

Conservative Party at a crossroads

One of the few guarantees of Canadian federal politics is that the Conservative Party in its many forms over the last 152 years has little stomach for a leader who loses an election to the hated Liberals.

In my lifetime alone, the party has shown John Diefenbaker, Robert Stanfield, Joe Clarke, Kim Campbell and Jean Charest the door after unsuccessful election campaigns. Brian Mulroney and Stephen Harper chose to retire from politics rather than face the music at a party leadership review. Seldom do former Conservative leaders get to go quietly into the night and retire to some plumb position in academia or on Bay Street in Toronto. Most leave battered and bruised, with knives from unhappy members figuratively planted between their shoulder blades.

Andrew Scheer has now joined that long list of former Conservative leaders. We will likely never know if Scheer jumped at retirement or was pushed by party members who are unhappy with both his election performance and the sweetheart deal with the party executive that helped keep his four children in a swanky private academy while perfectly good public schools were in the offing. Scheer “got while the getting was good,” leaving Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition rudderless for the foreseeable future.

Since Scheer’s sudden resignation on December 12, a long line of supposed leadership hopefuls have said they have no interest in the empty chair as federal party leader. Premiers Doug Ford of Ontario, Jason Kenney of Alberta and Brian Pallister of Manitoba announced with indecent haste that they had no desire to run for the federal leadership, surprising many an experienced Ottawa watcher. Maxime Bernier, who finished second to Scheer at the last leadership convention and was so unhappy with the decisions made at that meeting that he left the Conservatives and formed his own political party, called the Conservatives “corrupt and dishonest” and said he would never be returning to the party fold. Kevin O’Leary, of *Shark Tank* fame, who has mused about replicating a Trump-like revolution in Canada, has also categorically said no to running for the position.

Why are all these high profile candidates running away from what should be the most prestigious job on the political right in Canada, leading the federal Conservative Party?

A number of political pundits believe that the Conservative Party is at a crossroads where in its current structure they have discovered that their message truly does not resonate east of Winnipeg. The party itself, created by the “hostile takeover” of the Progressive Conservatives by the Calgary based Alliance/Reform Party, is a dichotomy of philosophies and ideas that only Stephen Harper figured out how to sell.

Within the Conservative Party of Canada you will find a heady brew of libertarians, social conservatives, fiscal conservatives and so-called Red Tories who might be more comfortable in the Liberal Party than their own. The nexus of the party that was deeply entrenched in the corporate boardrooms of English speaking Montreal and the Bay-Bloor banking corridor in Toronto for almost a century has been forcefully relocated to Calgary by Stephen Harper and his ilk.

The Progressive Conservative party that under Bob Stanfield and Joe Clarke supported official bilingualism, immigration and sacred social programs like free healthcare is no more. In its place has grown a movement that agrees on fiscal policy easily, but social and environmental policy has and continues to be their Achilles Heel, affecting their electability in 2019 and into the future.

In the last twenty years there have been seismic shifts in Canada on social and environmental policies that were once considered “third rails” in federal politics, and the Conservatives have found themselves on the outside looking in as Canada moves forward. Abortion is no longer a policy that gets most Canadians excited. The laws in place are well accepted. Assisted suicide is now case law with layers of legalities in place to ensure it is not abused. The LGBTQ community is now equal in most aspects of life in Canada, with more legal changes coming every year. Marijuana has been de-criminalized and nary has a whisper been heard from the Canadian Association of Police Chiefs about any negative effects of that legal change. More than 62% of Canadians embrace the science behind climate change, and voted for parties in the last election that favored some kind of carbon tax or aggressive climate policy that would lower Canada’s CO₂ emissions.

Canada has become a solidly center-left nation since the beginning of the new century and the Conservatives struggle to get that point loud and clear. One Red Tory bemoaned the impact that social conservatives have at local riding meetings, party planning and policy conventions and leadership reviews/conventions. Because they are passionate about combating the changes to abortion or LGBTQ laws they show up at these meetings en masse, and even though Conservatives estimate that they are only 1 in 4 of current party membership, they can pack a room like no other faction can.

Their interests are heard by the party executive, and few are elected to positions of party power now without the support of these individuals, putting the Conservative Party clearly at loggerheads with what the rest of the nation accepts and will not support to revoke.

Andrew Scheer eked out a narrow victory over Maxime Bernier in 2017 with social conservatives firmly lined up behind him. These same social conservatives have stated publically that Scheer betrayed them during the last elections on the issues of same-sex marriage and abortion, and at the next convention they will find a “real Conservative” to support.

In-house pollsters have told the Conservatives that to be successful in urban Canada (Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal) they will need to move to the political center on the following policies:

- Abortion
- Same sex marriage and LGBTQ rights
- Assisted Suicide
- Climate change
- Renewal energy policies
- Immigration and multi-culturalism

Those same pollsters have told senior leadership that as long as the party has policies beyond the pale of what is acceptable to most Canadians they will remain a western Canadian based movement that only has success outside of that very narrow base in a small number of largely rural ridings in Ontario, Quebec and Atlantic Canada.

It will take very brave or cunning individuals to run for this leadership position knowing that they need to give the impression that they are moving towards the political center on key social and environmental issues. This sleight of hand has to be done without antagonizing social conservatives and pushing even more libertarians towards Maxime Bernier's home for disaffected Tories, the Peoples Party of Canada.

The field of candidates looks like, in spite of all the inherent risk involved, it will be a large one. It will be interesting to see who can best deliver a message to both party stalwarts and the Canadian people about why they might vote Conservative.

Candidates, start your engines!