

Trudeau shouldn't be so confident, even without any credible challengers

by Conrad Black



This promises to be the most absurd federal election since 2000, when Jean Chrétien was facing four opposition parties of somewhat equivalent strength (PC, NDP, Reform and the Bloc), ensuring he could not possibly lose, in an election he called prematurely, to try to stifle the majority of his own party who were unimpressed with him. The sequence of events he set in motion ended with Chrétien becoming the only incumbent elected prime minister in the history of Canada to be turfed

out of office mid-term by his own party. Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau faces no such challenges, but rather is running against the precedent set by Lester Pearson in 1965, Bill Davis in Ontario in 1977 and David Peterson in Ontario in 1990, all of whom called elections prematurely. Pearson and Davis were looking to turn their minority governments into majorities, and failed to do so; Peterson was defeated in a stunning upset. The apparent motive behind this election is to give the prime minister a blank cheque to impose a high tax, high spend, high deficit, green-obsessed, authoritarian left-wing course correction that flies in the face of practically all of Canadian history.

Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole has been a very indistinct figure since his elevation to party leader last year and relatively few Canadians know who he is or what he thinks about anything. He ran at the previous Conservative leadership convention in 2016 against Andrew Scheer and Maxime Bernier as more or less a red Tory, and ran against Peter MacKay in 2019 as a genuine conservative, but lost no time abandoning the social conservatives in his party and zigzagging back towards the left. We now have five left-of-centre parties in the country and the Conservative message in most key areas is that they would do as the liberals have done, but would do it better. This formula has never worked and does not deserve to succeed. Liberals make better liberals than Conservatives do and the only way Conservatives have been able to win a solid victory federally since the last election of John A. Macdonald in 1891 has been either winning on a great overarching issue – such as trade reciprocity with the United States (Robert Borden, 1911), the Great Depression (R. B. Bennett, 1930) or free trade with the United States (Brian Mulroney, 1988) – or after four or five liberal victories, when the country silently agreed that it was time for a change (John Diefenbaker in 1957, Brian Mulroney in 1984 and Stephen Harper in 2006). It has only been six years since Trudeau defeated Harper, the Liberal leader has a rather pleasant personality

and there is no evidence the country has altogether tired of him.

The early polls show the Liberals leading by three to five points, which, if it holds, would not give them back their majority, though they would be the largest party and would be capable of continuing in government. It is a well-settled historical fact that the Liberals can always outbid the Conservatives for the support of a third or fourth party as needed; they are, however subtly, to the left of the Conservatives and have always been able to attract the support of the New Democratic Party and its predecessor, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, as Mackenzie King did in 1945 and Pierre Trudeau did in 1972. On other occasions, the Liberals gained support from Western rural populists (1920s) and Québec's Cr ditistes ('60s). In the last two years, they have secured the support of the NDP, the Bloc Qu becois and, if there were ever a need for it, the Greens, as well.

On this occasion, there are a number of opportunities for the Conservatives. The Liberals have stumbled badly in the first week of the campaign, being incoherent on the horrible shambles in Afghanistan, and the only issue that they are attempting to push to the forefront is mandatory vaccinations for those in the public service. This is unusual for the Liberals who, whatever their shortcomings in government, have run a smooth, professional campaign in every federal election in living memory, except for their overconfidence in 1957, the problems with the Pierre Trudeau-John Turner transition in 1984 and Michael Ignatieff's collapse, especially in Quebec, in 2011. If this pattern continues, and the Liberals continue to stumble, their support could erode quickly.

Trudeau's support is soft – he is well-liked personally, as he deserves to be, but his record over six years is an unrigorous fixation on climate change, an excessive and groveling national self-shaming over First Nations issues, a very tedious and pretentious preoccupation with gender questions

and, in the last year and into this election campaign, a crescendo of implausible self-laudations over the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. On this last subject, the shutdown has been much too severe and prolonged, and an inexcusably high number of our fatalities have been in homes for the elderly, which should have been protected better and earlier. The initial partnering with China in the production of vaccine was an unmitigated fiasco, and Canada was one of the slowest advanced countries in the world in getting its population vaccinated. The very fact that the government could imagine that its pandemic record is one that justifies its re-election is both astonishing and discouraging.

In these circumstances, and given that O'Toole is so little-known, it is conceivable that he could pleasantly surprise the country and prove an effective campaigner and debater. He has none of Trudeau's glamour or contemporary chic, but he presents as having a fair amount of middle-Canadian common sense. As the parties are running fairly closely together, it is quite possible that O'Toole could prove a better debater and score heavily against Trudeau with an apt thrust or epigram, like Brian Mulroney's "You had a choice, Mr. Turner," in 1984. In precise terms, the Liberal party appears to be vulnerable in its frivolous disregard of the colossal deficit, its proposals to raise taxes on gasoline, groceries and home heating, where the Conservatives propose targeted tax cuts and at least a formally declared intention of balancing the budget again within 10 years. The Conservatives could also gain from their advocacy of bringing back the transit tax credit, reversing this government's stinginess with veterans and abandoning Trudeau's extravagant and foolish prostration of this country at the feet of a great many disreputable regimes around the world. Unfortunately, both parties have acquiesced in the government of Quebec's proposed suffocation of the English language in that province.

Needless to add, no one is uttering a word of any originality

to whet Canada's parched thirst for some grandeur or vision or imagination or even hint at how to make the country great and positively important and noticed in the world. Lester Pearson, Pierre Trudeau, Brian Mulroney, and even Stephen Harper in his own way, had an idea of how Canada could add a cubit to its stature, and they did that; this campaign looks like Canadian humdrum at its most pedestrian. The Conservatives are recommending a national suicide line; if we can't get more impressive leaders, we may need it.

No one should be bracing for a scintillating campaign, but nor should the Liberals be quite so confident of getting their majority back. There is room for surprises and almost any surprise would be positive.

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