

MESSAGE TO THE CONSERVATIVES: GO MAINSTREAM OR GO HOME

Rick Peterson

The voters sent Conservatives a clear message on June 28 — go mainstream or go home. Urban voters, women, youth and Quebecers all rejected the Conservatives as being too far to the Right on social issues, and insufficiently supportive of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. From a combined Alliance-PC score of 37 percent in the 2000 election, the new Conservatives won less than 30 percent, while losing most of the cities, falling short of expectations in Ontario, and being shut out in Quebec. The good news, writes the chair of the Red Tory Council from Vancouver, is that Conservatives now form a competitive opposition and can use that platform to position themselves as a government in waiting. But they must continue moving to the centre on social issues, while maintaining classic conservative values on fiscal issues. Red Tories and Blue Tories need to strike these compromises, beginning with their 2005 policy convention. Rick Peterson concludes this is the first step on the path to power.

Les électeurs ont adressé aux conservateurs ce message sans équivoque lors du scrutin du 28 juin : rentrez dans le rang ou rentrez chez vous. Citadins, femmes, jeunes et Québécois ont tous rejeté leur vision des questions sociales et du rôle de la Charte des droits. En 2000, l'Alliance et le Parti conservateur avaient obtenu ensemble 37 p. 100 des suffrages exprimés. Avec moins de 30 p. 100 des voix, la droite fusionnée a cette fois perdu la plupart des villes, déçu les attentes en Ontario et complètement échoué au Québec. Le président du Red Tory Council de Vancouver y voit au moins une bonne nouvelle : le Parti conservateur forme désormais une opposition performante et peut se positionner comme gouvernement en devenir. À condition d'accroître son recentrage sur les questions sociales tout en maintenant ses valeurs classiques en matière financière. Conservateurs sociaux et traditionnels devront s'entendre sur ce compromis dès le congrès de 2005, conclut Rick Peterson, pour franchir une première étape clé vers le pouvoir.

The June 28 federal election sent a clear and sobering message to the Conservative Party of Canada: go mainstream, or go home. What remains to be seen this fall is if Tories will heed the message.

Make no mistake — the election was an enormous disappointment for Canada's Tories. The considerable amount of momentum and hopes that were built up in the preceding eight months with the formation of a new Conservative Party and the strong showing of the new party leader led many party faithful to believe that a Conservative minority, or even a majority, was possible.

Reality proved different. After venting their anger against the Paul Martin Liberals, large chunks of the Canadian electorate turned their backs on a Conservative

Party that appeared to be too right-wing and too out of touch with mainstream Canadian values to merit serious consideration as government. Urban voters, Quebec voters, and younger voters all turned their backs on the Tories, who were able to make only limited gains in Ontario and remained shut out of Quebec.

The Conservative vote count across Canada was significantly less than the combined Progressive Conservative and Canadian Alliance vote of four years ago — just under 30 percent, versus a combined Alliance-PC 37 percent in 2000. The new party increased its seat count from a combined CA-PC total of 78 to 99, but remained far out of contention in Ontario and Quebec, where Canadian governments form or fail. The Conservative electorate

remains older, rural, western and white — hardly representative of the Canadian reality of today, and far from where Canadian demographics are leading this country tomorrow.

Here's the flip side, though, of what might seem a dismal scenario for Canadian Conservatives: the June 28 election is an important step in the evolution of Canada's new

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Conservative movement. Much has been accomplished to give the new party a strong base, and the lessons of the election give us a clear road map of where we need to go to become relevant in the future.

This is an opportunity to review some important policy and positioning ideas that will allow Canada's new Conservatives to take the next step forward. We'll leave aside the more political discussion of leadership questions: Stephen Harper is the undisputed leader of the Conservative Party of Canada. He has played a significant role in taking the party this far, and he deserves the right to make a decision on his future without any pressure to the contrary from policy or political analysts. That said, failure by him to take concrete steps to move the Conservative Party more into the mainstream would inevitably lead to concerns over his ability to take the party to the next level. We're probably a year — and a policy convention — away from the time when we can judge how he stacks up on that.

Instead I'll provide an outline of a road map that he or any other leader can follow that will move the party into the Canadian mainstream. In the first part, I consider the two guiding values that must anchor the new approach Canada's new Conservatives must adopt; in the second part I suggest two policy and "branding" initiatives that would

allow Conservatives to move strongly into the mainstream of the Canadian social and political spectrum as we move toward the next election.

The bottom line is this: the Conservative Party of Canada must follow a two-track approach in the next step of the party's evolution. We must anchor our policies in the best tradition of fiscal conservatism and democratic reform; and at the same time we must embrace progressive, Red Tory values, principles and ideas and move the CPC to the centre.

