidence of this worldwide trend.

Rather than seeking to understand the roots of these populist reactions or acknowledging the legitimacy of at least some of their grievances and aspirations, however, the response of the political, academic and media establishments in most countries has simply been to denounce these populist uprisings and their leaders in the most extreme fashion. By now, however, it should be clear that simply denouncing populists as right- or left-wing extremists, or attacking their eccentric fringes rather than addressing their central concerns, is a totally inadequate response. Even as a temporary vote-getting tactic, it failed in both the recent British Columbia and U.S. elections.

Under these circumstances, a more relevant response is to address the question as to whether populist political energy can be effectively harnessed for

constructive causes. And for any Canadian familiar with the political experience of Western Canada, the answer to this question is a resounding “Yes.”

To illustrate, it was the bottom-up populist desire of rank-and-file Westerners for a greater say in the governance of their own affairs at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries that led to the transformation of much of the old North-Western Territory into the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Later, in 1930, it was the populist government of the United Farmers of Alberta, in league with federal MPs belonging to the populist Progressive Party of Canada, who secured the constitutional amendment that gave those Western provinces ownership of their own natural resources: an example of populist energy successfully harnessed to secure constructive constitutional and governance changes.

On a completely different front, the first woman to be elected to a democratic assembly in the British Empire was Louise McKinney, who won a seat in the Alberta assembly in 1917 as a representative of the populist Non-Partisan League. All of the Famous Five, who secured the recognition of women as “persons” in Canadian law, were members of populist organizations. And Agnes Macphail, the first woman elected to the Parliament of Canada, whose candidacy and election was vehemently opposed by both establishment parties, got there as the candidate for a populist third party. Populist energy – followers of Kamala Harris take note – was successfully harnessed toward advancing the legal and political status of women.

And then, again in Western Canada, two of the major political products of the Great Depression were the bottom-up populist Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (the predecessor of the NDP) and the Social Credit movement and party, which grew dominant in Saskatchewan and Alberta. The leaders and members of the CCF were vehemently denounced by the establishment of the day as left-wing extremists (and closet communists). Yet the populist energy they represented was constructively harnessed for, among other things, the creation of medicare, a health care system eventually adopted nationally. The leaders and the members of the Alberta Social Credit Party were dismissed by the establishment as religious fanatics and denounced as right-wing extremists (and closet fascists). Yet it was the populist-based Social Credit regime that successfully presided over the oil boom triggered by the discovery of crude in Leduc, Alta., in 1947 – avoiding the political corruption that accompanied the discovery of oil in most American states and creating the legislative and

regulatory framework of what has become a multibillion-dollar sector of the Canadian economy.

The attainment of major constitutional changes, major advances in the status of women, universal access to medical care, the corruption-free management of an oil boom – all these constructive accomplishments were made by populist political movements, parties and governments in Western Canada.

How to harness populist political energy for constructive causes is a discussion to which the populist experience of Western Canada again has much to contribute. But first there needs to be an abandonment of the reactionary tendency to simply dismiss populist uprisings as “extremism” on the fringes of our democratic space, and an acceptance of the fact that populist energy can be harnessed to constructive ends if there is the will and a plan to do so.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-can-populist-energy-be-constructively-harnessed-for-productive/>

Allan Fotheringham (“Dr. Foth”) delighted in skewering “Parson Manning” and Air Farce comedians had great fun with that big-eyed, squawky voice.

Parson Manning “humbly” bypasses the role his Reform Party played in reshaping Canadian politics. Exploiting legitimate grievances in Western Canada—I once had a Reform Party membership—Manning et al established themselves in the House of Commons and then the Conservative Party that resulted from the merger of Reform with the Progressive Conservative Party. Thanks to people like snaky Peter MacKay and dead-fish, dictatorial Stephen Harper—his management style was notoriously mean-spirited—hardline conservatives soon took over the party and drove out Red Tories (like me). (Same happened with the Saskatchewan Party after the merger between the PC’s and provincial Liberals.) “These people” are single-minded and stubborn, and do not play fair or compromise any more or any longer than they have to till they get what they want. They then set to locking in their gains.

Elites: Mr. Manning neglects to acknowledge how his father and his cronies established themselves as Alberta’s elite—allied with the oil industry potentates who just made corruption “legal” built into the system. The CCF/NDP did something similar here in Saskatchewan.

We may “thank” Parson Manning for giving us Pierre Poilievre and his ilk. The likes of Preston Manning and Stephen Harper never shut up or relent. Mr. Harper is now AIMCO’s new chairman, not because of his exceptional investment acumen, but because of his ideology and standing with American billionaires like Sheldon Adelson and Albertans like Murray Edwards. TJB