

# From Macdonald to Mulroney: Transformative Conservative Leadership

Geoff Norquay

*From the founding of Canada under Sir John A. Macdonald to free trade under Brian Mulroney, Conservatives have provided Canada with transformative leadership, including Sir Robert Borden in the First World War and John Diefenbaker on his Bill of Rights, forerunner of the Charter of Rights. Veteran Conservative strategist Geoff on Conservative nation-building over 150 years.*

Like most political movements, Canadian Conservatives in the past 150 years have celebrated the heights of achievement, suffered the ignominy of defeat, seized opportunities and lost them, been divided, reunited and redefined several times, recovered to regain victory and persevered. As other parties, they have celebrated heroic leaders and spurned bad ones who left behind smouldering ruins of regret. Canadian Conservatives have created national institutions and innovative foreign and trade policies that have helped define our nation and have become part of the Canadian fabric.

The coalitions and compromises that founded Canada were all about Sir. John A. Macdonald. He was not heroic in the ways of many leaders who have founded nations—he faced challenges by working through them with practical strategies and tactics, and often with the help of others of different political stripes.

When political instability and deadlock paralyzed the legislature of the United Province of Canada in 1864, he reached out to an individual he disliked, the Toronto reformer George

Brown, to create a Grand Coalition to bridge the French and English-speaking elements of Canada, to seek political reform and pursue a confederation uniting the British colonies in North America. Between 1864 and 1866, conferences in Charlottetown, Québec City and London led to the creation of the Dominion of Canada on July 1, 1867. Shortly after assuming office, his purchase of the Hudson's Bay Company lands in the west added an astounding one-third of the North American continent to Canada.

Macdonald's second and third accomplishments are fused together and were very nearly the end of him as a political leader. Facing a serious threat from American manifest destiny, he needed to add the western territories and British Columbia to his fledgling nation and the only way to do that was to build a railroad across the continent. The construction of the CPR took many years and initially resulted in serious corruption, with both Macdonald's government and the prime minister himself taking significant bribes. Macdonald lost the government in 1874, but he returned in 1878 and then served as prime minister until his death in

1891, completing the initial building of Canada from sea to sea.

Conservatives' relationships with Québec have often been tenuous but they started from a solid base. Schooled in the necessities of double majorities in the old United Province, one of Macdonald's greatest accomplishments was the tying together of the British and French realities of Canada, without which Confederation would never have occurred. In many ways, he set the pattern for successful national political leadership in Canada, by bridging the "two solitudes" of the two founding nations that created the country.

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While Macdonald did allow the hanging of Louis Riel, which outraged many in Québec, a much larger defining moment for the party in that province came with the conscription crisis in World War I. In June 1917, the Minister of Militia told the House that fewer than five per cent of the 432,000 Canadians who had volunteered had come from Québec, which then comprised 28 per cent of Canada's population. Québécois saw the war as Eu-

rope's battle, while English Canada was at one with the British Empire.

With resentment growing in English Canada and armed with a huge majority for his Unionist government, Prime Minister Robert Borden brought in conscription through the Military Service Act, which took effect January 1st, 1918. To quell the resulting Easter weekend disturbances in Quebec City, Canadian soldiers fired on the rioters, killing five and wounding close to 150 people. Not surprisingly, the Conservatives would be virtually shut out of Québec until the Diefenbaker sweep of 1958.

As he campaigned towards the largest majority of any government in Canadian history in 1984, Brian Mulroney sought a mandate from Québécois for a new vision of federalism and for national reconciliation, in light of Québec having declined to sign on to the new constitution in 1982. In office, Mulroney led consultations that resulted in the Meech Lake Accord in 1987, which recognized Québec as a distinct society within Canada, strengthened powers of the provinces in areas of joint jurisdiction, limited the federal spending power and slightly changed the constitutional amending formula.

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**W**hen Meech Lake failed in 1990 after all provinces had not ratified it within the three-year time limit, Mulroney quickly returned to the fray, launching a series of national consultations



Sir John A. Macdonald, the first Conservative PM, and founding father of Canada. *Library and Archives Canada photo*

that led to the Charlottetown Accord in 1992. In addition to again recognizing the distinctiveness of Québec, the Accord addressed many of the oversights of Meech, awarding culture, forestry, mining and natural resources to the provinces, and formally institutionalizing the federal/provincial/territorial consultative process. It provided for a Triple-E Senate and recognized Aboriginal governments as a third order of government, entrenched existing treaty rights in the constitution and provided constitutional recognition of Métis rights.

Notwithstanding support for the accord from the three principal federal parties, all premiers and many aboriginal leaders, a variety of dissenters found cause to attack it in the subsequent referendum and it was defeated on October 26, 1992 by 55 per cent to 45 per cent. In 1993, Mulroney left office and the Progressive Conservatives were reduced to two seats in that year's federal election. It would take 10 years and successive Liberal majority governments to convince Stephen Harper and Peter MacKay to merge the Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives into the new Conservative Party of Canada in 2003.

