

# Canada: Erin O'Toole promised boldness and change. We're still waiting

by Conrad Black



The leader of the federal opposition, Erin O'Toole, gave an important address to his Conservative partisans, anticipating a general election at his party conference in Ottawa on February 26. He lamented that his party had lost two elections in 5 1/2 years and had four leaders in that time and his prescription for winning was, "We must present new ideas, not make the same arguments ... We need to be the party for all of Canada. We need to be a Conservative party with the courage to be bold. And a conservative party with the courage to change." But he didn't change and there is no boldness.

Instead of handing the regime a blank cheque for reelection by

saying "Spending to protect Canadians during the pandemic is the right thing to do and Conservatives have supported it," he should have exposed the Liberal response to the coronavirus as the shambles and the disgrace that it has been. As of Friday, there were 3769 people hospitalized in Canada with COVID-19 of whom 1125 were in intensive care units, out of a population of almost 38 million, and the country is locked down. Why is O'Toole not attacking fiercely on the implicit failure and disconnection between these numbers? It was clear a year ago that, when factoring in that two per cent of cases result in death and 80 per cent of fatalities also had one comorbidity, recovery rates are approximately by my calculations 99.5 per cent for healthy people beneath the age of 65.

The latest reliable statistics show that Canada leads the world in percentage of Covid deaths in homes for the elderly: 70 per cent of our total, compared to 27 per cent in the UK and Germany, 33 per cent in Israel, 38 per cent in the United States, 47 per cent in Sweden, and 59 per cent in Spain. If we had just protected the elderly and infirm a year ago, we might have been able to save at least a third of those who have died, at a minimum cost in inconvenience and in money. Why doesn't Erin O'Toole say something about that? There are more than 40 countries with a higher level of per capita vaccination than Canada. Amongst them are not just obvious scientifically advanced nations like Israel and the United States and the UK, but Denmark, Switzerland, Germany, and Sweden. Has the official opposition uttered one word about these completely unacceptable, uncompetitive and ultimately death-dealing numbers?

This government did nothing in the trade renegotiations with the U.S. to amend poor patent laws in the drug industry. It refused to discuss pharma in those negotiations at all, and has, like its predecessors, done nothing to encourage a robust domestic drug industry. Instead it speculated unsuccessfully in vaccines. Someone arriving in Canada with the certification

of a negative COVID test is interned for three days at a cost of \$3000 and is then in quarantine for two weeks subject to serious legal penalties for any derogation. This is just reflexive authoritarianism, flailing at COVID. Canada was too slow to approve the Moderna or Pfizer vaccines and did nothing to partner seriously with the drug industry early on. Why isn't Erin O'Toole storming around the country raging at the Trudeau government's deadly failures? I apologize for the shabby recourse to rhetorical questions, but answers come there none.

Even among the elderly and the infirm, the survival rate is likely around 95 per cent, and the average age of COVID fatalities is almost identical with the life expectancy. This takes nothing from the tragedy or gravity of the pandemic. But the Liberal government and some of the provinces terrorized the country and then sanctimoniously claimed to have manfully dealt with the pandemic by inflicting terrible economic and psychological hardship on the entire country. It was obvious a year ago that the best tactic was to get towards the front of the vaccination queue, (we didn't), and focus on protecting the vulnerable (didn't do that either). The government obviously thinks it can win reelection on its miserable record, because the opposition is so incompetent, although the government is a sitting, (unvaccinated) duck.

In his conference speech, Erin O'Toole announced a five point Recovery Plan. These are unspecific but include a "comprehensive jobs plan to recover the million jobs lost during the pandemic within one year." This should actually be tax reform in which a good deal of revenue is moved to tax on elective spending and taxes on lower level incomes are abolished, and there is a tax credit for net job creation. Instead we get what you receive when you press the button on the device that dries hands in the public lavatory. The second point is the usual promise of a draconian anticorruption law. This government isn't particularly corrupt. SNC Lavalin wasn't

much of a scandal-Justin was just trying to keep 10,000 jobs in Quebec. WE is worse but mainly because it is so asinine and the twin charlatans were allowed to keep their front feet in the trough for so long. It was embarrassing, but not obviously illegal.

The third O'Toole point is a Canada Mental Health Action Plan including "better wellness coverage," and a "nation-wide, three-digit suicide prevention hotline." This is probably a good thing but no one will win an election by promising a better suicide watch. We are rationing health care now and there is completely inadequate mental-health care for those who cannot afford to pay the specialists. What we need is to cease to be one of the two or three countries in the world which do not officially tolerate private health care, focus the public funding of health care on those who cannot pay for it themselves and give those who can a tax credit for necessary medical expenses. The fourth and fifth parts of the O'Toole plan are an improved crisis management system, and the customary promise of a balanced budget within 10 years. No details are provided no one will take these proposals seriously.

We have no right or wish to expect Erin O'Toole to be Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the bourgeois equivalent of a rabble-rouser. But there are two grievous further problems: O'Toole said in his speech: "We cannot ignore the reality of climate change. The debate is over." No, it isn't; it hasn't begun. He is right that the Conservatives must not be climate deniers. But what is needed is more research, and not another panicky effort to catch up to the Liberals and the NDP in pursuit of leftist policy options.

The most alarming element of his speech was his capitulation to Québec nationalists: a greater share of Quebec's direct taxes to go to Québec than the federal government, (which will make it more a sovereign state than a province), and the application of Law 101 on federally chartered companies. This

is an attempt to prostrate the Conservatives before separatist sentiment in Québec, and also the approval of what amounts to cultural discrimination. He is abandoning within Québec the interests of the 70 per cent of Canadians who speak English, delegitimizing English within Québec after 258 years of official status, and is putting the official cultural minorities of all provinces over the side. He is also handing the Liberals the electoral baseball bat of being the defenders of federalism.

Our governance is so awful because the Liberals don't have to do anything, because the Conservatives are so easy to defeat. It is late, but not too late to break that cycle before another election, but not the way Erin O'Toole tried it on February 26. To be continued.

First published in the