

Canada: The Opposition's odious ineptitude

by Conrad Black



Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole

It is almost unimaginable, given the horrifying shambles that the present federal government has made of almost everything, that it is potentially on the brink of a premature election, confident that it can regain a majority. The only explanation for this is the traditional unfeasibility of the federal Conservative party. Once the Liberals adopted the policy of alternating English and French-Canadian leaders, and the Conservatives obligingly recruited some prominent English-speaking Liberal politicians to mobilize the anglophone majority in the country to impose conscription on French-Canadians who had no particular reason to feel any filial loyalty to the British or the French in the hecatomb of the First World War, the preeminence of the Liberals was assured. The only federal Conservative leader since that time who was knowledgeable enough of Quebec, and of national political

currents generally, to compete on an equal footing with the Liberals was Brian Mulroney. And except for Jean Chrétien, who had the benefit of running against a completely fragmented opposition, he was the only prime minister to win two consecutive majority elections since Louis St. Laurent in 1953.

No one still thinks of conscription and 1917 – even in Quebec, whose motto is “*Je me Souviens*” (“I remember,” and it doesn’t very accurately) – but the Conservatives have managed to find other bear traps and landmines that they conveniently put in front of themselves and blunder into during practically every election. Since it is the Conservative party, it naturally provides the electoral home for those who espouse conservative values. But instead of defending this as policy, the Conservatives endlessly fritter and agitate between easily caricaturable and ineptly formulated positions on fringe issues such as abortion, gender, exotic environmental matters and Indigenous questions, and allow the Liberals to run up and down their backs in hob-nailed jack-boots masquerading as the party of contemporary liberal enlightenment. The result is that the Conservatives are perceived as “harsh,” as was said of the unexceptionable budget that was used as the pretext for bringing down Joe Clark’s ephemeral government in 1979, or “scary,” as the Liberals have repeatedly painted their rivals. Tories allow themselves to be seen as wafflers, trying to suck and blow at the same time, throwing a lifeline to Old Testament notions of anti-choice and white male supremacy, while making insincere and inadequate gestures to more progressive sections of the electorate.

This dismal performance has essentially been repeated by all 10 Conservative leaders between Robert Borden and Brian Mulroney (1921-1984, in which time only Arthur Meighen, R.B. Bennett, John Diefenbaker and Joe Clark were prime minister for a total of 13 years), and the six post-Mulroney Conservative leaders, of whom only Stephen Harper was elected

prime minister due to the popularity of the NDP and Bloc Québécois, which were able to siphon enough votes away from the Liberals in key ridings. This came to a shuddering end in 2015 when Harper invited himself to be portrayed (not very inaccurately) as an inflexible, desiccated old Tory who was entrenched in the political Dark Ages.

Andrew Scheer actually won the popular vote two years ago, but still managed to lose in the traditional conservative manner, and the new leader, Erin O'Toole, ran as a red Tory against Scheer and Maxime Bernier four years ago, and as a traditionalist against Peter MacKay last year, and has since been bumping along, singing the same old discordant Conservative song of a non-conservative Conservative who can also be a better liberal than the Liberals. It has never worked, it won't work now, and even those who might like it to work generally conclude that it is hopeless. The Liberals are incompetent, but they run slick election campaigns, which makes them a force to be reckoned with. As late Liberal confidant Jack Pickersgill used to say, "We're the party of government and the Conservatives are the mumps: you get them once in your life."

As a public service, one more time, I suggest the Conservative road map to victory: attack the Liberal record of incompetence and hypocrisy with the vituperation it deserves and present alternatives that don't break faith with conservative values but cannot be smeared again as the retrograde pieties of antediluvian political reactionaries. The government apparently imagines that it can be re-elected on its performance during the COVID-19 pandemic, even though it has been an unmitigated disgrace. Once we had even elemental information about the coronavirus, we should have devoted our attention to protecting the elderly and all of those with reduced immune systems. No schools or businesses should have been closed; some level of masking and social distancing was justified, but nothing remotely like the mighty self-inflicted

wound the economy of the West generously took, which conferred an immense strategic victory on China. We aren't even in the top 50 when it comes to the percentage of our population that has been vaccinated, trailing many relatively less developed countries and almost all our peers. We should have been rubbing the government's nose in these failures for the last year. O'Toole shouldn't be calling for a time-wasting commission to investigate the government's COVID performance – he has the relevant facts and he is the commission.

As mentioned here last week, Indigenous issues have been a disaster, as well. The government's policy has almost nothing to do with the truth or reconciliation that was promised and is fraudulently based on our prime minister's confession on behalf of the population of Canada that we have been practising cultural genocide against the Natives for centuries. Every word and every letter of every word of that assertion is false and no one who believes it is fit to be prime minister.

The Liberal government's policy trifecta concludes with its fatuities about climate change. Even if global warming is as big a threat as its most ardent proponents claim – which it most certainly is not – Canada's carbon footprint is irrelevant to the world: the principal polluters, China and India, do not recognize the issue, and this government has no excuse for declaring war on the country's greatest industry (energy) and on two of our provinces, all thanks to its spurious misreading of ecological needs. What is needed is massive vigilance and research to spare us, and the world, from the self-destructive bungling of an issue that has not been adequately explored. We don't know enough about climate change and the world's temperature has not risen much in the last 30 years.

The conservatives should light up the country by exposing the government's shameful incompetence in choosing and mismanaging these policy areas. That the leader of the Opposition held and

lost a vote at his own policy conference last month on the relevance of climate change does not incite optimism about the outcome of a forthcoming election. In coming weeks here, if we still appear to be headed for an election, I will propose some policy alternatives. May God, if He is still listening despite official attempts to banish him (including by this government's former governor general who was fired by her office staff and a consultant), and the voters, save our country.

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