Throughout Canada's history, Conservative prime ministers have contributed significantly to the foreign, defence and trade policy of Canada. When the country entered World War I, Borden insisted Canadian sol-



R.B. Bennett, who had the misfortune to govern during the Great Depression, but also created the CBC and the Bank of Canada. *Library and Archives Canada photo*

diers remain as a single group and under our command, instead of being split up and assigned to British divisions. At the end of the war, Borden successfully argued that Canada must have a separate seat at the Paris Peace Conference as an independent country, which enabled Canada to sign the Treaty of Versailles in its own right and to gain separate membership in the League of Nations.

By the early 1960s, the British Commonwealth was rapidly becoming a multi-racial organization as the former colonies of Asia, Africa and the Caribbean gained independence. At the 1961 Commonwealth Conference in London, Prime Minister John Diefenbaker led the Commonwealth in rejecting the readmittance of South Africa to the organization over apartheid. As the *London Observer* noted at the time, "Mr. Diefenbaker's role was of decisive importance. Not only did he provide a bridge between the old white dominions and the new non-white members, he also demonstrated the importance of someone giving a lead." Diefenbaker's stand began the campaign of international pressure on South Africa to abandon its racist approach to defining citizenship.

**A** young law student named Brian Mulroney was so impressed by Diefenbaker's leadership on South Africa that he went to Ottawa to help welcome him



John Diefenbaker, father of the 1960 Bill of Rights, opponent of apartheid, proposer of a Northern Vision for Canada's Arctic. *Wikipedia photo*



Brian Mulroney, father of free trade and negotiator of the Acid Rain Accord with the U.S. *Library and Archives Canada photo*

back to Canada following the Commonwealth Conference. As prime minister in the 1980s, that same Brian Mulroney would renew Diefenbaker's fight against apartheid, personally taking on both British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and U.S. President Ronald Reagan, and seeing it through to a successful conclusion as the champion of Nelson Mandela and implacable foe of what he termed "the scourge of apartheid."

Conservatives have been on both sides of free trade with the United States, 100 years apart and with the right response in both cases. Sir John A. Macdonald had always feared free trade with the U. S., believing that Canada's nascent industries needed protection through his National Policy. By the time Mulroney became prime minister in 1984, Canada was still exporting much of its natural resource production to the U.S. but was also growing as an industrial middle power. Having opposed free trade as a candidate for leader, in office, he concluded that the time was right to pursue a deal with the Americans. The Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA), vehemently opposed by John Turner's Liberals, became the dominant issue of the 1988 election campaign, which Mulroney won. By any measure the FTA, which quickly morphed into the North American Free Trade Agreement, created bil-

ions of dollars in trade for Canada and resulted in millions of additional Canadian jobs. It is Mulroney's crowning achievement. In 2006, he was also named Canada's Greenest Prime Minister by the environmental movement for his championing of the 1991 Acid Rain Accord with the U.S. and the 1987 UN Montreal Protocol on the ozone layer. Both acid rain and ozone depletion, the leading environmental issues of the day, are no longer public policy concerns.

Under the government of Stephen Harper, Canada stepped back from multilateralism, at least as it involved the United Nations, and made Israel the centrepiece of its foreign policy in the Middle East. The Harper government inherited the Afghanistan assignment in Kandahar Province, where Canada ultimately lost 158 soldiers, a diplomat and several civilians over the course of the mission. Creating a more muscular and less nuanced foreign policy, Canada also spent some \$18 billion in Afghanistan before withdrawing its troops at the end of 2014. Harper also successfully negotiated the breakthrough Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with Europe, and took a tough stand against Russia following its aggressive intervention in Ukraine.

All governments regardless of party make contributions to the building of national

institutions and programs, and Conservatives have been no exception. Borden extended suffrage to women and created the National Research Council. Despite a disastrous term as PM from 1930-1935, R. B. Bennett launched the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission, which became the CBC. He also founded the Bank of Canada, created the Canadian Wheat Board and laid the groundwork for a national air transport system.

The government of John Diefenbaker appointed Saskatchewan Judge Emmett Hall as chair of the royal commission on health services, which led to the creation of Medicare. Diefenbaker also brought in the 1960 Canadian Bill of Rights, the forerunner of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms a generation later, and appointed the first woman to cabinet, Ellen Fairclough, and the first aboriginal senator, James Gladstone. Brian Mulroney laid the groundwork for the creation of La Francophonie, advocated for the reunification of Germany at the end of the Cold War, appointed the first western ambassador to Ukraine and created the third Canadian territorial government, Nunavut. His government also brought in the goods and services tax, which, while it angered voters, made eminent economic sense. Stephen Harper extended a much-lauded apology on behalf of Canadians to Aborigines for residential schools, and appointed the landmark Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

As Canada turns 150, Canada's Conservatives have a new leader, Andrew Scheer. He has youth, experience, a happy disposition and has come through the fire of an exhausting and competitive leadership campaign. Those of us who know him are confident that when his time comes, he will be ready to join the ranks of Conservative leaders who have defined once again Canada's future, and renewed its promise. **P**

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