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VIEWPOINT

Conservatism has lost its way

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CONSERVATIVE leaders in Canada have a long history of improving the lives of Canadians and building our international reputation. John Diefenbaker fully supported the implementation of our government-funded health care system. Joe Clark and Brian Mulroney made Canada one of the first Western countries to boycott apartheid South Africa. Stephen Harper apologized to Indigenous Canadians for our disastrous residential school system.

What is wrong with conservatism in Canada today? As the child of a German immigrant, I am haunted by the Holocaust. I've devoted much of my career to understanding how it happened because I feel I have a responsibility to make sure it never again becomes a reality. The most important thing I have learned is that genocide can happen only when we dehumanize our neighbour. The reason why we live in a world where genocide continues to exist is because we don't see everyone as equal; we arbitrarily choose certain groups of people to marginalize and then attack.

Marginalizing has unfortunately become a common tactic of conservatives in recent years, and this is very dangerous for Canada and for the world we live in.

In the recent British Columbia election, the only clearly stated educational policy in the Conservative platform was to further marginalize the gender non-conforming community, that is, those whose gender expression, identity, or presentation does not align with traditional or societal expectations associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.

When an Ontario principal played a peace song in Arabic at a school Remembrance Day ceremony, Ontario Conservative MPP Lisa MacLeod called for him to be fired, and federal Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre called playing the song "an absolute disgrace." It should be noted that "Hamas High" was also graffitied on the school.

Federal New Democrat Heather McPherson is known to wear lapel pins in Parliament to support various groups that face injustice, including Ukrainians and Indigenous Canadians. When she wore a watermelon pin, signifying solidarity with the people of Palestine who have been under a siege and a vicious military assault for well over a year, Conservative members of Parliament raised such a ruckus that the Speaker of the House had to call for order. Even worse, in the Conservative-led Ontario parliament, Sarah Jama, a black MPP who uses a wheelchair, was officially sanctioned (silenced) for her open support of Palestinians.

Racism and intimidation are not conservative values, but they are regular practices of extremists. I have had many interactions with Conservatives in my lifetime, and until recent years I found them congenial and respectful. Why are they now adopting the tactics of the far-right? Discriminatory responses do not lead to effective long-term policy, but they can make great soundbites. Ontario Conservative Premier Doug Ford's reaction to a Donald Trump tweet announcing tariffs on Canada and Mexico is a case in point. "What I found unfair about the comments is to compare us to Mexico," he said, adding that it was like "a family member stabbing you in the heart." This is not only racist but also naive. Why is a bully surprised when he becomes the victim of an even bigger bully? In contrast, Mexican President Claudia Shein-

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baum — an intelligent Jewish woman and ally of the Palestinian people — offered Trump a much more reasoned and factual reply.

Perhaps change is coming. Members of Poilievre's caucus have recently leaked information that progressives living in Conservative ridings have suspected for some time. Poilievre is accused of exerting dictator-like control over his MPs, preventing them from serving their constituents.

Federal NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, a Sikh Canadian, is no stranger to racist harassment. His response to Donald Trump's tariff announcement offers us all a good strategy for moving forward:"The only thing a bully responds to is strength."

The world is growing tired of manipulative and even violent right-wing extremism. The greatest hope for humanity is to respond with unity, truth, and courage.

Gerry Chidiac specializes in languages and genocide studies and works with at-risk students. He received an award from the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre for excellence in teaching about the Holocaust. Column courtesy of Troy Media (troymedia.com).

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