

Opinion: How the federal Conservatives can become the Natural Governing Party



THOMAS MATHEWS, SPECIAL TO MONTREAL GAZETTE

[More from Thomas Mathews, Special to Montreal Gazette](#)

([HTTP://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/THOMAS-MATHEWS-SPECIAL-TO-MONTREAL-GAZETTE](http://montrealgazette.com/author/thomas-mathews-special-to-montreal-gazette))

Published on: May 21, 2015 | Last Updated: May 21, 2015 3:59 PM EST



A detail from The Old Flag, The Old Policy, The Old Leader, the iconic image of the election of 1891. Sir John A.

Barring a shock announcement, Prime Minister Stephen Harper will be leading the Conservatives in the next federal election, seeking to extend an already lengthy reign in the Prime Minister's Office. This decision is Harper's to make, and presumably he feels he is in the best position to defeat any challengers in the vote, expected in October, including the young and personable Justin Trudeau, and the effective leader of the Opposition, Thomas Mulcair.

But, as many columnists have written, Canadian history is replete with examples of prime ministers losing elections after approximately a decade in power.

If Harper loses the next election, obviously a leadership race would be immediate; but even if he wins, he should slowly make plans for a successful leadership transition. Even before the election, recruiting candidates who may be leadership contenders and/or front-bench ministers must be a priority.

Conservatives should be thinking about their long-term future direction now.

Ultimately, the prime minister's legacy will largely be determined by how successful he is in having the Conservative Party replace the Liberal Party as Canada's Natural Governing Party. In today's politics, leadership is everything. From Pierre Trudeau onward, prime ministers have steadily increased the power wielded by the PMO. The character and style of the party leader and eventual prime minister shape Canadian politics to an unparalleled degree.

Conservatives wishing to create their own blueprint for political

domination of the 21st century can look closely at how the Liberals attained that during the 20th century. One tradition that contributed to their success was the Liberal policy of alternating between anglophone and francophone leaders.

Perhaps a good policy for the Tories would be not only to alternate between western- and eastern-based leaders, but also leaders with Reform leanings and those with Progressive Conservative leanings. While such a policy does not need to be written in stone, allowing for exceptional candidates to win, the party would do well to think about the importance of such a strategy. Longevity is arguably created through ever expanding the party base. Conservatives should remember that it is not about ensuring that a Blue or Red Tory lead the Party (those terms themselves being largely out of date and inapplicable, especially upon attaining power), but rather that the party be given the best opportunity to win successive elections.

Why talk about leadership now? Because a successful transition in politics is harder than some might think. The debacle of the Liberal Party, beginning with the resignation of Jean Chrétien, the troubled custodianship of Paul Martin, through to the soul-searching failures of Stéphane Dion and Michael Ignatieff, demonstrate how hard it is to get leadership right.

The party should be making moves to get strong leadership and cabinet material in line right now. While a number of leadership candidates will be within cabinet and caucus already, there are strong candidates who need to be recruited from private life. Many heavyweights from earlier Conservative cabinets have left the stage, and eventually, the First Minister of the Crown will do the same.

For the good of the party's ongoing competitiveness and national appeal, the next leader should not necessarily be a disciple of Harper. The choosing of a new party leader is an opportunity for imagination, ideas and the image of the party to be rejuvenated. Tories should tap into different aspects of the wide discipline that is conservatism, appealing to and attracting different parts of the national electorate. This would give the party the lateral movement required to adjust

itself to the mood of the country, always being competitive in almost any region, and thereby able to capitalize on federal elections.

The party's poor performance in Quebec, along with its timid opposition to the Parti Québécois's charter of values, is of concern to anyone with a strong understanding of Canadian conservative values. To be fair, however, Quebec never liked Harper from the start, and there was little that could ever be done about it, except addressing it going forward.

The current Conservatives have been criticized as being too ideological. However, did not the famous conservative intellectual and author of *The Conservative Mind*, Russell Kirk, argue that conservatism is the negation of ideology? Furthermore, Conservatives have often been compared, both in underlying political doctrine and tactics, to U.S. Republicans. Yet, do not our traditions and temperament more closely align with the Tories of Great Britain? Moreover, as F.H. Buckley and Hugh Segal argue, Canadian conservatism is indeed highly distinctive, with its own deep traditions and reflexes. Canada is a quickly changing country, but conservatism is a rich discipline able to adapt (or react) to the changing fortunes of the day.

Politics is inherently focused on the short-term; hence the 2015 federal election. However, such historians as Richard Gwyn, as noted in his two-part biography of Sir John A. Macdonald, would argue that politics is about "the long game." While attention should be drawn toward the next election, Tories must keep this ever-important "long game" in mind.

The 20th century belonged to the Liberals, but the 21st century has so far been advantage Conservatives: A lot of thought an effort must go into ensuring that this trend continues for the rest of the century.

Sir John A. Macdonald would not only raise a toast to such an accomplishment, but to the audacity of the ambition behind it.

Thomas Mathews, of the Bars of Ontario and Quebec, practises law in Toronto. He attended law school at Université Laval and articulated