



Opinion

Why stereotyping of Conservatives as party of 'old white men' persists

Conservatives, who perhaps above all else are freedom fighters, need to ensure that our newly elected leader prioritizes opportunities to better align policies that champion these freedoms for women.

BY MICHELLE COATES MATHER

A quick Google search of women and conservative policy in Canada leads to a link to "Conservative Women," a subpage buried deep on the Conservative Party's website.

In this link, the party reflects on how the left often describes Conservatives as the party of "old white men," what has become an "oft-repeated stereotype."

A few things immediately struck me when reading this credo.

First, it is indeed an unfortunate stereotype.

Second, can we, as Conservatives, really be all that surprised that the left has quite successfully been able to persuade voters to believe this stereotype?

Despite the party's successful recruitment of its highest number of female candidates in a federal election to date, the stellar performance of some of its most high-profile female MPs in the last Parliament, and the growing number of savvy female political commentators hitting the airwaves, female support for the Conservative Party seems to be stagnant.

In the last 15 years, polling seems to suggest female support

for the party has hovered between 35 per cent under Harper down to 30 per cent in the final two weeks of the last federal election under Andrew Scheer.

This is not exactly a promising data set when we consider women make up over half the voting population—and a highly motivated one at that.

Conservatives can tweet all we want about the unjust and biased nature of the left-leaning media and continue to blame them as a source for our perpetual branding troubles. It might be an effective approach to rile up a certain segment of the base to spike fundraising in the short term, but otherwise, it's a tired approach that no one else appears to be buying.

A conservative path to governance will be hard won without a compelling reason for women to jump on board the Conservative Party wagon.

So how does the new leader of the Conservative Party begin to genuinely connect with the female voter?

First, the next leader of the party needs to take responsibility for our own shortcomings in developing a compelling pitch to actually engage women.

All we need to do is look at the latest shadow cabinet lineup, read about the lengthy list of men missing leadership runs, or reflect on the Conservative campaign of this past federal election to see quite clearly that we are, in fact, emboldening these stereotypes all on our own, and it's eroding women's trust in us.

And in doing so, we have given the Liberal Party free rein to claim themselves as champions of equality and women's rights. We have allowed them to own that narrative while controlling ours, and, to their credit, they have done so successfully, notwithstanding a few obvious hits to their feminist brand over the course of this past year.

Second, much like big brands take the time to evaluate all the

potential customer segments at their reach, the new leader of the Conservative Party—regardless of whether they end up being a man or a woman—must prioritize getting to know the female audience segment. What motivates them and what their pain points are.

We need to offer solutions to women's biggest challenges.

Third, we need to offer solid proof points of our commitment to see women succeed. And that doesn't have to mean applying a symbolic gender-based lens to every government program or creating gender-based quotas.

But it will mean being bolder than offering two line items in a platform, promising to maintain current funding support for the Child Care Benefit while making parental EI benefits tax free. While those are indeed welcome contributions of relief for families—and a sizeable segment of the female vote, such as working moms—there is an opportunity for bolder value propositioning here.

Women deeply covet freedom of choice—and I don't just mean the freedom to choose what rights we have over our own bodies; that's non-negotiable. I mean the freedom to make basic choices that allow ourselves and our families, should we choose to have them, to thrive based on our unique circumstances as individuals and of those of our families.

Conservatives, who perhaps above all else are freedom fighters, need to ensure that our newly elected leader prioritizes opportunities to better align policies that champion these freedoms for women. Basic freedoms like which career we choose to pursue; the choice of when or if to start a family; how we spend our income; where we send our children to school; what childcare options best suit our family's needs; whether to stay home with our kids or grow our careers, or do both at the same time.

Fourth, the new Conservative leader ought to really consider

broadening his or her circle of advisors to involve a diverse contingent of conservatives—men and women—so we can identify new policy and branding opportunities to enhance female voter engagement, rather than recycling through policies and tactics of days past.

And on that point, the new leader would also be well advised, from an optics perspective, to decentralize the party's profile beyond him or herself. What a truly bold move and unexpected tactic it would be for the Conservative Party to deploy a public-engagement approach that sees a greater variety of star talent on the national tour.

This will be especially important if the next elected leader of the Conservative Party is a man. A man who surrounds himself with strong, capable women, and gives them space to shine is a wise man who may indeed find himself rewarded by a female voters who finally see themselves in the Conservative Party.

In the final days before the leadership entry closes, I genuinely hope the women contemplating a run go for it. It is really the only way for women to have meaningful influence over the outcome of the race and influence over the future direction of the Party. There are ample women within the Conservative Party who are as equally qualified as the men we have seen put their names forward.

By not entering, I fear the party will continue to signal that women still don't have a place in Conservative leadership ranks.

And that would be the most unfortunate stereotype of all to continue to prolong.

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