

Conservative Party in the UK and in Canada

When William of Normandy mastered England in 1066 and imposed feudal institutions on his new vassals, there was no talk of people of different interests to be chosen in the assembly.

James Guy in his book People, Politics and Government states that in the history of governmental practice, political parties are very young institutions. Those that appeared in the United States in the late 1790s are some of the oldest in the world. Now, less than two hundred years later, political parties are found throughout the world. How did this happen? Most likely, people saw that to organize in groups regarding of interests and try to get their needs met may be effective and useful.

Accordingly to Mr. Guy, at this time the parties are categorized under different types: pragmatic/brokerage, nation-building, revolutionary, ideological and special interest parties. Nation-building parties draw from national ideologies to create a program of development. Both British and Canadian Conservatives are nation-building parties.

Traditional conservatism is known to stand for the monarchy, law and order, and free enterprise with a minimum of state interference in business. However, it is an old point of view. As Heath Macquarrie mentioned in his book The Conservative Party, a person who looks for deep philosophic differences between Liberals and Conservatives will be disappointed. Just as Bradley Cruyton suggested in Spotlight Canada, traditionally, the Liberal and Progressive Conservative parties vie for the political centre because this is where most of the votes are found in any election.

Accordingly to the information posted on the party's website, the UK Conservative Party the oldest in Europe. The Tories are basing the claim on the fact that the word "Conservative" was first used in 1830. In 1886 the Liberal Party split over the issue of Irish Home Rule and the Liberal Unionist Party was formed. This party worked in alliance with the Tories before finally being absorbed into the "Conservative and Unionist Party" in 1912. As contradistinction from their main opposition, the Whigs, who wanted more parliamentary control, the Conservatives of the seventeenth century supported the powers and prerogatives of the Crown.

Admitting that it is difficult to pin-point a precise date of origin of the Canadian Conservative Party, Heath Macquarrie gives us a good reason for regarding 1854 as the inaugural year for this political group. In that year the Tories assumed office and, under direction of John A. Macdonald, began the "process which established a nation in the northern part of this continent". The Conservative Party was first called the Liberal-Conservative Party.

In the Encyclopedia Canadiana there is an interesting section on political parties which contains a diagram illustrating the listing of events of major political significance in the history of our country. There are eight such events

noted from Confederation to the present day: Confederation, 1867; Hudson Bay territories joined to the Dominion, 1870; addition of Arctic Islands, 1880; the defeat of reciprocity, 1911; enfranchisement of women, 1918; the dominion Elections Act providing universal adult suffrage, 1920; the Statute of Westminster, 1931; addition of the Newfoundland, 1949. Although Heath Macquarrie states that it would be foolish to suggest that all the good things which have taken place in Canada have been carried out by one political party, he calls it "striking" that all but one of these major incidents occurred under Conservative governments.

Accordingly to Mr. Macquarrie, the Conservative Party has not only the first party in Canada but also the most successful for a long time, holding office from 1867 to 1896 with a brief interregnum of six years. Though, its popularity has not always been this high. For instance, from 1896 to 1957 the Liberals were in office for forty-six years while the conservatives held power for a total of less than fifteen years. In addition to this fact, Bradley Cruyton certifies that during "Dirty Thirties", people had become increasingly dissatisfied with the both main political parties - Conservatives and Liberals as they seemed to have no new, fresh ideas for solving the country's economic troubles. This was the time when new political parties, such as Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (future NDP), Social Credit party and Union Nationale, were formed. Yet, none of them ever became a dominating party in Parliament.

However, in 1846 a serious split between free-traders and protectionists occurred. The division was over abolishing the Corn Laws by Robert Peel and maintaining the price of food at an artificially high level. This kept the party out of power for most of the following 20 years.

The Tories were out of power during eighteenth century until William Pitt the Younger became Prime Minister in 1783 at the age of twenty-four lead the government for twenty-one years with only one interval. His support of free trade and sound finance became the basis of the modern Conservatism.

Moving into the twentieth century, protecting the United Kingdom from any chance of breaking up, the Conservative Party refused to grant the Home Rule to Ireland.

In 1931 during an economic crisis, the Tories joined Labour dissidents led by the former socialist Ramsay MacDonald in order to form a National Government which would be strong enough to cope with the problems.

