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## Stephen Harper and the Politics of the Bully

THE PRIME MINISTERIAL CAREER of Stephen Harper, whose supposedly “bullying” style has attracted much notice, invites reflection upon the nature of this style: what it means to degrade a particular “other” in political discourse, and, more importantly, whether the nature of that other makes a moral difference. My contention is that it does. We can accept the abuse of the other as intrinsic to the political game, or reject it as a deviation from democratic ideals; but it is too easy to assume that, short of outright barbarisms such as racial slurs, most cases of such abuse are more or less morally interchangeable. They are not, and I would like to try and sort out precisely how and why they differ.

Begin with the premise that a certain mentality embraces the robust demarcation and devaluing of an “out-group,” against whom the “in-group” is defined. In politics, this can manifest in many forms, but does so perhaps most classically in populism, which is predicated on the vigorous assertion of a spontaneously unified “people” against sundry out-groups.<sup>2</sup>

Now the very act of devaluing the other can be decried as at best infantile, a product of insecurity, and at worst grossly oppressive (as with racism, homophobia, etc.). But the way in which we *define* the out-group may make a considerable normative difference. For instance: those forms of nationalist identity wherein the “nation” and the “state” are broadly understood to be coincident *prima facie* tend to define the out-group as some entity external to the state. Thus, the Soviet Union becomes the principal enemy of the United States during the Cold War; or the United States becomes the *bête noir* of Canadian nationalists, from Confederation onward. Granted, defining the other as an external force usually rebounds

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks to John Wright, University of Calgary, for his comments.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Margaret Canovan, “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy,” *Political Studies* 42 (1999): 2–16.

internally to an extent. Communists come to be persecuted at home, the “War on Terror” turns against Muslim citizens, and those who advocate more harmonious relations with the United States or closer alignment to American policy wind up being denigrated as “hostile to Canadian values,” “holding the bully’s coat,”<sup>3</sup> etc. The process has obvious dangers at the best of times.

Nonetheless, there remains a significant distinction to be drawn in singling out an internal, rather than an external, “other” for marginalization and exclusion. This is because when we marginalize citizens of our own polity, we subject them to *power* in a way seldom true for external out-groups. Consider anti-Americanism in Canada. J.L. Granatstein borrows from Robert Fulford to denounce this as “a polite but acceptable form of bigotry. People who would die of shame before tolerating homophobia, racism or anti-Semitism will cheerfully join [in] denouncing the Yanks.”<sup>4</sup> Granatstein may be quite right to condemn anti-Americanism as a foolish and “poisonous force,”<sup>5</sup> but the parallel with racism fails, because anti-Americanism is very hard to connect with any *oppressive activity* on the part of its proponents. Canada has negligible power to exert its will over the United States, and the relationship between Canadians and Americans is in no sense analogous to that which holds between racial minorities and Caucasian majorities. Conversely, when we marginalize members of our own polity by labelling them de facto non-members, then we are, in effect, attempting to bully them out of the democratic conversation, denying or devaluing their citizenship in a normative (albeit not in a legal) sense. If we believe what Berlin called “positive liberty”—the aspiration to self-mastery, through participation in common decision—to be a good, then insofar as we succeed in so framing them, we do them a serious wrong.

There is also a qualitative difference in the implications of choosing certain *types* of internal others. A populist mobilization against actors who can plausibly be demonstrated to wield considerable or disproportionate power within the political community is less self-evidently noxious than a mobilization against the comparatively powerless. This is not, again, to say that a strategy of marginalization/exclusion of internal others can ever be wholly benign. It may be *closer* to benign in circumstances of severe

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<sup>3</sup> Linda McQuaig, *Holding the Bully's Coat: Canada and the U.S. Empire* (Scarborough: Doubleday Canada, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> J.L. Granatstein, *Whose War Is It? How Canada can Survive in the Post-9/11 World* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2007) 78–79.

