

Canada: The Conservatives' Leadership problem

by Conrad Black



Tory MPs should be wary of their first post-election meeting on Tuesday; to judge from an uncommonly self-serving email sent to supporters by Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole, they are being swarmed and hustled to confirm O'Toole as leader 15 days after he blew the election. Under Conservative MP Michael Chong's Reform Act of 2014, when recognized parties where the chairperson of the caucus receives a request signed by at least 20 per cent of the party's caucus asking for a leadership review, the caucus chair shall order that a secret ballot be taken promptly among all of that party's MPs. If a majority vote to replace the leader, an interim leader is appointed until a formal leadership election is held.

I never blame anyone for trying to hang onto their job, and I never blame a leader of an organization, particularly a political party, for stuffing the upper echelons of the organization with loyalists to try to repel challengers. In this case, O'Toole has sent out a very peppy letter that incites the inference that there should be no consideration of whether he continues in his position and that the election was some sort of victory for his party and himself because when it was called, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his collaborators thought they would win a majority. Instead, they made significant gains, the Conservatives lost what were considered safe seats and hundreds of thousands of votes compared to 2019, and although the government was extremely vulnerable on a wide range of issues, O'Toole gave Trudeau a free pass on every substantive point and pitched his party's campaign on the theory that he is a more substantial

individual than the prime minister.

The takeaway from the election is that the public did not agree with that assessment: O'Toole appeared to be the lesser candidate to a large enough number of Canadians to re-elect the Liberals with increased parliamentary representation. Unlike the last two Conservative leaders, Stephen Harper and Andrew Scheer, O'Toole defined no substantial differences between his party and the Liberals.

He refused to attack the government's pitiful record in competitively double-vaccinating the country against the coronavirus. Without consulting anyone as far as can be discerned, O'Toole threw in with the government of Quebec's Bill 96, consenting to the gradual strangulation of English-language education in Quebec and reducing the language rights of English-speaking Quebecers to a status well beneath any French-speaking minority in the other nine provinces (though none of them are as numerous as Anglo-Quebecers). He could easily have proposed positive rather than anglophobic coercive measures for strengthening the French language in Quebec, and picked up the 20 per cent block of non-francophones in the province and a substantial number of French-Quebecers who think bilingualism is a desirable advantage. He would have made it a three-way race in that province, instead of coming more than 20 seats behind both the Bloc Québécois and the Liberals. Brad Wall was a fine premier of Saskatchewan, but his comment piece arguing that there was no point in the Conservatives seeking to elect MPs in Quebec demonstrates, as former prime minister Brian Mulroney could tell him, that he doesn't know enough about Quebec to fill a thimble.

In his absurdly self-congratulatory email, O'Toole rejoiced in gaining an increased percentage of votes in Ontario and Quebec without mentioning greater Liberal gains and declared that although the Conservatives lost ground to the Liberals, "we are now within striking distance," as if he had some success to celebrate. He interprets a leadership review not as a

serious review of his leadership but as a study of tactics to deploy against the Liberals, as he is "resolutely committed to leading (the Conservatives) into the next election that Justin Trudeau has said could be just 18 months away." This is bunk; O'Toole had plenty of good advice, he was running against an extremely vulnerable government and a leader whom a very large number of Canadians consider to be unserious. He failed to develop a consensus within his own party about energy and the environment, gave no suggestions whatsoever about how to reduce the deficit, never laid a glove on the Liberals for the WE affair or their many other blunders and abuses, waffled on guns, the carbon tax and most other subjects, and his chief reform proposal was a national suicide hotline, which, while it might be a good idea, is hardly an uplifting principal election platform plank.

O'Toole fishtailed through the last several years between masquerading as a red Tory and a Harper traditionalist conservative, and while elections are generally lost and not won on policy, he has failed to give any comprehensible explanation of why he thinks he is a conservative or why anyone should vote for a party led by him. He competed with Justin Trudeau's tiresome personality cult by mimicking Russian President Vladimir Putin with pictures of his own muscularity in the party's platform manual. And he is trying to represent a severe and easily avoidable election fiasco as some sort of vindication of his leadership qualities. The idea that there might be any question of his fully earned right to carry on as leader after his failure is not even acknowledged.

It was, in fact, a classic Canadian federal Conservative election bungle, like most Conservative election performances over the last century, in which the Liberals have governed for 71 years and counting: the Conservatives concede Quebec and open themselves up to being portrayed as reactionary by a generally hostile media along with the Liberals and NDP, or the Tories snuggle up and assimilate the Liberals' ideas,

failing to impress the real liberals and demoralizing the genuine conservatives. Most elections of the last century have been Conservative amateur hours and Liberal cakewalks; this one certainly was. O'Toole had a great opportunity against the least formidable elected Liberal prime minister since Alexander Mackenzie, and O'Toole produced his own Mickey Mouse personality cult, with bombast and egotism that's unbecoming an unproven leader.

Mackenzie King, who won five general elections, drew one and lost one, and faced nine Conservative leaders (counting Arthur Meighen twice), wrote that one of his greatest "assets" was over-assertive, dogmatic, tactically inept Conservative opponents, naming Meighen, R.B. Bennett and George Drew. O'Toole is less accomplished than those men, though his French is better, but he is a blowhard and a blunderbuss. He substituted his own over-confident and energetic bloviations for real leadership. He had his chance and squandered it. I have never met O'Toole and have no grievance against him personally, and urged readers to vote for him. He has every right to try to remain as party leader, but not to pretend that he hasn't suffered a serious defeat and that leadership is not an issue.

He is trying to turn Tuesday's caucus meeting into an implicit confirmation of his right to continue without review for at least two years, when he will again claim that an election is imminent and that he has led the party to the brink of victory. Conservative MPs should reserve judgment and not be cajoled by O'Toole's self-serving pep-talk into denying themselves the opportunity to choose the strongest possible leader of the Opposition. Better leaders are available, and they must not be swindled or sand-bagged from forcing a serious selection process on their benighted party. It is time for a real choice and a leader who can win. The Conservative Party of Canada owes that much at least – to Canada and to itself.

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