

It's not an exciting Conservative leadership race, but I'd choose Peter MacKay

Neither O'Toole nor MacKay is exciting, but English-Canadian politicians rarely are, and excitement isn't Canada's national forte anyway.

by Conrad Black



Conservative party leadership front-runners Erin O'Toole, left, and Peter MacKay

Canada is now lumbered with an almost completely incompetent government, sustained in a lazy and virtual Parliament by a Dunciad of Quebec separatists and New Democrats. Even in the depths of an immense public health and economic crisis, it has

made aid to corporations laid low by its over-extended economic shutdown conditional on adequately docile responses to the regime's climate change catechism. This government's blunderbuss response to the crisis has probably pushed the deficit projection to a completely unsustainable 20 per cent of GDP. The execution of the government's plans has been left to inefficient public health officials, who monopolize testing for the coronavirus instead of entrusting that function to the country's doctors. Though the financial assistance plans have been adequately generous, most are not well designed. There is no indication of any comprehensive plan for the reopening of the country's economy. Most Canadians have been led to believe that COVID-19 kills many more than approximately one in every 5,000 people and among those beneath the age of 60 and in good health, only about one in 25,000. Each individual demise is a sadness, but this is not statistically significant. Nor is it much mentioned that in all age categories including those in their 70s and older, most people afflicted by the coronavirus have either no or minimal symptoms. We have, next to Japan and Germany, the best coronavirus record of any large northern hemisphere country whose numbers are believable. The government deserves some credit for that, but we are shirking our duty to help lead the entire world out of an attitude of excessive fear tainted by cowardice and into a more purposeful state.

The government's performance should generate great interest in the selection of a new Opposition leader. But the Conservative leadership race is attracting little attention, including from the majority of potentially interesting candidates. The absence of Rona Ambrose, John Baird, Maxime Bernier, Jean Charest, Jason Kenney, Pierre Poilievre and Brad Wall, though often understandable, is a disappointment. Canada needs a strong alternative government. Of course the pandemic has overshadowed everything, but the Conservative problem has been aggravated by the most boring nomination process possible: ballots mailed in with a complicated preferential voting

system will be determined by the operation of machines and announced with the absolute minimum possible incitement of public interest. Bring back live conventions.

Canada needs a strong alternative government

There are five candidates; the only ex-ministers are Peter MacKay (foreign affairs, defence, justice) and Erin O'Toole (veterans' affairs) and one of them is almost certain to be the leader. The other three candidates, Jim Karahalios (twice disqualified, I mention him only in case he somehow tries again), Leslyn Lewis and Derek Sloan, are long-shot social conservatives. MacKay, 54, was leader of the old Progressive Conservative party and agreed to unification with the Canadian Alliance (Reform party), to reassemble a unitary Conservative party, in 2003. He was deputy party leader under former prime minister Stephen Harper, and a Nova Scotia MP for 18 years. O'Toole, 47, was a captain in the Royal Canadian Air Force, and has been the MP for Durham (Ontario) for eight years. Both men are lawyers; MacKay has the declared support of 39 MPs and O'Toole of 32.

All five candidates would permit private members to introduce bills to restrict abortion, but MacKay and O'Toole would vote against such measures, and MacKay would require cabinet members to vote against such restrictions, as well. Governments should not have, nor aspire to have, the right to inflict childbirth on a woman who does not wish to have a child. Abortions will occur and they should be sanitary and un-stigmatized. But it is morally offensive that the Liberals and other parties consider abortion to be an equivalent act to birth, a matter of "reproductive rights," and attach no credence whatever to the concept of the rights of the unborn at any stage. The former leader of the Bloc Québécois, Gilles Duceppe, considered the Roman Catholic Church (which is chiefly responsible for the survival of the French language in Canada) to be an organized conspiracy against abortion rights.

Religious freedom includes freedom from atheistic oppression. The Conservatives are the only federal party that evinces any concept of the inherent sanctity of life and the conceivable existence of a superhuman intelligence of any description; this is a matter of toleration and not of belief.



Conservative leadership candidate Peter MacKay greets supporters at an event in Ottawa on Jan. 26, 2020. Justin Tang/The Canadian Press

All five candidates want to end this government's war on the oil and gas industries and build the economically sensible pipelines. MacKay and O'Toole, as well as Lewis, want to move the embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, which should no longer be controversial. Lewis and MacKay want to reopen the office of religious freedom. MacKay, having seen as defence minister when that department took over the old Nortel buildings, how the Chinese had wired it up for industrial espionage by Huawei; wants to exclude China from the 5G networks, and O'Toole wants to emphasize economic, defence and cultural association with the U.K., Australia and New Zealand. Both are good ideas. All candidates wish to repeal the May 2020 firearm ban, and MacKay and Sloan seek some other liberalizations (they're all right). MacKay wants to review the temporary worker program and Sloan wants to cut back immigration by 60 per cent (a bad idea that looks like vintage bigotry). O'Toole wants to end funding for the CBC English language television service (the French network is even more obnoxious, and we need a better public broadcaster, not an asphyxiated one). MacKay wants to build up Churchill, Man., as a port and naval base and seeks an enhanced early warning system in the North and promises to meet the two per cent GDP NATO target for defence spending (as does Sloan). These are all excellent proposals. MacKay and O'Toole want to retain Bill C-16, which protects gender expression and identity under the Human Rights Act (an absurd measure but a politically correct totem after all Trudeau's gender nonsense; can't we just agree that there are two sexes and all adults can sort out their own

sexuality?) Lewis and Sloan want it repealed. All candidates want to abandon the carbon tax. Karahalios and Sloan want to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement, and the fact that all of them are quiet on the environment incites hope that they would avoid the “green terror” being pursued by the present government. The best climate policy for Canada would be to contribute to serious neutral research on what actually is happening, since the fetishistic insistence on the “settled science” of “98 per cent of expert opinion” is bunk and there is no consensus on what is actually happening to the climate. There is nothing original from any of them about tax policy, private medicine or reform of international institutions.



The 2020 Conservative Party of Canada leadership election will be held by postal ballot in August 2020 to choose a successor to Andrew Scheer. Darren Calabrese/The Canadian Press

The policy positions of the two viable candidates are not very original, apart from MacKay's support of an increased military, but they are not reactionary either. MacKay is more experienced and is running as essentially a Mulroney-like candidate, more worldly and conservative than the Clark-Stanfield tradition, and more accessible to centrists than Harper. O'Toole, who was a centrist at the last leadership convention in 2017 when he came third behind Scheer and Bernier, is now seeking the Harper vote, and the mantle of the Reform wing. Generally, the Mulroney route is the way to victory; Harper could never win unless there were four parties and won his one majority in 2011 on the freakish defeat of the Quebec Liberals by the NDP. (Brian Mulroney was the only Conservative leader except John A. Macdonald to win two or more consecutive full-term majorities – Robert Borden's re-election in 1917 was a war-time coalition.) O'Toole has the advantage of speaking French with more ease and fluency than MacKay, who has made an effort and is not acoustically irritating in that language but could not be called bilingual.

Neither is exciting, but English-Canadian politicians rarely

are, and excitement isn't Canada's national forte anyway. Peter MacKay is reliable and competent and more experienced, and unlike Harper, open to innovative suggestions. Erin O'Toole is an unknown quantity; he would be acceptable but if I were a delegate, I would, via Canada Post, cast my vote for Peter MacKay.