<sup>5</sup> Granatstein, 108.

oppression, and on behalf of the oppressed; but even then, the strategy is probably best avoided, since civil peace may depend in the long run upon some amount of reconciliation with those internal oppressors. Consider, for instance, Martin Luther King's appeals to wider American values, and his rejection of such an exclusionary politics; or Nelson Mandela's visionary refusal to demonize white South Africans. Nevertheless—returning to the Canadian case—we must draw a moral distinction between familiar examples of populist mobilization against (say) the “established parties” in Ottawa, or Central Canadian dominance of the federation, or “big business”—all fairly unambiguous incarnations of the powerful<sup>6</sup>—and populist mobilization against (say) immigrants, “welfare cheats,” or gays and lesbians—all fairly clear examples of the vulnerable. The one can be a tool, albeit a morally risky one, for achieving a more equitable distribution of power within the polity. The other is classic bullying, feeding the vanity of the strong by preying on the weak.

Many politicians have deployed tactics of the latter kind. Stephen Harper—perhaps recognizing that the marginalization of internal “others” strongly appeals to a certain constituency, but that too broad an application of it grinds against the centre of Canadian political culture—has pursued a relatively modest version of them. His most striking efforts in this respect were directed to delegitimizing his former opponent, then-Liberal leader Stéphane Dion, in an unprecedented campaign of televised attack ads run between elections. One such sally, deployed in January 2007, asserted that Dion “can't even get his own Liberal senators to pass a bill limiting Senate terms”—as though he had sought to do this, and failed—and then offered an extended freeze-frame shot of Dion caught forlornly in mid-shrug, while a baritone voice-over chuckled derisively and excoriated his weakness (“Stéphane Dion is not a leader”).<sup>7</sup> The Quebec versions of these ads, meanwhile, superimposed words about Liberal policy and past practices over hilariously derogatory visuals (pastiche of Dion's startled face twirling comically through the air, having a door slammed upon it, etc.).

Now the novelty here is of degree rather than kind. Harper himself was the victim of remorseless, if decreasingly effective, Liberal attack ads

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<sup>6</sup> This is not to deny that some forms of western-Canadian populism have had unsavoury connotations. Indeed, even the critique of Central Canadian power has ambiguities, inasmuch as a key component of Central Canada is Quebec, the jurisdictional heart of a vulnerable national minority.

<sup>7</sup> As of July 29, 2009, the video could still be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAtuvQFXeuc&hl=en>

in the elections of 2004 and 2006.<sup>8</sup> One can shrug, therefore, make a case from moral equivalency, and argue that this is *la bonne guerre*. All the same, the signal was unmistakably sent that Mr Harper is prepared to degrade and humiliate his chosen “other(s).” The assault, it should be remembered, was principally on Dion’s character (“*he is not a leader*”), and not, as with earlier Liberal attacks on Harper, over imputed matters of substance (a “hidden agenda”). If this charge of “hidden agenda” attributed duplicity to Harper, and so did impugn his character, such *frisson* as it possessed drew more from the unattractiveness of that hypothetical agenda: the awful policies that a Harper government might adopt. The inter-election attacks on Dion invoked substance mainly as a by-product of their primary aim, which was to pour scorn on Dion and irrevocably brand him a hapless poltroon. That the difference is of degree rather than kind does not make it insignificant.

More crucially, though, the Conservative attacks were not put forward in the heat of electoral battle, or according to the rules of Parliamentary engagement. Instead they were wholly removed from these contexts, being undertaken as a major media campaign by a party controlling the high offices of government. We can well ask, then, whether at least part of the visceral appeal of Harper’s persona as a “Strong Leader”—a major theme in his 2008 election campaign—was that it resonated with *whatever segment of the population craves the vicarious gratifications of a politics of abuse and humiliation*: in short, the politics of the bully.<sup>9</sup>

With Dion defeated, the Harper Conservatives undertook a second foray into this style of politics in the spring and summer of 2009. Another round of nationally-televised ads, again deployed between elections, denounces Dion’s successor, Michael Ignatieff, for having spent most of his career abroad, and for being “elitist.” “He’s only in it for himself,” the ads proclaim. Arguably less over-the-top degrading than the Dion spots, these strike a more prototypically populist note, anathematizing the cosmopolitan intellectual for the sin of being precisely that (and thus, by inference, not “one of us”). The tone—open contempt bordering on disgust, coupled with personal attack—remains unchanged.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For an entertaining account, see Paul Wells, *Right Side Up: The Fall of Paul Martin and the Rise of Stephen Harper’s New Conservatism* (Toronto: Douglas Gibson Books, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> I don’t say that this is all there is to it. Harper has surely benefited from the perceived contrast with his predecessor, Paul Martin Jr., whose “Mr Dithers” moniker captured a frenetic and scattershot public style. It is hardly to be wondered at that people might prefer a head of government who projects focus and calm to one who does not. But of course, these are not the qualities that are being projected when one launches a massive ad campaign mocking the leader of the opposition.