Neville Chamberlain became Prime Minister in 1937. However, he ended his period in office in failure when his policy of calming Hitler failed and Britain entered World War II. He was replaced by Sir Winston Churchill in 1940.

The Conservatives lost the following the war, 1945 election. They explain their loss with the fact that "the nation called for social change" (the Conservative Party website). In 1951, however, the Tories, still led by Winston Churchill, came back to power. They maintained in power until 1964 despite the problems of the Suez Crisis. Harold Macmillan, who took over the leadership

of the party in 1957, told the public that "You've never had it so good". In 1964, however, under rule of Sir Alec Douglas-Home, the economy was very low and the party was beset by the Profumo scandal. Labour returned to the office in the election of that year.

The Conservatives re-entered government under with the Edward Heath as a prime minister. Even though he created an economic crisis by sharp rises in the price of oil and incurred problems with the trade unions resisting the Industrial Relations Act, he did take Britain into the European Economic Community.

Heath called a snap election in February 1974, as a result of which the Tories had to leave the office, but returned in 1979 under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher - the first woman prime minister. She pursued an aggressive right-wing programme and throughout the 1980s reduced the powers of the trade unions and in a programme of deregulation began to privatize many of the nationalized industries.

In November 1990 Mrs. Thatcher was replaced in office by John Major. His main achievement during his first two years in power was securing several opt-outs for Britain from the 1991 Maastricht Treaty. Despite a severe recession and deep splits over Europe following the signing of the Maastricht Treaty the Party won a fourth consecutive General Election.

With the party facing internal splits over Europe, Major resigned as a head of the party in June 1995 forcing a leadership election. His words that those who wanted him replaced could "put up or shut up" were quoted in all newspapers. He was also reported to have described the right-wing Eurosceptic members of his Cabinet as "bastards". But nothing could lower his popularity - John Major won the election taking 66% of the vote.

Sleaze was haunting the Party in 1990s. Several MPs and ministers were forced to resign by a float of press stories regarding their private lives.

The Tories also suffered from several defections. During the 1995 Conservative Party conference it was revealed that Alan Howarth was joining the Labour Party. Then in 1996 Emma Nicholson joined the Liberal Democrats. She was followed by Peter Thurnham. In March 1997 Sir George Gardiner, who has already been deselected as the party candidate resigned the Tory Whip and joined the Referendum Party. Sir John Gorst also stepped down from the Conservative Whip and told the government it could not rely on his support because of the closure threats to a hospital in his constituency.

On March 17 1997, John Major officially declared the May 1 election date.

The Conservatives had their worst electoral performance since 1945, gaining only 165 seats from 31.4% of the vote. 38 ministers lost their seats. The supposition that Defence Secretary Michael Portillo would be a favourite contender for a post-election leadership battle, was dramatically stumped as

he lost his Enfield Southgate seat to a 27-year-old Labour candidate. In fact, not a single constituency in Scotland or Wales elected a Conservative MP.

The day after the election, John Major resigned as the Party leader to make way for William Hague.

An early test of Mr. Hague's leadership was the Oxbridge by-election on July 31st which was caused by the death of Conservative MP Sir Michael Shersby. The Tories held the seat, increasing their majority by more than 3,000 votes.

Now, let's re-call some of Canadian Conservative history. Joe Clark, M.P. from Rocky Mountain Alberta, was elected to lead the Party in February of 1976. In May 1979, he won a minority government, 136 to 114 seats. In any event, Clark announced he would govern as if he had a majority. Well, as Claire Hoy commented in his Margin of Error, he did not have a majority, an obvious fact that came crashing home to him on December 13, 1979, with the defeat of Finance minister John Crosbie's budget, which featured an eighteen-cent-per-gallon excise tax on gasoline, and spoke of "short-term pain for long-term gain." As John Guy states in his People, Politics and Government, the leader's "weak political image" continued to hurt the party even after the defeat. Thus, in 1983, recognizing the growing dissension, Clark announced his resignation, and at the same time, declared his candidacy in the upcoming leadership race.

The leadership was won by Brian Mulroney. It is hard to call him an unpopular PM, since it looks like he had other problems except unpopularity. Murray Dobbin in his work The Politics of Kim Campbell comments that many Canadians would be happy to forget the "nine long years" while Mulroney was in power, while Financial Post simply calls him "a hated prime minister".

