

Oligarch investor seeks leadership of Canada's Conservatives

By Carl Bronski
26 January 2017

Just days after proposing that the federal government become more of a “profit-center” by selling Senate seats, multi-millionaire investor, reality television star, and inveterate blow-hard Kevin O’Leary announced he is a candidate to lead Canada’s Conservative Party.

O’Leary joins thirteen other candidates vying to lead Canada’s Official Opposition. But much of the media has already anointed him the “front runner” in the Conservative leadership race, which will climax at a party convention in May.

The post of Conservative leader has been vacant since Stephen Harper resigned within hours of his decade-old Conservative government losing the October 2015 federal election to the Justin Trudeau-led Liberals.

O’Leary, who has no political experience, is claiming strong support for his candidacy, based largely on name recognition from his numerous television appearances as a business commentator and his leading role in two “reality” based shows that extol the virtues of entrepreneurship—the Canadian version of “Dragon’s Den” and its American spin-off, “Shark Tank.” His candidacy is supported by long-time right-wing party stalwarts, such as former Ontario Premier Mike Harris, Senator Marjorie LeBreton, and former Harper confidante Mike Coates.

O’Leary has long been associated with the unbridled cultivation of wealth and the celebration of social inequality as keystones of a well-functioning capitalist economy. In 2014, in his capacity as business expert on a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) financial news program, he infamously hailed a then-recent Oxfam report that showed the richest 85 people in the world owned as much as the poorest 3.5 billion.

“This is fantastic news,” he pontificated. “Of course I applaud it. What could be wrong with this? It inspires

everybody to get some motivation to look up to the 1 percent and say ‘I want to become one of those people, I’m going to fight hard to get to the top’.”

O’Leary, who has made the accruing of obscene wealth a veritable fetish, no doubt would have been tickled by the most recent Oxfam report on social inequality. It shows that the gulf between the richest oligarchs and the rest of the global population continues to grow. Based on new and better data, Oxfam found that today eight multi-billionaires control more wealth than half the world’s population. The same report cited figures showing that in Canada, two men—David Thomson of Thomson-Reuters and Galen Weston of the giant Loblaw grocery empire—own more than the poorest 30 percent of Canadians.

It is not difficult to find other aggressively anti-democratic statements from O’Leary. In 2011, on the same CBC financial news program, he railed against a threatened strike by Air Canada employees. “Here’s the right thing to do,” said O’Leary. “Elect me as prime minister for 15 minutes. I will make unions illegal. Anybody who remains a union member will be thrown in jail.”

In the ballyhoo about O’Leary’s entry into the leadership race, much has been made of the similarities between him and US President Donald Trump. Both men harbour profoundly anti-democratic views and advocate class war policies aimed at further redistributing wealth to the capitalist elite, including the slashing of taxes on big business and the rich, the gutting of social spending, and shredding of environmental and labour regulations.

O’Leary has complained bitterly about election financing laws that prevent him from mimicking Trump and using his personal fortune, estimated at more than \$400 million, to fund his leadership bid.

The corporate media has afforded O’Leary overwhelmingly positive coverage. For months, it has promoted his campaign with story after story speculating about his possible candidacy and, more recently, his impending entry into the Conservative leadership race.

There have been some notes of caution expressed in ruling circles, however, particularly over O’Leary’s flaunting of his wealth and political inexperience and his inability to speak French. Several of his Conservative rivals have also attacked him for comments he made last year criticizing the Harper government’s promotion of Canada as a “warrior nation.”

Since its creation in 2004, out of the merger of the right-wing populist Canadian Alliance and what remained of a shattered Progressive Conservative Party, the “new” Conservative Party has been used by Canada’s ruling elite to shift politics dramatically to the right.

During the decade of Conservative rule that began in February 2006, Harper vastly expanded Canadian imperialist involvement in US-led wars and military-strategic offensives, including against Russia and China. Canada’s leading role in the Afghan counter-insurgency war was used to acclimatize the population to the shedding of blood, putting paid to the myth of Canada as a “peacekeeper,” and to promote a virulently reactionary, pro-monarchy, and militarist Canadian nationalism.

On the domestic front, Harper and his Conservatives imposed sweeping social spending cuts and attacked democratic rights. This included whipping up anti-immigrant chauvinism and Islamophobia under the guise of the so-called “war on terror” and granting the national security apparatus police-state powers. The Harper government also moved to criminalize worker resistance, virtually banning strikes in key sectors like the railways, air travel and the postal service.

It therefore comes as no surprise that O’Leary is far from the only Conservative leadership candidate advancing Trump-style, ultra-right policies.

Kellie Leitch, Harper’s former Minister of Labour, has deliberately patterned her campaign after Trump’s right-wing populism, denouncing the “liberal elites” and pinning the problems faced by workers on immigrants who threaten “Canadian values.” She has

vehemently defended her 2015 election campaign appearance, along with then the Immigration Minister and fellow leadership candidate Chris Alexander, to call for an anti-immigrant “barbaric cultural practices” snitch-line.

Leitch is only the most vitriolic of several leading candidates who have taken up the anti-immigrant cudgel as their political calling-card. Quebec-based candidate Stephen Blaney and former Veterans’ Affairs Minister Erin O’Toole have called for restricting immigration, with Blaney also urging restrictions be placed on Muslim women wearing religious face-coverings.

Former Small Business Minister Maxime Bernier, who is running to be Canada’s “first libertarian prime minister,” advocates the privatization of health care and the post office, massive social spending cuts, the elimination of all capital gains taxes, and the effective gutting of all regulatory restrictions on the unbridled pursuit of profit.

Such has been the stampede to the right that Lisa Raitt, herself a former Harper Labour Minister who regularly invoked or threatened strike-breaking legislation, can now posture as leader of the party’s so-called “moderate” faction.

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