

Canada's Conservatives choose Harper disciple as new leader

Roger Jordan
1 June 2017

Andrew Scheer was elected last Saturday as the new leader of the Conservative Party, Canada's Official Opposition, in a membership vote. His victory, largely thanks to appeals to social conservatives and a brazen defence of former Prime Minister Stephen Harper's hard-right record, brings an end to a campaign which saw the Conservatives move still further right.

Scheer, a Saskatchewan MP and former House of Commons Speaker, has cast himself as "Harper with a smile." On the 13th ballot he secured 51 percent support, in an electoral system that gave each constituency equal weight irrespective of the number of Conservative voters. He defeated Maxime Bernier, a self-avowed libertarian and Harper cabinet minister who had led on all previous 12 ballots.

Scheer's campaign drew on the militarism, xenophobia and low tax policies espoused by Harper during his decade in power. In his victory speech, he denounced the decision of the Trudeau Liberal government to withdraw Canadian fighter jets from the Mideast war in Syria and Iraq, and vowed to send them back. The Liberal decision to withdraw the jets had nothing to do with opposition to the US-led war. Rather, it was part of a recalibration of Canada's role, which led to a tripling of the number of Canadian Special Forces deployed to Iraq.

Scheer invoked the threat posed by "radical Islamic terrorism" as justification for his call for Canada to resume a "combat role" in Iraq. Under Harper, such rhetoric was used to justify the imposition of authoritarian surveillance laws like Bill C-51, which have handed vast new powers to Canada's intelligence agencies, and to whip up Islamophobia so as to split the working class.

Scheer also pledged that a Conservative government would balance the budget within two years of taking office, which would require sweeping social spending cuts, and that he would eliminate the Liberals' carbon tax, the centerpiece of the current government's climate change strategy. The carbon tax is a big-business proposal, supported by much of the oil industry. Nevertheless, all but one of the 13

Conservative candidates still standing when the votes were tabulated last week denounced it as an intolerable restraint on Canada's energy industry.

Although Scheer laid claim to Harper's mantle, his victory does not mean the Conservatives are simply following Harper's agenda, as right-wing as that was. The leadership campaign saw the Conservatives shift still further to the right and even openly flirt with extreme right-wing and fascistic forces.

This was above all shown in the leadership bid of Kellie Leitch, a Harper cabinet minister who styled herself as Canada's Donald Trump. Leitch advocated all immigrants and visitors to Canada be screened for "Canadian values," and attended meetings at which leaders of racist and Islamophobic groups spoke. In the most notorious of these incidents, Leitch spoke with members of the Rise Canada group, a far-right organization which claims that Canada is threatened with an Islamic takeover and "Sharia creep."

For his part, Bernier declared that he was ready to deploy the army to prevent the relatively small number of refugees crossing by land from the US into Canada. The increase in "illegal" border-crossings since the beginning of the year has been driven by the Trump administration's vicious anti-immigrant crackdown.

The leadership race was also pushed further to the right by the intervention of the oligarch and reality TV star Kevin O'Leary, who entered the leadership race in January, only to endorse Bernier when he concluded that he could not win. Boosted by overwhelmingly favourable press coverage, O'Leary advocated a program of unbridled wealth accumulation and attacks on workers' rights. Just days before entering the race, he stated that the federal government should sell seats in the Senate, Canada's upper house, to raise money.

Ultimately O'Leary's campaign floundered amid concerns that his unabashed flaunting of his wealth could prove a political liability. His failure to embrace Harper's claim that Canada is a "warrior nation" also raised questions among Conservatives over his commitment to military

spending hikes and a leading role for Canada in NATO.

Founded in 2003 out of a merger between the populist Canadian Alliance and a much weakened Progressive Conservative Party, the “new” Conservative Party spearheaded the drive of Canada’s elite to push politics sharply right and more in line with the agenda of militarism and unbridled social reaction being pursued by their US strategic partners and economic rivals.

Harper dramatically expanded Canada’s aggressive imperialist foreign policy in wars from Afghanistan to Libya and Syria. This was combined with sweeping social spending cuts, attacks on democratic rights, and the adoption of a battery of anti-worker laws that effectively criminalized strike action by Canada Post, railway, airline and other workers governed by federal labour law.

However, after a decade in power, Canada’s ruling elite became increasingly concerned that Harper’s hard-right program, including his anti-immigrant appeals, were becoming a lightning rod for mounting popular opposition. They thus opted for a change of course in 2015, swinging behind Justin Trudeau and his Liberals, who, with appeals to identity politics and close collaboration with the trade union bureaucracy, have moved forward with their agenda of austerity and war, but in new packaging.

Despite the corporate media’s portrayal of Scheer as something of a moderate, he joined in the further shift to the right that characterized the entire Conservative leadership campaign. He was one of the first in the Conservative caucus to embrace Brexit, following last June’s referendum in the UK. Scheer, as *Maclean’s* columnist Paul Wells noted in a column this week, is an ardent admirer of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, and is determined to complete the levelling of what remains of the welfare state.

An opponent of abortion rights and gay marriage, Scheer also based his candidacy on an appeal to the party’s most socially conservative elements. On the final ballot, he won most of the support that had previously gone to the fourth-place finisher, Brad Trost, who had cast himself as the voice of social conservatism in the Conservative Party. Trost is expected to receive a prominent position in Scheer’s leadership team. Although he has vowed not to reopen these issues, Scheer has repeatedly stated that he would permit Conservative MPs to present private members bills on abortion and same sex marriage, and allow a free vote on such matters.

In his victory speech, Scheer said that he would deny federal funds to universities that do not abide by “free speech” principles. This is an appeal to far-right groups, including anti-abortion activists and “anti-Islamic terror” groups, that have been prevented from speaking at universities due to widespread student opposition.

Bernier’s defeat has been largely attributed by the media to his call for the dismantling of the supply management system in Canada’s dairy and poultry-farming sectors, which cost him support in his home province of Quebec.

But other elements of Bernier’s radical free market agenda were no less significant. *Maclean’s* magazine reported that Bernier’s team confirmed on the eve of Saturday’s vote that his health care policy would have meant an end to the Canada Health Act, a piece of legislation introduced over 20 years ago to placate popular opposition to the privatization of health care. Bernier’s proposal to remove the federal government from the health care sector was likely recognized even in Conservative circles as being so unpopular at present as to make them unelectable.

Bernier sought to marry his radical free market policies with a more moderate stance on social issues, including same sex marriage and abortion rights. This raised the ire of the party’s social conservative constituency, who backed contenders like Trost and gave their second preferences to Scheer. Scheer also enjoyed a substantial advantage within the Tory parliamentary caucus, receiving the backing of 24 MPs compared to Bernier’s eight.

The Liberal government reacted to Scheer’s selection as Conservative leader by denouncing him as a social conservative and continuator of Harper’s legacy. Such criticism rings hollow, however, given the Trudeau government’s ongoing adherence to the fiscal framework imposed by almost a decade of Conservative austerity, their continuation of aggressive military interventions abroad and their maintenance of draconian legislation implemented on the pretext of the “war on terror.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact