

Memory and forgetting

By Bill Kilpatrick

In his 1978 book entitled *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera spoke about how to resist powerful forces through the simple act of remembering and preserving the past. He said "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." Given the forces that are raging against our liberal democracy never has it been more important to remember the past than during this federal election. Especially the most recent past that is posed to repeat itself if Pierre Poilievre becomes prime minister.

The past is important to Poilievre as he outlined during his interview with Jordan Peterson stating, "when I launched my leadership race I literally had the same language in my leadership launch speech that I had put in that essay 22 or 23 years earlier. When I was part of the Harper government we basically fought for and did the same things then that I'm proposing to do now." Given that Poilievre plans on continuing the legacy of his mentor Stephen Harper, it's probably a good time to remember what those years were like and why the country elected Justin Trudeau with a massive majority.

Although I lived through those years, I've begun to look at what happened during that time through a different lens. At the time, many of us knew that Harper was no friend of democracy and democratic institutions, but now that many other "strong men" have come to power, the tactics used by Harper, don't just seem haphazard, it's become obvious they were planned, autocratic, and meant to undermine our liberal democratic values of human rights, the rule of law, and respect for science. Harper and his tactics took Canada to a very dark place that none of us wanted to be in.

The tactics of today's autocrats are mirror images of those used by fascist leaders in the 1930's as Jason Stanley points out in his book *How Fascism Works: The Politics of us and them*. He says, "Fascist politics seeks to undermine public discourse by attacking and devaluing education, expertise, and language." This was a hallmark of the Harper years and will become one of Poilievre's main tactics to undermine our democracy if he is elected.

Do you remember July 10, 2012? This was when hundreds of scientists, who would much rather be in a laboratory, took part in "The death of evidence" march in Ottawa, as a result of Harper's attacks on their professions. In his 2013 book entitled *The War on Science: Muzzled Scientists and wilful blindness in Stephen Harper's Canada*, Chris Turner quotes a scientist, who unbeknownst to me at the time, was describing a tactic that should be familiar to most people these days, the tactic of the fire hose of changes. "It was staggering," Dalhousie University biologist Jeffery Hutchings told Turner. "It seemed like every week there was something new happening. And it got to the point where, as a Canadian scientific community, not only were we thinking what's going to happen next, but there was so much, we didn't actually know how to respond. And it really felt like a boxer who's just been punched so many times, it's all you can do to stand up." When Hutchings arrived in Ottawa to march he was confronted with placards that read "No science/ no evidence/no truth/no democracy" we need to take this as a warning of things to come if the Conservatives come to power.

While Poilievre is trying to make himself out to be the law and order/ tough on crime guy, it's important to remember how the Harper Conservative's actually behaved when they were in power. As a 2014 Toronto Star article pointed out they were plagued with scandals. Three of Harper's senate appointments, Mike Duffy, Patrick Brazeau and Pamela Wallin were "suspended from the senate for allegations of improper expense claims." And do you remember Nigel Wright, Harper's chief of staff, who cut Duffy a cheque to cover his "questionable expenses"?

And who can possibly forget Pierre Poutine, robocalls, and the election scandals? Remember Michael Sona, who used a cell phone registered to Pierre Poutine, to make calls that sent liberal voters to the wrong polling stations? He went to jail for it. In 2006 the Conservatives pled guilty to exceeding national election spending limits. Harper tried to create a "super pac" like they have in the US because he does not believe in funding limits. Dean Del Mastro, Harper's former parliamentary secretary was found guilty of breaking spending rules. Given that Elon Musk, who has endorsed Poilievre, is handing out million dollar cheques to voters in the

US, you can almost guarantee that Poilievre will find ways to bring more money into politics giving us less democracy.

Do you remember that time that Harper prorogued parliament to shut down the committee looking into the allegations that Canadian soldiers were knowingly sending detainees into captivity to be tortured and abused? Not exactly how someone who respects the rule of law and human rights generally acts. More like the behaviour of a wannabe dictator.

Then there was the time that the Harper Conservatives were found in contempt of parliament, on not one, but two occasions. One for lying about defunding a charitable organization, and the other because they refused to reveal the costs of corporate tax cuts, the F-35 fighter jet program, and certain criminal justice measures. At the time I personally felt the chill on political speech that Harper's government created as he intimidated not-for-profits that criticized him using tax audits and harassment. Because I'm politically active my employer told me to take their name off of my Facebook page for fear of retribution. Sound familiar?

Remember when Harper undermined democracy in 2008 when he prorogued parliament because his government was about to be defeated by a coalition of parties, which is perfectly legitimate and legal in our democratic tradition. Although he claimed to care about Canadian's he didn't seem to care much about their democratic rights.

Oh, I almost forgot about the name calling. A favorite ploy of wannabe-autocrats and autocrats alike. Jack Layton, the NDP leader was nicknamed 'Taliban Jack' when he dared suggest that the Canadian government negotiate with the Taliban. Poilievre learned these tactics from Harper and he's been honing them ever since and unleashing them on Canadians.

Where is Harper now? Well, he's the chairman of the IDU, a think tank founded by Margaret Thatcher, that describes itself as an 'alliance of the centre right.' They claim to care about things like liberal democracies, human rights, free speech, non-violent dissent, and free elections, and yet its chairman and his party held all of these values in contempt when they were in power. Not to mention the IDU welcomes the likes of autocrats like Hungary's Viktor Orban, hardly a friend of liberal democracy.

Frances Russell, writing for the Winnipeg Free Press in summed up the real Stephen Harper in 2013, and it should be taken as a warning of what to expect from his protégé Poilievre if elected. He wrote 'The conservatives under Stephen Harper are running a effective dictatorship. They believe they are quite within their rights to muzzle parliament, gag civil servants, use taxpayer money for blatant political self-promotion, [they] stand accused of trying to subvert a federal election and hand over much of Canada's magnificent natural heritage to the multinational oil and gas lobby.' Any of this sound familiar?

When heading to the polls it's important to remember that the Poilievre conservatives are not progressive conservatives. The new conservative party that was begun by Harper when he merged the far-right Reform Party with the Progressive conservative party, has been consistently moving further to the right ever since. In his 2025 book on Pierre Poilievre, Mark Bourrie, writes about what the new conservative movement really represents. He says 'This new movement is many things: 'populist,' anti-intellectual, repressive, uncharitable, unkind, classist, racist, opportunistic, and incoherent. But it's not conservative.'