

Canada's Conservatives choose Erin O'Toole as leader in further shift right

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Canada's Conservatives, the official opposition in the federal parliament, chose Erin O'Toole to be the party's next leader in a postal ballot of the membership, whose results were released early Monday morning.

A 12-year Canadian Armed Forces' veteran, corporate lawyer, and junior minister in the Harper Conservative government for 10 months in 2015, O'Toole won the Conservative leadership by presenting himself as the best defender of Harper's legacy of austerity, reaction, and militarism, and by courting the party's large social conservative faction. He pledged to "take back Canada" from the "radical left," aggressively confront China in alliance with Washington, and make Canada an even friendlier place for global investors.

O'Toole was endorsed by Jason Kenney, Alberta's premier and the de facto leader of the party's western-based hard-right faction, after a long list of prominent Conservatives with close ties to Stephen Harper, including former interim leader Rona Ambrose, John Baird, and Pierre Polivere, declined to stand for party leader.

O'Toole defeated Peter MacKay, the presumed front-runner throughout the months-long COVID-19 extended campaign, on the third ballot. Although he held senior portfolios in the Harper government and has close personal ties to Brian Mulroney, who shifted Canadian politics sharply right during a nine-year stint as prime minister (1984–1993), MacKay was dismissed as "too moderate" by wide swathes of the party. This was above all due to his having led the rump that remained of the Progressive Conservative Party prior to its merger with the Harper-led Canadian Alliance in 2003 to form the "new" Conservative Party.

O'Toole seized on this, painting himself as the "True Blue" Conservative in the race, and by making targeted appeals to the social-conservatives and anti-immigrant xenophobes that initially backed the third and fourth-place finishers, Leslyn Lewis and Derek Sloan.

The leadership vote was open to all Conservative Party members. But the winner and ballot rankings were determined on the basis of a points system, in which each of the 338 parliamentary constituencies was worth 100 points, and the points that the candidates received were determined by their

respective share of each constituency's popular vote.

Virtually unknown prior to entering the leadership race, Lewis, who championed restrictions on abortion rights and the slashing of regulations governing natural resource projects, actually won more votes than both O'Toole and MacKay on the second ballot. She drew especially strong support from social conservatives and sections of the party's hard-right base in Alberta and Saskatchewan, where the Conservatives hold 47 of the 48 House of Commons' seats. However, due to the vagaries of the party's voting system, Lewis finished in third place on points on the second ballot and was eliminated.

Sloan, who was eliminated after the first ballot, used his campaign to champion Trump-style policies. These included quitting the Paris Climate Accord, cutting immigration, and withdrawing Canadian support for the World Health Organization. Combining racism and anti-China bellicosity, he made headlines last spring by publicly accusing Canada's Public Health Officer Theresa Tam, a native of Hong Kong, of "working for" Beijing.

Taken together, Lewis and Sloan secured 40 percent of the vote on the first ballot, out of a total of 174,000 votes. The small number of total votes cast—representing less than 0.5 percent of Canada's 37 million people—and the strength of the support for the social conservatives Lewis and Sloan, underscore just how narrow is the Conservatives' base of social support, and how little popular enthusiasm the leadership contest generated. Even right-wing *Globe and Mail* columnist Konrad Yakabuski acknowledged that the Conservative leadership race had been a "drab contest among B-listers."

The lack of widespread support for the Conservatives reflects the fact that they speak unapologetically on behalf of the most rapacious sections of Canadian capital. O'Toole campaigned as the "natural inheritor" of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, whose tenure in power between 2006 and 2015 was characterized by a vast militarization of Canadian foreign policy, sweeping attacks on workers' rights, and savage austerity spending.

Since Harper's departure immediately following the Liberals' October 2015 election victory, the Conservatives have shifted even further right.

O'Toole replaces Andrew Scheer, who touted himself as

“Harper with a smile” in campaigning for the party leadership in 2017. An unrepentant social conservative and devotee of the arch-reactionary Opus Dei, Scheer nonetheless successfully portrayed himself as a “compromise” candidate in defeating Maxime Bernier, who had topped each round of voting prior to the 13th and final ballot. Little more than a year later, Bernier quit the Conservatives and founded the People’s Party of Canada (PPC). Combining virulent anti-immigrant chauvinism with ruthless neoliberal policies, Bernier has modelled his PPC on the Alternative for Germany (AfD), France’s National Rally, and other European far-right parties.