<sup>10</sup> See the online version of the campaign at <http://ignatieff.me/> (accessed: July 30, 2009).

Less successful, if highly-publicized, was Harper's apparently off-the-cuff remark during the 2008 election, justifying his government's penurious arts-funding policies through an invidious contrast between artists at "rich galas" and "ordinary people." Here, the marginalized "other" became an artistic elite, accused of luxuriating in unwarranted public largesse. It is not surprising that this backfired in Quebec, where artists and intellectuals have historically played a strong role in mobilizing and defining the embattled nationalist "in-group."<sup>11</sup> The prime minister proceeded to shoot off the remainder of his foot in December 2008, when, desperate to save his government from ouster by a Liberal-NDP parliamentary coalition supported by the sovereigntist Bloc Québécois, he resorted to demonizing "the separatists." We shall come momentarily to the implications of targeting sovereigntists in this fashion.

I invoke Harper, not because he has been a particularly egregious practitioner of these arts, but because this analysis might shed light on a significant part of his appeal (such as it is). True, the Liberal Party of Canada, as Tom Flanagan suggests, has long been a master of positioning itself as the defender of the national in-group against two "others," the United States, and Quebec sovereigntists.<sup>12</sup> The temptation is, once again, to invoke a spurious moral equivalency ("the Liberals do it too, ergo ..."). But we need to remember that not every act of designating and attacking an out-group *is* morally equivalent. The United States, as I suggest above, is a less morally loaded target than Quebec sovereigntists. Only the latter represent an *internal other* to whom our discourse seeks to deny full membership; they are subject to our power where the United States is not. Then again, it might be significant that sovereigntists have been decidedly more than powerless, posing as they have a grave challenge to the integrity of the political order itself. As targets of a marginalizing and exclusionary discourse, they may have more in common with the powerful than, say, artists, aboriginals, or gays and lesbians. We might also consider that Quebec sovereigntists are especially open to such treatment precisely because they deny the value of their membership in the shared order. Whether this makes a moral difference is less clear, but I suspect that it does. One can hardly protest being "othered" when one's entire project depends on it. Nonetheless, the visceral demonization of that other remains problematic at the very least, especially insofar as they continue to be citizens of our state.

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<sup>11</sup> Lysiane Gagnon, "The Tories get a little Culture Shock from Quebeckers—and the Bloc," *The Globe and Mail* (September 29, 2008): A13.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Flanagan, *Harper's Team: Behind the Scenes in the Conservative Rise to Power* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's U Press, 2007).

While certain of Harper's tactics may therefore be without exact parallel in our contemporary national politics, by no means should this blind us to analogous cases. It is interesting to recall in this context the rhetorical excesses of Pierre Trudeau, who, while hardly a populist, bent his political career to the destruction of those same sovereigntists, and whose style, invariably labelled "arrogant," at times contained a strong whiff of the politics of the bully. Certainly, his late polemic against Prime Minister Mulroney (derided as a "wimp") over the Meech Lake Accord could only be defended with reference to the relative imbalance of power between, first, a sitting and a retired prime minister, and second, the early defenders of Meech Lake and their critics, who were taking on what seemed to be a consensus among the powerful. Some amount of compensatory vitriol ("snivellers," "losers," "wimp") might be partially excusable given the context.<sup>13</sup> Much more troubling, it scarcely needs saying, was Trudeau's invocation in 1970 of the War Measures Act, which suspended civil liberties in order to crush a small terrorist cell in Quebec. Setting aside the wider debates around this action, such heavy-handedness of both rhetoric and policy suggests that at least some part of Trudeau's appeal may have rested upon a quality shared by Stephen Harper's rather more muted appeal—namely, the vicarious pleasures of identifying with overweening strength, as manifest in the humiliation and abuse of selected targets.

Other notable instances of populist invocations of an out-group might include former NDP leader Ed Broadbent's juxtaposition of "ordinary Canadians" (a term, significantly, co-opted by Prime Minister Harper) against those of "Bay Street" in the 1980s; or, much more spectacularly, Alberta Premier William Aberhart's attacks on the "50 big shots" in the 1940s, or Ontario Premier Mike Harris's "Common Sense Revolution" against unions and "special interests" 50 years later. In each such case, fellow citizens have been rhetorically set beyond the pale of democratic solidarity. But there is little to be gained in attempting here a comprehensive history of this sort of exclusionary move in Canadian discourse. The main point is that the moral assessment of such cases would need to consider who is being "othered" and how that relates to structures of power.

Returning to the present, and speaking very broadly, it is interesting to ask whether the politics of the bully is more likely to appeal to certain ideological constituencies than others. There may be something to the intuition that the *political right* is more apt to rely disproportionately upon the

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<sup>13</sup> Pierre Elliott Trudeau, *With a Bang, Not a Whimper: Pierre Trudeau Speaks Out*, ed. Donald Johnston (Toronto: Stoddart, 1988) 18, 22.

appeal of a politics that targets the internally powerless for marginalization and abuse. For simplicity's sake, let's define the "right" as a perspective hostile to the government-sponsored redistribution of wealth, often but not invariably combined with strong support for traditional authority structures in the public and private spheres.<sup>14</sup> It is hard to understand how the advocacy of tax-cutting, deregulation, and rolling back of the welfare state—those sturdy hobby-horses of the "new right" as it crystallized in theory in the 1960s and 1970s, and in practice in a variety of regimes ever since Thatcher and Reagan—is *primarily* directed to mitigating the marginalization and suffering of the weak. The main impetus likely lies elsewhere: perhaps in a bold advocacy of the sanctity of individual choice against centralized authority, or in a utilitarian belief that such measures will maximize the general welfare by, say, unleashing the benefits of private initiative and market competition (in which, of course, the strongest win).

Yet it surely *is* fundamental to the self-understanding of most of those on the "left" that they aspire to something called "social justice," usually, but not always, understood as including the state-sponsored minimization of the suffering and marginalization of the weak. One can protest that this political left, in whichever of its manifestations, tends to be naive about the facts of economic life, or glib in its reading of, and prescriptions to, social problems. One can stand with conservatives such as Michael Oakeshott who recoil from the left's "rationalism," its obliviousness to the imperfectability of human life.<sup>15</sup> We can even assert, with Hayek, that the perverse net effect of leftist politics is greater misery and oppression than before.<sup>16</sup> What matters here is the contentious postulate that the left is intrinsically more interested than the right in the welfare and dignity of the weak. If one understands a main goal of political activity to be the mitigation of suffering, one's politics will perhaps leave fewer openings for a style that marginalizes (or "others") the less powerful elements of society. Indeed, one might be likelier to shy away from *any* of the more remorseless applications of the tactics of the bully.

If so—and it's a big "if"—then this would be one point in favour of the mainstream political left. And it may help to explain the less-than-pressing question of why colloquial attacks on this left seem much more likely

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<sup>14</sup> For starters, see Ian Adams, *Political Ideology Today*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Manchester: Manchester U Press, 2001) chs. 3 and 9.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1944).

to frame their antagonism in a language of macho bullying than analogous attacks against the right (which usually accuse their target group of such sins as “war-mongering,” “racism,” “fascism,” etc.—all, tellingly, versions of exclusionary bullying). For that matter, this may also be part of the explanation of why “attack ads,” at least at the national level in the United States, seem in recent decades to have disproportionately favoured the Republican side. If Democrats pioneered the televised attack ad with their infamous “Daisy” commercial, which associated Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater with nuclear holocaust, it was not they who turned “Swift Boat” into a verb.

Or perhaps there is no useful partisan or ideological difference to be drawn here. Perhaps the Republicans have, on the whole, simply been more effective at abusing and marginalizing their rivals, notwithstanding their disastrous 2008 presidential campaign. But *certainly* such questions are worth thinking about. Clarity risks being hampered by too glib a recourse to the moral equivalency of all acts of “othering” in political discourse. We need to draw finer distinctions in thinking through the politics of the bully.