



J.P. Veitch, Rona Ambrose's partner, wears a T-shirt that says it all about the interim Conservative leader running for the party leadership. Jason Ransom photo

## The Conservative Party Post-Vancouver: Where Does it Go From Here?

Yaroslav Baran

*The Conservative convention in Vancouver in May presented a united front to the country that had voted out the Harper government seven months earlier. There was little of the corridor conspiring that featured at previous gatherings, and the grassroots seemed focused on absorbing the lessons from last fall's defeat and moving on to the coming leadership race and 2019 election. A former communications director for Stephen Harper, Yaroslav Baran has a prescription for what the party needs to do to complete its next incarnation.*

Conservatives gathered in Vancouver at the end of May for an important convention. In theory, it was a standard biennial congress, but in reality, it was the first gathering post-Harper and after a federal election unnecessarily lost due to a shockingly shoddy campaign.

A common expectation was that the Conservative Party convention would be a sombre affair—a collection of the demoralized and bitter, wagging fingers

*“I am a Canadian, free to speak without fear, free to worship in my own way, free to stand for what I think right, free to oppose what I believe wrong...”*

– JOHN DIEFENBAKER, 1956

and venting frustration. It was anything but. The tone was surprisingly energetic and the delegates strikingly youthful: spirits were high, and most importantly, focused on the future rather than the past. Perhaps enough time had passed since October that people were ready to move on. Perhaps it was the masterful post-mortem performance by the party's executive director officer, Dustin Van Vugt, which left no stone unturned, nothing hidden and no frustration left to vent.

Whatever the reasons, the party chose collectively to take the opportunity to renew itself, exorcize its demons of policy and style, and start to present a new face to the public as it rebuilds in time to challenge the Liberal government in 2019.

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(or “decrim-lite”). A mental health policy framework was adopted. These are the hallmarks of a modern, progressive party—not the narrow debates of a generation ago: the language on cereal boxes or death penalty redux. At the same time, the timeless bedrocks of modern conservatism were reaffirmed: competition in the marketplace, and a principles-based foreign policy.

For the first time since the current party was formed, media were given full access to all proceedings, drawing an amusing (dare we say *ironic*?) contrast with the concurrent Liberal convention in Winnipeg, where the Fourth Estate complained throughout about closed policy sessions and lack of access to ministers.

The strongest undercurrent at the convention was the issue of future leadership. The fact that only three contenders are formally in play thus far (Michael Chong, Kellie Leitch and Maxime Bernier), begged the predictable speculation: Who else would run? Would either of the titans—Jason Kenney and Peter MacKay—jump in? (Neither was obviously campaigning.) Are there any white knights or surprise outsiders? When would the fireworks begin?

Despite this strong thematic, outside observers were also surprised to see none of the expected cleavages between antecedent parties—the old Progressive Conservatives and Reformers. As one insider noted, “The only people who talk about that are those who are not members and never have been. Inside the party, nobody even thinks about that stuff anymore.” Indeed, an entire generation of party members and activists have risen through the ranks knowing nothing other than a united,

organized and battle-ready party—a fact that may end up as one of Stephen Harper's biggest legacies.

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So, bogeymen and anchors cast off, the Conservative Party of Canada has a genuine fresh start. Now what will it do with it? Where does the party go from here?

The road back to power hinges on a number of lessons the party would be wise to heed.

Number One: Keep 2015 in perspective. It was not a cataclysmic defeat. It was not a humiliation. It was not a fundamental repudiation. It wasn't 1993. It was an election loss. Period. It happens all the time. The Tories came in eight points behind the victorious party, and pulled through with a formidable 99-seat Official Opposition. This should not be triggering identity or existential crises.

Interim Leader Rona Ambrose hinted

at this in her address. Don't jettison a formidable legacy because we are disappointed after a single election:

"We're the party of Confederation, one of the most durable political arrangements the world has ever known. We're the party that bound the country together from coast to coast with the Canadian Pacific Railway, one of history's most visionary nation building projects. We're the party that introduced Canada's first Bill of Rights, 22 years before the Charter of Rights. We're the party of free trade, signing the historic [Free Trade Agreement] .... We're the party of the first African-Canadian MP and Cabinet Minister, the first Muslim MP, the first Hindu MP, the first MPs of Chinese, Greek, and Japanese descent, and the first Senators of Filipino, Korean, Pakistani, and Vietnamese descent."

Not to mention the first woman to serve in Cabinet, and the first woman as prime minister. #BecauseIts1993. Or universal suffrage. #BecauseIts1918

The point to remember? Conservatives have a legacy of which they can be proud. They need to tame the revolutionary impulses of the populist strain of the party for iconoclasm and constant reinvention. Celebrate your accomplishments—it's the stuff legacy brands are built on. And don't be shy about shouting it from the rooftops, because most Canadians are unaware of the party's iconic nation-building accomplishments.