In other words, we need to take the best elements of our Reform, Alliance and Progressive Conservative roots, and create a modern and centrist Conservative Party of Canada. We must establish our identity as Canada's new Conservatives.

The PC-CA merger of last year has allowed Conservatives of all stripes to hope once again that our ideas will one day form part of government policy. Let's be clear on one point: Red Tories and Blue Tories alike need each other to survive and thrive.

The December 2003 merger between the Progressive Conservatives and Canadian Alliance pulled two non-contenders together and gave them a financial base and the critical mass needed to become a national force.

Throughout the last decade, Progressive Conservative attempts to win the Canadian centre on its own by siphoning off votes from the Liberals were a disaster, as it lost the right-of-centre vote to the Reform and then the Canadian Alliance. As a result, the PCs were primarily reduced to a regional rump in the Atlantic.

On the other hand, the efforts of the Reform and Alliance parties to advance a program of social conservatism have been a colossal failure as well, resulting in those movements failing to make any gains outside of western Canada. Canadians have been, and still are, wary about possible new policies on capital punishment, abortion, gay rights and immigration coming from this part of the conservative spectrum. The newly created Conservative Party of Canada failed to shake these concerns on June 28, and paid a dear price.

The election results fell short of Conservative hopes and expectations, but there's no doubt that democracy in Canada is stronger, and more competitive, because of this renewed Conservative presence. The debate that now must take place inside this united conservative base is the one between the centre-right and right-wing elements of the party. This is the time for conservative compromise by both factions in the name of advancing a common cause.

There are historical precedents that lead many of us to believe that this process can bear fruit. Ronald Reagan was able to win the leadership of American Republicans after winning support from both the secular and religious right and moving his party more

to the centre; Tony Blair moved his New Labour party away from its leftist extremes and has been able to offer a more palatable, centrist — and successful — Labour alternative for voters in Great Britain; and Brian Mulroney, in his time in government, moved the Conservatives from its opposition mentality to the centre of the political spectrum and held a difficult coalition together through two elections that produced Conservative majorities.

The image of the Conservative Party in Canada clearly must differ from the one Stephen Harper led into battle last June. It must become more acceptable to urban voters, it must appeal to Quebecers, and it must be a relevant choice for young people across the country. To get there will take some work. Here are the two steps we need to take to get us on the right path:

First, the Conservative Party of Canada needs to emphasize its conservative fiscal agenda. The party is known for advocating parliamentary reform and law-and-order issues, but it must broaden this scope and raise its profile on policy issues of taxation, trade and debt reduction.

These very strong components of previous Reform and Canadian Alliance programs need to be reinforced and highlighted, which was not the case in the recent Conservative election platform. A focus on good fiscal policy will create a “social dividend” and the political capital we need to advance our progressive social policy positions. The Progressive Conservative Party of Canada’s failure to stake out a strong stance on these issues since the mid-1990’s largely explains their slide into irrelevance. Here is proof that a centrist social policy without strict adherence to fiscal conservatism is a recipe for disaster.

Tax reform for middle income earners and corporations, further advances in free and fair trade issues, and a continued focus on debt reduc-

tion are integral parts of a Conservative platform that will appeal to entrepreneurs, executives, mid-level managers and hard-working immigrants across all demographic and income lines. A disciplined and clear approach on these issues will bring about renewed respect for the pro-business element of the Conservative policy that, until now, has taken a back seat to concerns over social conservatism.

In effect, this renewed focus on business issues addresses the changing face of young and progressive conservatives in Canada, those we call “Canada’s new Red Tories.” Today’s centrist conservatives are quite different from their predecessors of even a decade ago. Their ranks include energetic and influential urban baby boomers at the height of their professions, involved in their communities, global in their perspectives, and pragmatic in their view of politics.

Today’s modern Red Tories have more small business owners, managers, entrepreneurs and executives than ever before. As a result, a strong sense of fiscal responsibility and a distaste for government waste are leading elements of today’s Red Tory discourse — something that separates us from

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the right wing of the federal Liberal Party of Canada.

As well, today’s Red Tories recognize that our greatest natural resource, the engine that drives Canada’s economy and future prosperity, is a renewable resource — our very own people. Conservative fiscal policies must recognize that fact, backed by the belief that we must attract and keep Canada’s and the world’s best and brightest risk-takers and entrepreneurs to create wealth, provide jobs and

build our country. Again, we can do that by focusing on taxes, trade issues and debt reduction.

Second, the Conservative Party of Canada must realize that it cannot use government as a tool of social policy. Abandoning social conservatism is a necessary step for any right-of-centre party wanting to govern. It’s only by scaling back the social side of government — effectively getting government out of people’s bedrooms and businesses — that any right-of-centre party will be given the chance to govern. This is the price that social conservatives must pay if they wish to become acceptable in Ontario and Quebec, where power lies in Canada. As we saw on June 28, Canadians want a government of social conservatives no more than they want a government of social radicals.

