

Canada: Ex-Conservative leadership candidate to found new right-wing party

Félix Gauthier
5 September 2018

Canadian establishment politics has been rattled by former Conservative leadership contender Maxime Bernier's announcement that he has quit the Conservative Party and will soon launch a new right-wing party, dedicated to promoting a "free market revolution" and employing anti-immigrant demagoguery.

At an August 23 press conference, held on the eve of the Conservative's national convention, the long-time libertarian denounced the party he had served as an MP for the past twelve years as "too intellectually and morally corrupt to be reformed."

Whatever the ultimate outcome of Bernier's new political project, it is part of a crisis wracking the traditional governing parties of Canada, the US and Europe under conditions of rampant social inequality and mounting popular alienation and class conflict.

With the stated aim of becoming "Canada's Macron," that is a politician who breaks the traditional political mold to push through a right-wing Thatcher-style agenda, Bernier articulates the demand of the bourgeoisie for a more aggressive policy—an intensified assault on the working class, beginning with massive tax cuts for big business and the rich to match those enacted in the US under Trump, and a more vigorous drive to advance Canadian imperialist interests on the world stage. Coming soon after the ruling elite propelled the right-wing populist and Trump admirer Doug Ford to power in Ontario, the country's most populous province, Bernier's initiative is manifestly part of a pronounced shift further right in establishment politics.

Bernier's August 23 gambit was prepared by several high-profile controversies Bernier instigated in recent months over the Liberal government's promotion of multiculturalism and identity politics. The most recent and inflammatory was launched by Bernier on August 12, the first anniversary of the fascist rampage in Charlottesville, Virginia, and came in the form of a series

of tweets attacking a speech Prime Minister Justin Trudeau had given a few days earlier.

Among other things, Bernier denounced "Trudeau's extreme multiculturalism and cult of diversity," saying it will "divide" Canadians "into little tribes that have less and less in common, apart from their dependence on government in Ottawa." Bernier also insinuated that immigrants, or at least many of them, "reject basic Western values," and "refuse to integrate into our society and want to live apart in their ghetto."

Aware that there is broad support for such chauvinist sentiments both among Conservative MPs and the party rank-and-file, Conservative leader Andrew Sheer remained conspicuously silent for several days, before ultimately distancing himself from Bernier's remarks, with the comment that Bernier was not speaking "for the party" but only "for himself."

Undeterred, Bernier issued even more explicitly chauvinist comments after Scheer's intervention. In terms that closely resemble the tirades of Jordan Peterson, the psychology professor who is being touted as a leading Canadian intellectual even as he cultivates a constituency among the global New Right, Bernier asserted "immigration policy should not aim to forcibly change the cultural character and social fabric of Canada, as radical proponents of multiculturalism want."

The Liberals, their multiculturalism policy and identity politics more generally are not "left-wing" or "pro-refugee." But Bernier's criticisms of them are from the standpoint of an explicitly right-wing nationalism that emphasizes "national and cultural unity" and, in the name of the "defence of Western values," promotes anti-egalitarianism, militarism and xenophobia.

The son of a former Progressive Conservative MP, Maxime Bernier began his political career as an advisor to Bernard Landry, Minister of Finance in Quebec's Parti Québécois (PQ) government in the late 1990s.

After a career in finance, Bernier was appointed in 2005 Executive Vice-President of the Montreal Economic Institute (MEI), a neoliberal advocacy group. Elected to parliament in 2006, he held several positions in Stephen Harper's government, where he was best known for deregulating much of the telecommunications sector.

He has long been a proponent of the privatization of healthcare and the abolition of "equalization," the system whereby the federal government transfers funds to the poorer provinces to ensure minimum national standards for health care and other essential public services.

The continuity in Bernier's career is to be found in his virulent opposition to government environmental and labor regulations, public services and social-welfare provisions and his championing of the dismantling of any worker social rights not only in the name of the "free market," but of "freedom" *tout court*. He is an admirer of such right-wing capitalist ideologues as Ayn Rand and the economist (and advisor to the Chilean dictator Pinochet) Friedrich Hayek.

Bernier's adoption of populist "new right" rhetoric, stoking anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment, is more recent. In 2009, when members of the Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ)—the right-wing populist movement that merged in 2012 with the current Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ)—petitioned Bernier to become their leader, he politely declined the offer. More recently, amid the controversy sparked by Ontario Conservative Kellie Leitch's 2016 "survey," Bernier opposed the idea of a "values test" for new immigrants.

Only in the more recent period, characterized above all by Trump's victory south of the border, does it appear Bernier recognized the potential for chauvinist appeals to broaden the base for his hard-right neoliberal agenda.

Bernier began to distance himself more openly from the Conservative Party establishment after finishing, to his own surprise and that of senior party leaders, a very close second to Scheer in last year's party leadership race.

Bernier's Conservative critics present his departure as a rash decision, fueled by ambition, egotism and sour grapes. However, press reports indicate he has been promised financial support from prominent sections of business. There is also manifest sympathy for his trenchant criticisms of the party's leadership and direction among a substantial layer of Conservative Party activists. Running as a self-described Conservative libertarian, Bernier, it should be recalled, won the first twelve out of thirteen leadership ballots at last year's convention, and lost to Scheer on the final ballot by less

than two percent.

Bernier's erstwhile Conservative colleagues in parliament have thus far uniformly panned his plans to found a new party. But for many this reaction is due to tactical considerations, principally the fear of being divided against their opponents in the 2019 federal elections.

Former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Jason Kenney, leader of Alberta's new United Conservative Party, and Doug Ford in Ontario have all dissociated themselves from Bernier in the name of Conservative unity. But they have all previously shown an affinity for the type of politics Bernier is now embracing, making rank chauvinist appeals, whether against Quebec, immigrants or Muslims. Within days of becoming premier, Ford was whipping up anti-refugee sentiment, seeking to scapegoat those fleeing Trump's anti-immigrant witch hunt for a housing shortage that is the product of decades of cuts by Liberal, Conservative and NDP governments.

Whatever the fate of Bernier's soon to be created new party, a growing section, not only of the Conservatives but of the entire political establishment, is adopting little by little the ultra-right rhetoric and policies that he articulates only more boldly. The rise of the extreme right in America and Europe, including the participation of the neo-fascist AfD party (Alternative for Germany) in the German parliament, is emboldening the bourgeoisie to set aside political taboos.

The traditional political order is discredited. But war and austerity remain the only means available to the ruling class to "solve" the crisis of capitalism. It is the need to impose this unpopular program that is behind the bourgeoisie's rapid reconciliation with the extreme right. The latter, long banned from official politics after the horrors of Nazism and the Second World War, is increasingly being promoted and politically legitimized.

As one journalist wrote in a surprisingly candid defence of Bernier for CBC, a "common identity... creates impermeable unity in crisis." The only means of cultivating such "national unity" are authoritarianism, militarism, anti-immigrant chauvinism and the division of the working class through the promotion of the most socially backward conceptions.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact