

Canada: Conservatives need to swiftly settle their leadership question



by Conrad Black

Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole has maintained his well-established habit of arbitrary 180-degree policy turns. He came in third when seeking the leadership of his party in 2017, behind Andrew Scheer and Maxime Bernier, standing as something of a red Tory against Scheer's Harper-style conservatism and Bernier's quasi-libertarianism. And in 2019, he ran as a traditional Tory against Peter MacKay, a red Tory and former Progressive Conservative leader. But on almost every major policy issue, most recently China, O'Toole has executed course corrections like a wind-sock. China-bashing was a prominent feature of his 2020 leadership campaign: he accused China of hoarding COVID protective equipment, flouting international rules, damaging the environment (all fair charges); he wanted to suspend the Canada-China Legislative Association; and he vocally supported Taiwan and Hong Kong and consistently denounced the People's Republic as a serious abuser of human rights.

There was an entire section in the 2021 Conservative election platform trumpeting the punitive measures that an O'Toole government would implement against China: the country was denounced 31 times. But many believe the Tories lost a number

of seats because of its anti-Chinese rhetoric in constituencies where there are substantial numbers of voters of Chinese extraction. In December, the party chose not to prioritize reinstating the House of Commons' special committee on Canada-China relations, which was tasked with investigating issues pertaining to China. This prompted Robyn Urback to write in the Globe and Mail on Jan. 14 that O'Toole had caved to pressure from China and was now an appeaser of that country. That is certainly how it appears, and last weekend, a number of conservative MPs tweeted criticism of O'Toole for this latest waffling.

O'Toole and his entourage have tried to represent this as a "misunderstanding," but it is very hard to treat it as anything other than a bare-faced switcheroo – an opportunistic response to a ripple of adversity. This roll-over on China is in perfect sequence with a variety of previous flip-flops. When O'Toole was running for the Conservative leadership, he promised to end fossil fuel subsidies, which he described as corporate welfare, and he signed a pledge with the Canadian Taxpayers Federation not to introduce a carbon tax. He promised the repeal of Liberal legislation and orders-in-council on firearms and the election platform promised the repeal of Bill C-71 and the May 2020 orders-in-council on that subject. He also promised to cut funding for English-language CBC and espoused the goal of privatizing it.

The day after his Conservative leadership platform was released, Erin O'Toole removed the promise to end fossil fuel subsidies. A National Post article from June 12, 2020, quoted him as saying that he had "made a change to make it clearer." The change was another U-turn. Where he denounced a carbon tax in his leadership platform as a tax rather than an environmental plan, in the election platform, he promised a personal low carbon savings account whose proceeds would be used for "things that help (consumers) live a greener life." On firearms, he shifted mid-campaign to maintaining the

Liberal's ban on "assault-style" weapons, which were never clearly defined, and when questioned by the press about his actual stance, he told them to look to the Conservative platform to "fill in the blanks." This was only a semi-about-turn; later in the campaign, O'Toole declared that, "We're maintaining the (Liberal) status quo that's in place right now." As for defunding the CBC, by the time this turkey limped to the election platform, it had become a promise to review the mandate of English-language CBC services to see whether they could be repurposed along the style of the American Public Broadcasting Service. (The French CBC and PBS are both even more obnoxious than the English CBC, difficult though that is to imagine.) One of O'Toole's leadership campaign slogans was that he would balance the budget on a prudent timeline and he called himself "true blue," while portraying Peter MacKay as "Liberal-light." Yet in the election platform, this "true-blue" conservatism translated into a promise to balance the budget within 10 years by unspecified means, coupled with a promise to avoid any spending cuts.

O'Toole reacted similarly on several other important issues. After the election, he supported the rule saying that 20 per cent of caucus members could trigger a leadership review, calling it part of a "fair and transparent process." This commendable democratic spirit was tempered by his threat, circulated by his entourage, that he would regard any call for review as adequate grounds to expel whoever did so from the Conservative party. This is an idiosyncratic definition of transparency. In a 2020 interview, O'Toole promised free votes for his MPs on legislation over conscientious issues and stated that, "The fundamental freedoms of MPs and the rights of free votes on issues of conscience is a fundamental part of our party." After the election, he told the Conservative caucus that they would be able to vote freely on legislation banning conversion therapy (in matters of gender identification). But this was quickly scuttled when he chose to fast-track the bill by giving it unanimous consent. In the

election platform, he promised to protect the conscience rights of health-care professionals, but during the campaign, that position vanished without a trace.

O'Toole has been ruthless in trying to punish caucus members for speaking out against his leadership. He expelled Sen. Denise Batters from the national caucus, for asking for an immediate leadership review. He requested a House of Commons investigation of MP Shannon Stubbs, who had criticized his leadership, because she allegedly had created a toxic workplace environment. He also expelled his former leadership rival, Derek Sloan, from the caucus and, after courting her supporters in the last ballot, relegated Leslyn Lewis to the back benches, with no post-convention role once he became the party leader, despite her impressive showing in the leadership race.

This isn't leadership; it's just invertebrate lurching around important issues according to the weather-vane of opinion polling. O'Toole has no opinions of any solidity except a maniacal (and therefore fragile) faith that he should be the party leader. But his contempt for policy questions indicates that he is neither a conservative nor a leader. He apparently thinks he can win as a Liberal look-alike by calling himself a Conservative. But Canadians who want Liberals will elect real Liberals. I never blame someone for trying to hang onto his job, and I don't know Erin O'Toole or have any personal grievance with him, and urged readers to vote for him during the last election, but the sooner it is determined whether he really has the support of his party, the better. If he does, his docile MPs should resign themselves to defeat: the Liberals governed for 42 of the 49 years between 1935 and 1984. Without a serious Conservative leader like Brian Mulroney or even Stephen Harper, they will replicate that record. O'Toole, and if it supports him, this caucus, deserve no better. And if this is the best the Opposition can do, neither does Canada.

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