Lesson Two: Drop the constant references to "the base." For too long, the Conservative Party's policy triage has been dominated by crude tossing of "red meat" to this mythical demographic. Who is the base, exactly? Depends whom you ask and on which day. But one thing is certain: As the Harper government grew long in the tooth, the definition of "base" narrowed and narrowed, yielding a bizarre grab bag of policy offerings:

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**W**hile the Conservatives by no means have a monopoly on eye-rolling clichés, a mature and intellectually self-respecting party has to forge the discipline to keep them in check. To succeed, conservatives need to accept that policy must be for *everyone*, because *governance* is for everyone.

That means growing beyond the lower-hanging fruit and articulating a vision—and offering a home—to all demographics. Stephen Harper's dream of displacing the Liberals as Canada's "natural governing party" will only be achieved when his successors feel just as much at home addressing an urban transit forum at a downtown Toronto cappuccino bar as they would at the Calgary Stampede or an Antigonish lobster boil. Important strides were made at the convention with LGBT and Muslim members. But that's just the start. Students, downtown urbanites, environmentalists and other neglected groups must know that the party also speaks for them.

Lesson three: end the internal factionalism. While it's true that the old PC/Reform divide is gone, other self-identified clans do exist: social conservatives, Red Tories, Blue Tories, Green Tories, libertarians.... And each is guilty of accusing other factions of heresy. If the Liberal coalition can coexist without factional supremacy wars, there is no reason why Tories must believe that one

faction has to dominate. The next generation is already cross-pollinating between old categories. This has to continue, and the party needs to think of itself with a *single identity* accommodating a *spectrum of individuals*—not as a confederal *coalition* with a *spectrum of groups*.

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Lesson four: End the war with the media and other so-called elites. The media are not out to get the Tories. While it may be incidentally true that more centre-leftists go to journalism school than do centre-rightists (as the inverse is likely true for business schools), there is no vast conspiracy. The news media, and journalists as individuals, are driven by their own industry imperatives. And those imperatives are not anti-Toryism. Media are hard-wired to question authority, seek truth, unearth the hidden, and equalize power dynamics. These traits apply regardless of which party holds the reins of power.

The sooner Conservatives stop feeling sorry for themselves, excise their residual victim complex and renew a sophisticated approach to media relations, the quicker the rewards will start to accrue. This process has already started under the stewardship of interim chief Rona Ambrose, and must be allowed to continue when the permanent leader is chosen.

The same is true with the other estates of officialdom: the courts, the public service, and the business or stakeholder community. We need not “nail shut the revolving door” as we often heard on the 2006 campaign trail. We need to build *more* doors, and actively encourage executive exchange between all these groups. Doing so would suck an enormous amount of distrust and misunderstanding out of Ottawa, and both government and politics would function much more smoothly.

Lesson five: Don't think you own it. You have to work for it. And the other guy will only get better.

The Liberals made a collective error in the early Harper years. Many arrogantly thought of a Conservative government as an aberration—an abnormality that would naturally correct itself. Only after nearly a decade did many in the punditocracy start to posit that perhaps some level of political realignment was actually occurring. By 2015, the Liberals knew that to take back the crown, they would have to roll up their sleeves and work hard—devise new campaigning techniques, modernize their party and processes, and pound the pavement. Similarly, we eventually saw a cadre of young Tories whose first jobs out of school were as ministerial policy advisers earning more than their parents. The Conservatives were in power since they started to vote, and nothing could seem more normal than a blue Ottawa. This is the generation that most needs this message: Just as Stephen Harper did not do himself in with outlandish “un-Canadian”



Campaign buttons for Conservative leadership candidates Michael Chong and Maxime Bernier, as well as an LGBT Tory button supporting same sex marriage. Yaroslav Baran photo

policy in his first two years as many Liberals had assumed and expected, Justin Trudeau also should not arrogantly be expected to implode.

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People tend to get better with experience, and his approval ratings are already sky-high. Moreover, Canadian governments tend to get more than a single term. In short, odds are on a Liberal re-election in 2019. If the Conservatives want a different outcome, they will have to work as hard as they did in 2006, and as hard as the Liberals did in 2015.

The Conservative Party has undergone massive transformation in our lifetime—with huge upheavals and

rebirth in the last 15 years. It is simultaneously an elder and a young child: It carries the political heritage of the party that gave birth to this country, yet is also new in that it was formally reconstituted in 2003 as a new entity. Like any elder, it has wisdom and perspective. It has proud achievements behind it, but also mistakes. And like any child, it has had growing pains, stumbles, throws the odd tantrum, but is also prone to being startlingly insightful.

The party has an opportunity to fully fuse the energy and freshness of its youth with the wisdom and perspective of its heritage. If it does this maturely, inclusively and comprehensively, it can be unstoppable as a political force in Canada. **P**

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