As Andrew Irvine, a conservative policy analyst in Vancouver, has written, this fact may not be welcome news to many on the political right — which might include the current Conservative leader — but it should be. And for those who accept this position, the upside is considerable, as Dr. Irvine points out.

“A smaller government that consciously tried to stay out of people’s

private lives,” he writes, “would not just increase personal freedom. It would also help private social institutions to flourish. Families, businesses, private charities, churches, synagogues and mosques all do better when tax rates are lower and government is smaller. Because most such institutions are typically conservative in outlook, citizens get the best of both worlds.”

Canadian Conservatives must also be clear in recognizing and fully accepting that the Canadian Charter of

Rights and Freedoms exists to defend individual rights from the unfair decisions of parliamentary majorities. The supremacy of the courts in enforcing the Charter, instead of the parliamentary majority, is not a perfect solution, but it is one that is widely accepted and strongly supported by a strong majority of mainstream Canadians.

Can improvements be made in the process by which we appoint our judges? Surely, yes. But Canada's new Conservatives must take a strong stance on Charter issues and wipe away, once and for all, the stigma of a "hidden agenda" or concerns on matters of individual rights that have dogged social conservatives in this country for the past 20 years.

Once the strong foundations have been laid for Canada's new Conservatives, the party will be ready to put forth bold, new initiatives that will help it define its policies and positioning as we approach the next federal election, which can come at any time in the next two to three years, or even sooner if the Liberals rebound strongly in the polls and arrange their own defeat in the House.

The next Conservative government of Canada should be a champion of private and public sector initiatives that reduce the burden of government in all areas and create a more efficient delivery of services to all Canadians, and espe-

cially to those who need our help the most.

Conservatives cannot and should not try to "outspend the Liberals." Unlike the federal Liberals, who must closely watch their left flank in a minority government situation, Conservatives must brand themselves as the party with the most balanced approach to solving Canada's problems. Conservatives must be seen as the guardians against the development of what Margaret Thatcher called "the nanny state." Conservatives must be caring and compassionate — but also clear-eyed and conscious of their role as guardians of public trust and the public purse. Nothing is more sacred.



White House Photo

Brian Mulroney and Ronald Reagan, here at the White House in 1984, are prominent and pertinent examples of conservatives who won the leadership of parties on the Right, and then succeeded with the electorate by moving them closer to the centre. A model Stephen Harper should emulate, writes Rick Peterson, if he hopes to take the Conservative Party from opposition to government.

Nowhere is there a greater need for a rational, conservative approach to the efficient delivery of services than in the health care sector.

Without advocating two-tier health care, Conservatives can take a leadership role in helping the next generation of Canadians come to grips with spiraling health care costs and the fact that, as things stand today, there is only one source of health care funding: the Canadian taxpayer.

Senator Michael Kirby, author of a comprehensive health care report in 2002, pointed out again in a recent *Globe and Mail* article that money for health care comes from Canadians directly paying for services, or indirectly when the government uses taxpayers' money. There is no painless solution to problems associated with the health care system — despite what you hear from Paul Martin and the Liberal government.

Rather than impose user fees, allowing a parallel private insurance system or increasing taxes, Senator Kirby advocates a variable national health care insurance premium.

“The main advantage of a variable health care premium,” Senator Kirby argues, “is that it links the charge imposed on taxpayers directly to the funding of health care services: It’s a truly dedicated tax. Taxpayers are clear on how much money they are paying and where the money is going. This reinforces in the taxpayer’s minds that they are paying for the health care services they cherish; it begins to dispel the myth that health care is a free good.”

This same realistic approach to the health care debate can serve Canada’s new Conservatives well in other areas that can help carve out a bold new approach. Nowhere is that more evident than in child poverty.

The tragedy of child poverty in Canada is real, persistent and widespread. It is a cancer in the inner

cities of our largest urban areas; it’s found on First Nations reserves; it is a blight on the Prairies and in other rural areas across the country. It is one area of social policy that Canada’s new Conservatives can approach hand-in-hand with private sector partners and finds support in demographic areas across Canada where the party is absent.

Eliminating child poverty can become a leading Conservative social policy initiative. The Conservative approach can be different from the Liberal approach, which is limited to federal government funding of daycare spaces and pious promises dating back to the first Chrétien government that have been ignored for more than a decade.

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Here’s a leading example of how Conservatives can help: rather than funding daycare spaces solely with government money, Conservatives can advocate a plan that would encourage private sector employers to create daycare spaces and services in the workplace.

Private sector employers who embrace this plan will be the most sought out by the best and brightest of Canadian parents — including single mothers, many of them at or below the poverty line, who are frozen out of the workforce today because of daycare shortages. Everyone wins: employers will see less down time and better moral within their staff; kids will have a safe, happy environment to grow and develop; and Canadian tax-

payers will have a lighter load to bear than if they paid for all these spaces on their own.

Yes, daycare is a provincial responsibility, and yes, such a plan would take considerable work and negotiations with both provincial government partners and private sector leaders. Yes, it will take leadership at the federal government level, but isn’t that why Conservatives are trying to regain power? Don’t we want to tackle our most difficult problems and help those who need us the most — like kids living in poverty? Absolutely.

A second area that Conservatives need to address is the environment. We cannot stand by and let the Green Party monopolize those issues by default. For now, Conservatives are better known in the environmental area by our opposition to Kyoto. We have to take a more proactive and higher profile stance in this area.

Is it too much to ask Conservatives, a pro-business party, to come up with innovative approaches to environmental issues that provide a balance to private sector and public desires? We hope not. Who better than us to leverage off of our understanding of the business imperatives of the environment to develop fiscally sound but forward-thinking initiatives for the future of our large part of this planet? Let’s harness the energy and know-how inherent in the free market system to produce the solutions that will allow us to live in harmony with our environment. Our party is, by far, best positioned to champion this cause.

We can start now — no need to wait to be in government. We could call for substantially increased research and development funding, led by people who understand their market potential, into alternative energy sources. The environment is a criti-

cal issue to growing the Conservative base into mainstream, urban, young Canada. The Conservatives are known, to the extent that they are known at all on environmental policy, by their opposition to Kyoto. That is a limited and limiting position.

Which leads to a final, but very critical point. Canada's new

The Conservative Party of Canada must realize that it cannot use government as a tool of social policy. Abandoning social conservatism is a necessary step for any right-of-centre party wanting to govern. It's only by scaling back the social side of government — effectively getting government out of people's bedrooms and businesses — that any right-of-centre party will be given the chance to govern.

Conservatives need to undergo an extensive re-branding effort. We must expand our demographic base, and take bold steps into the mainstream life of Canadians in an effort to illustrate that we are not just another tired political party whose message is invisible except at election time.

In other words, Conservatives need to re-brand the party, and take a more private sector approach to positioning the brand as we prepare for the next election. Here's a thought for Canada's new Conservatives: let's start thinking about our brand much like a private sector business would approach a marketing campaign for a new product launch.

Why not? Like many of us in the private sector, the Conservative Party is in a very competitive marketplace: our market share is continually under attack; our client base can be very fickle and is subject to massive swings to competitors; we're often not in control of events in our competitive environment; rivals try to poach our best people; we've had very high turnover in our executive suites over the past years; and most of the public really

doesn't know what we stand for.

Instead of limiting our branding to electioneering slogans such as "Demand Better" that are dropped the minute the polls close, Conservatives should work with a professional marketing group and develop a new tag line for the Conservative Party that will stay with us 12 months out of the year and be associated with policies that Canadians will

identify with and get excited about.

Put in this context, we need to embark on a positioning and branding strategy — now. Serious conferences and forums where we can explain our policies will be the bedrock of our credibility, but from there we need to take our message to the street and package it properly for meaningful impact. Let's take Canada's new Conservative brand out into mainstream Canada.

The next Conservative government of Canada should be a champion of private and public sector initiatives that reduce the burden of government in all areas and create a more efficient delivery of services to all Canadians, and especially to those who need our help the most.

And we have just the people on board already who can help us — members of the Conservative Fund of Canada. This collection of senior Tories from across Canada is filled with many high-profile men and women who have devoted tremendous amounts of energy and time on behalf of our predecessor parties, raising funds during some very difficult times.

There is a lot of talent in this pool of people — let's tap into it to help increase the profile and acceptance of the "Conservative brand." They have

the community connections, the grassroots contacts and the ability to connect with key decision makers in their communities. They can help take Canada's new Conservatives out to Main Street, and help put Conservatives back into power in Ottawa.

The prospect of change is never an easy one for anybody — including national political parties. Yet, Conservatives in Canada have done a good deal of heavy lifting in the past 12 months and brought about dramatic changes for the better. For that, everyone involved, from Stephen Harper to Peter MacKay on down,

should take credit.

But, further change is needed if Canada's new Conservatives hope to take the next step, one that will lead them to government again. We must anchor our policies in the best tradition of fiscal conservatism, and at the same time make a clear move to the centre in adopting the most realistic approach to progressive social policy.

Canadians clearly want us to move in that direction. They are ready

for change, and Canada's new Conservatives are the only viable alternative to the dynastic Liberals.

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