



New think-tank to push values of religious right

Institute to fight 'extremism' of legalized gay marriage, abortion, prostitution

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The Ottawa Citizen

Thursday, May 26, 2005

Canada's religious right is preparing to launch a social policy think-tank aimed at promoting traditionalist values that have been coaxed to the fore by the recent same-sex marriage debate.

The Institute for Canadian Values planned to begin its push for greater representation of religious and moral considerations in government policy last month, but it was delayed because several of its key players were anticipating involvement with the Conservative election campaign that was abandoned after last week's historic confidence vote.

"We know this (promoting values in government policy) has been done on the left for many, many years," said organizer Charles McVety, president of Canada Christian College in Toronto. "It's never been done from a centrist perspective and certainly never from the right."

Co-founder Joseph Ben-Ami, formerly of the Jewish advocacy group B'nai Brith, likened the institute to the fiscally conservative Fraser Institute, which counts among its members some of the founders of the current Conservative movement as well as core supporters of Tory leader Stephen Harper.

Buoyed by a recent \$250,000 contribution, the institute plans to launch an annual poll of social issues across the country "to see what the opinions of Canadians really are," said Mr. McVety.

The institute hopes to gain influence on Parliament Hill by enlisting all-party support from the likes of former Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day, senior Conservative MP Jason Kenney, and Liberal backbencher Pat O'Brien, described by Mr. McVety as one of 37 Grits opposed to same-sex marriage.

"The Liberal party of old has been a party that's been concerned about these issues. This extremism of same-sex marriage and (decriminalizing) prostitution and marijuana is not the party that most Canadians know," Mr. McVety said.

"We hear Paul Martin speaking about Canadian values as if he knows what they really are. Last I saw, prostitution was not a Canadian value."

Nelson Wiseman, a political scientist at the University of Toronto, said the Canadian social conservative movements emulate those established in the United States. But he said any popular religious-tinged political momentum that existed in Canada from the early part of the 20th century "has gone the way of the dodo."

"In the U.S., social conservatism has been a major boost in constituency for the Republican party. In Canada, social conservatism is a drag on the Conservative Party of Canada," Mr. Wiseman said.

Indeed, the Conservative party has gone to great lengths to cast off its more fundamentalist roots by passing motions not to reverse laws on abortion and to grant civil unions to gay couples, while upholding the traditional definition of marriage.

But there is significant support among parliamentarians for a social conservative agenda, said Mr. O'Brien, who threatened to quit the Liberal party recently because he is opposed to gay marriage.

Mr. O'Brien noted the existence of an all-party "pro-life caucus" of MPs that meets once a month to discuss issues related to the abortion debate, and said word of the new think-tank began circulating among politicians in Ottawa in the past few weeks.

"I think we're in for a few years of some heated debate on social issues in this country," O'Brien said.

"The left wing is highly organized and very vocal and seems to be well funded. People with traditional values, I think, should get better organized. I support it and I'd be happy to be a part of it in some way."

The seed for the group began to germinate when the government's same-sex marriage bill was tabled in February.

"This has really been the catalyst, and it's a good example of where we're coming from," said Mr. Ben-Ami.

The institute will also focus on the decriminalization and legalization of marijuana, abortion and capital punishment, Mr. McVety said.

The institute aims to recruit top-level academics and public opinion pollsters in anticipation that it will be viewed as a radical fringe element.

"There's no doubt that people will attempt to label the institute," Mr. McVety said.

"We want the academic integrity to speak so loudly that those voices will fall on deaf ears."

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