Bernier’s departure did not slow the Tories’ march to the right. Scheer’s campaign manager and other advisers had longstanding ties to Rebel Media, the Alberta-based news outlet that has become a mouthpiece for far-right and fascistic forces.

After the Conservatives failed to unseat the Liberals in last October’s election, there was a groundswell of opposition from within the party and corporate Canada, and Scheer was soon drummed out of the leadership. Sections of the party charged that Scheer’s evident hostility to gay marriage and abortion rights had made it difficult for the Conservatives to gain votes in urban areas.

While Scheer’s social conservative views and indifference to climate change undoubtedly did cost the Conservatives votes, a far more important factor in their defeat was Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s ability to posture as an opponent of the brutal austerity measures being implemented by Ontario Tory Premier Doug Ford. Popular opposition to Ford translated into a disastrous Conservative electoral performance in Canada’s most populous province, with their share of Ontario’s popular vote actually falling from 2015.

Trudeau’s anti-Ford posturing was facilitated by his allies in the trade unions and by the social-democratic NDP, which repeatedly proclaimed its readiness to serve as the Liberals’ junior partner in a coalition government. No sooner were the elections over than Trudeau publicly kissed and made-up with Ford and, in the name of “national unity,” moved to placate Kenney and his hard-right Saskatchewan counterpart, Scott Moe.

With the support of the trade unions, which have been ever anxious to promote the Liberals’ phoney “progressive” credentials, the Trudeau Liberal government, in its five years’ in office has slashed health care funding, further expanded the repressive powers of the national security apparatus, vastly increased military spending, and expanded Canadian imperialist involvement in US-led wars, military operations, and intrigues around the globe.

The Trudeau government worked closely with the unions, New Democrats, and big business to orchestrate a massive bailout of the banks and financial markets during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is now pursuing a reckless back-to-work campaign that includes slashing financial support for working people so that they have no choice but to

return to unsafe workplaces.

Even so, important sections of the ruling elite are increasingly frustrated with the Liberal government. They fear it lacks the political strength and ruthlessness to enforce a new round of savage austerity and aggressively pursue Canadian imperialist interests in the face of mounting working class opposition.

Hence the attempts to remould the Conservatives, the ruling class’ other traditional party of national government, into a viable alternative.

In his victory speech, O’Toole appealed for big business support, by declaring it time to rein in public spending, slash environmental regulations, and ratchet up tensions with China. “Capital and jobs have been leaving Canada and large deficits were being run before the COVID crisis led to record debt and deficits,” he declared. He then went on to accuse the Trudeau government of making Canada “a risky place” for investors.

O’Toole and the Conservatives are determined to defend the interests of the financial elite with the full force of the state. This was the meaning of his leadership campaign pledge to follow the example of Alberta Premier Jason Kenney and criminalize protest blockades of railways and other public infrastructure. Such anti-democratic measures have been justified as a response to last February’s blockades in support of Wet’suwet’en opposition to pipelines through their traditional lands—actions that prompted Scheer and much of the corporate media to demand the military be deployed to smash the protests.

O’Toole has vowed to “restore Canada’s place in a tough world,” by strengthening Canada’s alliances with the western imperialist powers, above all Washington. He is particularly adamant Canada take an even more prominent role in US imperialism’s incendiary military-strategic offensive against nuclear-armed China. The new Conservative leader is demanding Ottawa immediately ban Huawei from Canada’s 5-G network, work to “decouple” Canada’s economy from China, and impose sanctions on China citing its treatment of the Uighur minority and its attacks on democratic rights in Hong Kong. Echoing the bellicose statements of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, O’Toole has used apocalyptic language to accuse Beijing of seeking to “impose its own model of authoritarian governance on the world,” adding, “for Canadians, there is no greater geopolitical issue.”



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