When Brian Mulroney was gone Kim Campbell took his place. What shocked many people, remarks Murray Dobbin, were the polls that said how well a renewed Conservative Party would do in an election, specifically with Kim Campbell as the new Tory leader. As a result of one of the polls, she would win 43 percent of the vote compared to 25 percent for our present PM Jean Chretien. Mr. Dobbin comments that the hatred of Brian Mulroney as an individual was so intense and hopes for the post-Mulroney Canada so great, that people were ready to actually give the Conservative Party another term in office. Liberal leader Jean Chretien and NDP leader Audrey McLaughlin, despite their opposition to most of Mulroney's policies, still represented the old guard to many Canadians. Meanwhile, Campbell introduced herself as the "new direction". It is an image that Canadians want to believe, explains Murray Dobbin. Consequently, Kim Campbell became the party leader. As it is stated on the Conservative Party website, the first woman Prime Minister "oversaw the largest restructuring of government in our history". She reduced the size of the Federal Cabinet from 35 to 25.

Definitely, the opinion polls were not exactly right, as Kim Campbell lost 1993 federal election. She lost it to "yesterday's man," Jean Chretien. She lost it, Toronto Star stated, when she predicted that few jobs would be created in

Canada before the end of the decade. In December, she left her party's leadership. With the election lost, John Guy remarks, the old guard gave the task of reconstruction to Jean Charest. He was one of only two Progressive Conservative survivors in the House of Commons - not even enough seats to be recognized as an official parliamentary party. In the 1997 election Charest promised to reduce income taxes by 10% and get tougher on crime. The election was lost.

In 1998 Jean Charest stepped down. "Jean Charest jumped from the Tory leadership to the Quebec Liberal Party", Maclean's Journal remarked.

Mrs. Elsie Wayne took over the leadership of the party. Though, her rule did not last very long. On November 14, 1998 Joe Clark became a leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada the second time in his life. "Clark is planning to become Canada's Comeback Kid", Maclean's Journal in Toronto says. An old leader who had failed the party in the past returned in power after fifteen years. Accordingly to Maclean's Journal many of Clark's friends warned him that the party would use him to get through its current crisis, then dump him after the next election for a new face. Even though it may sound sad to Clark, this may come true.

Somehow, Joe Clark not only managed to become the leader of the Canadian Tories, but also is planning to win in the next election. "Canadians want to stop splitting the votes that elect Liberals by default", he declared in an interview in December 1998. "We're aiming for all available voters".

But the level of the popularity of the parties does not depend only on their political accomplishments. Except some hopes about the politicians' political performance, people have certain personal expectations from them.

Although the standards accordingly to which politicians of any country are expected to behave are very high, it is a must to have them met in order to maintain the public respect and gain enough votes to win an election. Conservative parties both in United Kingdom and Canada are promoting to their members to behave accordingly to public expectations. A good example of such demand would be the present leader of the British Opposition, who told party members that they had to learn the lessons of the election defeat if they wanted to return to power. He said that MPs, councillors and ordinary party members who brought the party into disrepute would no longer be tolerated (www.conservative-party.org.uk.)

If, however, an incident that does not match the image of a party member occurs, the politician that was the cause of it will have no choice but to step down. In 1990s, for instance British newspapers were full of stories about the private lives of Conservative MPs and ministers, several of whom were forced to resign. Heritage Secretary David Mellor was the first to go when his extra-marital affair was revealed. Tim Yeo resigned as an environment minister when it was revealed he had fathered a secret love child. David Ashby also resigned as a parliamentary private secretary after admitting that he had once shared a bed with a man and Hartley Booth also gave up his position as a

PPS when he admitted to an infatuation with a female researcher. But these were not the only problems concerning sleaze that affected the party. Tim Smith and Neil Hamilton stepped down as ministers when The Guardian published claims that they had accepted money from Harrods' owner Mohammed Al Fayed to table parliamentary questions. Jonathan Aitken also resigned as Chief Secretary to the Treasury following newspaper reports that he had lied to the cabinet over who paid his bill during a stay at the Paris Ritz. David Willetts, the paymaster general, also resigned following a report by the Standards and Privileges Committee which accused him of "dissembling". There are plenty of examples of Canadian politicians stepping down having failed the expectations of the public, and their party members. Joe Clark resigned in 1983 when he became incredibly unpopular with his caucus. Brian Mulroney passed on the control over the Conservative Party to Kim Campbell when "the party's scandals and controversial policy decisions eroded [his] influence in government and in the public eye" (John Guy, People Politics and Government). Kim Campbell, in her turn, left the party leadership having failed the 1993 election.

