

Erin O'Toole and the Conservative Party Brand

In the wee hours of the morning on August 24, 2020, the Conservative Party MP for Durham, a riding on the eastern edge of the Greater Toronto Area, was chosen as leader of the Conservative Party of Canada. His name is Erin O'Toole and if you don't know very much about him, you are not alone. A survey carried out a week after his election as party leader found that a small majority of those polled said that they didn't know enough about O'Toole to provide either a favorable or unfavorable impression of him. (<https://leger360.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Legers-Weekly-Survey-August-31st-2020.pdf>, p.15) So don't beat yourself up if you are among those who don't know very about the new leader of the Conservative Party.

At the same time, however, there will be another federal elections before long, likely in 2021 or perhaps 2022. So it is not too early to think about the new leader of a party that, in the last federal election, won just over 220,000 more votes than the Liberal Party but 36 fewer seats in the House of Commons.

The basic facts of Erin O'Toole's background, family and professional life are easily found online at his Wikipedia entry or some of the numerous articles that have been written on him. O'Toole is 47 years old, married with two children and is of Irish-Canadian ancestry. He served in the military, subsequently becoming a lawyer in Toronto with one of Canada's best known business law firms. O'Toole was first elected to the House of Commons in a 2012 by-election in Durham and has been re-elected twice since then. He was appointed to the Conservative

government of Stephen Harper in 2014 as Minister of Veterans Affairs, ran for his party's leadership in 2017 and was eliminated in the 12th of 13 rounds of voting that culminated in Andrew Scheer's selection as party leader. O'Toole was one of four candidates for the Conservative Party's leadership in 2020, winning over Peter MacKay on the third ballot with 59 percent of the vote. He is bilingual and, indeed, his proficiency in French improved noticeably during the several months of the leadership campaign.

Ideologically--and here opinions will differ--O'Toole is a moderate within his party. He is not a social conservative. Indeed, the Campaign for Life Coalition describes him as a "dissenting Catholic", a label intended to indicate that on such issues as abortion and LGBTQ rights his views and his voting record as an MP are not in accordance with official positions of the Catholic church. O'Toole publically supported the decriminalization of marijuana when he ran for the Conservative Party leadership in 2017.

None of this tells us very much about the likelihood of Erin O'Toole becoming prime minister. At the same time, however, party leaders in Canada are closely connected to their party's brand. By brand we mean the image of the party in the eyes of voters, including the policy positions, values, and attributes that voters associate with a party and with that party's leader. At this point, only about a month after his selection as leader of the Conservative Party of Canada, it may be too early to talk about Erin O'Toole's personal brand, the image that Canadians have of him and of what he represents. And of course he won't represent the same things to all Canadians any more than this is true of other national party leaders.

But it is not too early to talk about the Conservative Party's brand. And, according to some observers, this brand is a problem for the new leader and for his party's chances of winning the next federal election. Political scientist Alex Marland writes, "The Conservative Party must understand that its brand's kryptonite is the propensity of conservatives and libertarians in its caucus to be seen as mean and uncaring, especially towards politically vulnerable populations."([https://www.samaracanada.com/samarablog/blog-post/samara-main-blog/2015/12/23/a-branding-\(and-rebranding\)-reality](https://www.samaracanada.com/samarablog/blog-post/samara-main-blog/2015/12/23/a-branding-(and-rebranding)-reality))

We can learn a good deal about the parties' brands from a survey carried out by Abacus Data in 2017.(<https://abacusdata.ca/parties-as-brands-how-canadians-see-the-conservatives-liberals-and-ndp>) Respondents were presented with 20 pairs of opposing attributes, such as "old-fashioned" versus "young at heart", "favors some over others" versus "committed to equality", "male-oriented" versus "treats men and women equally" and "oil" versus "renewable energy". Bruce Anderson and David Coletto of Abacus summarize the differences between the Conservative and Liberal party brands as follows:

"The 10 strongest associations with the Conservative Party were "old fashioned", "proud of Canada" "oil" "tough on crime" "favour some over others" "doesn't care about you" "spends on the wrong things" "elitist", "does not trust people" and "economically savvy"."

"The 10 strongest for the Liberal Party were: "diplomacy" "treats men and women equally" "proud of Canada" "cares about the environment" "projects positive image of Canada" "young at heart" "future oriented" "individual freedom" "renewable energy" and "hopeful"."

An Abacus survey carried out two years later found that very little had changed. (<https://abacusdata.ca/conservative-party-brand-canada-abacus-data-branding/>) Here are some of the key takeaways from that 2019 report:

"The top of mind associations with the Conservative Party reveal a brand that is considered old, traditional and closed."

"A close comparison of the Conservative and Liberal word clouds shows a wide difference in perspective. While the Liberal Party is seen as open, diverse, good, and ambitious, the Conservative Party is regarded as old, traditional, and close-minded."

"More Canadians associate the Conservative Party with oil, farming, religion, and the military and many don't associate it with equality, women, climate, and diversity."

One of this report's authors, Dennis Matthews, argues that, "Conservatives need to renew the brand in a way that feels welcoming to a broader audience and more contemporary to the times. Too few voters are considering Conservatives in the first place because the brand has become a barrier. This brand problem is particularly acute in the parts of the country that are growing and changing the fastest: suburban and urban Canada." (p.10)

Well, if you are Erin O'Toole or just someone sympathetic to the Conservative Party, these survey findings may be rather depressing. But what brand exercises like these don't tell us is what images and attributes are more, and which ones are less impactful when it comes to the choices that voters make on election day. For example, the Liberal Party is much more likely to be seen as "too easy on criminals" and the Conservative Party much more likely to be viewed as "tough enough on crime" and more "economically savvy" than the Liberal Party. The Liberals

are much more likely than the Conservatives to be seen as caring when it comes to the environment and to be hopeful rather than fearful. Which of these and other party brand differences matter with what segments of the electorate, and why?

A party's brand in the minds of voters is certainly important, but it is far from being the whole story. Most of the strongest associations reported by respondents in the Abacus surveys were the same for both the Liberal Party and the NDP. But the Liberal Party's share of the popular vote in the 2019 federal election was over twice that of the NDP. Obviously we need to know more than the brand attributes of these parties in order to explain the Liberals' far greater success with Canadian voters.

We also need to address the fact that, despite the widely held view that the Conservative Party has an image problem, it won a larger share of the popular vote than the Liberals in the 2019 election. Issues, the participation rate of various groups in the electorate, and the effects that our electoral system has on translating votes into seats in the House of Commons are also important determinants of election outcomes.

So here's a question, two questions really. If you were advising Conservative Party leader Erin O'Toole on the personal brand that he should project to Canadians, what would you tell him? How would this personal brand be different, or would it be different, from what appears to be the Conservative Party's brand in the minds of Canadians?