Still, it is not always that the party members step down on their own will. The MPs, who fail to maintain the respectable image of the party, may get deselected on decision of a vote of no confidence as a way of punishment and removing them from the public sight. For instance, in March 1997 Sir George Gardiner had been deselected as the party candidate for his seat of Reigate when he accused Prime Minister John Major of being Chancellor Kenneth Clarke's ventriloquist's dummy in a newspaper article. But he was not the only one. Sir Nicholas Scott was deselected in December 1996 on decision of a vote of no confidence in his constituency following his arrest for drink-driving and failing to stop at a road accident.

Even if our expectations for the politicians were reasonable most of the time, sometimes we just expect from them what we would never require from ordinary "down-to-earth" people. Is it fair? The decision is up to us.

Failing to meet the idealistic objectives we have for our politicians ends up being really dangerous for them - they can lose their jobs and career. Involvement of new members has always been an important issue for both clans of Tories just as for any other political caucus. Youth is especially interesting for the parties, since people in their teens are particularly easy to influence. This is what PC Youth Association in Canada and the Conservative Future in Gt. Britain are all about. The parties need young people who would "initiate political changes at the federal level" (Progressive Conservative Party of Canada on the Internet). Therefore they put as much effort as they possibly can to get the youth interested in the chance "not only to acquire valuable leadership skills and political savvy but [also] gain friends across the country while having the best time in ... [their] life" (Progressive Conservative Party of Canada on the Internet).

"Get involved and discover why thousands of young Canadians already belong to the PC Youth", encourages the Conservative Party on the Party's website. Considering that the population of our country is about 32 million,

the fact that it is only "thousands" of young people who have joined the Tories, does not sound very impressive.

The big issue for the British Conservatives now is the upcoming election for the European Parliament, which will take place on 10th June, 1999. At this time Britain has 84 so-called MEPs (members of European Parliament) from whom 15 are Conservatives.

Edward McMillan-Scott MEP Leader of the Tories in the European Parliament in his message posted on the party's website proves that whoever runs the Parliament directly shapes the future of Europe. His platform is to "take Europe back [from Labour Party] and put it on the right path - the path of markets, competition, openness and free-trade.

What will happen to the parties in the future?

Will the Canadian Tories arise to fight and win again? Or, as Financial Post presumes, will they slide down into oblivion, which would be a "fatal combination of a hated prime minister (Brian Mulroney) and his inexperienced successor (Kim Campbell)"? In 1996 Financial Post called this question one of the central concerns in Canadian politics. Three years have passed since then, but the question is still important. "Who killed the Progressive Conservatives?" Financial Post asks. This question may be regarded as rhetorical or even premature. After all, how could a great political organization, like the party of Sir John A. Macdonald fade away so quickly?

Something I don't understand is how could Conservatives let Joe Clark lead the party again? I can assume that his friends forewarning is true and the party will reject him after the next election. But still, he is an old leader who has failed the party and returned in power after many years of oblivion. This is an event that has never happened to U.K. Tories - anybody, who made a mistake while being in power in Britain, never came back. This does not the party make the party look good. On the other hand, I may be too serious about the image Joe Clark is creating. Many people may not even have a clue about who he is. The fact that he has already shown Canadians that he is no candidate for a Prime Minister, may be out of sight for most of them. Be that as it may, but I believe that with a leader like Rt. Hon. Joe Clark, the Tories have only minimal chances to get into the office.

No, Canadian Tories have not yet fallen into oblivion. They keep 19 seats in the House of Commons. Yet, they are less popular than the Opposition party. Whose fault is it? We may be only partially right while blaming the Conservatives themselves. One of the reasons why they are so unpopular at this time is their leaders. The fact that several Conservative Prime Ministers in a row somehow screwed up made the public to keep some distance from the party. In any case, this simple coincidence (or fate?) has been keeping the old guard away from the legislating for almost six years now.