

De Souza: Federal election delivers blow to religious freedom

The 2019 federal election blew an ill wind toward religious believers in Canada.

Peter MacKay, former foreign minister and minister of justice under Stephen Harper, demonstrating a certain opportunism, accused Andrew Scheer of losing an election that should have been an easy win – “like having a breakaway on an open net and missing the net.”

The cause? Views on same-sex marriage that were like a “stinking albatross” around the Conservative leader’s neck.

Impressive that with such an apparently disqualifying position, Scheer still won more votes than the Liberals. What necklace of avian putrefaction were they wearing?

The solution? Get another leader. Perhaps MacKay?

So why did MacKay not run back in 2017 for the Conservative leadership? Why did so many other leading Conservatives not run?

It’s because they knew our history. Canadians never defeat a first-term government looking for re-election. That’s why none of the party bigfoots, like MacKay, ran in 2017. They knew they would lose to Trudeau in 2019 – because everyone always does to a first-term government – and did not want to wear the blame like an albatross afterward.

Yes, I know there were two exceptions. But they were exceptions that confirm the rule. In 1935, in the midst of the Great Depression, a first-term government was defeated. R.B. Bennett lost, but he lost to the immediate former prime minister, the wily Mackenzie King. Canadians like stability in government.

Then in 1979, Joe Clark was elected only to fumble away his government nine months later. Again, the immediate former prime minister came back – Pierre Trudeau.

So before too much blame is heaped upon Scheer, let it be known that had he won, he would have accomplished something that has never before been done in Canadian history. Hardly an open net.

The traditional Conservative strength is the economy. But unemployment is at a 50-year low. How about the carbon tax? Gas prices were about \$1.15 per litre on

election day, hardly an occasion for popular outrage.

More evidence about the lack of an “open net”? Since 1993 the conservative vote – the combined Progressive Conservative/Reform/Alliance vote before 2004, the Conservative Party of Canada vote from 2004 onwards – has averaged slightly below 35 per cent. In Harper’s four elections, he averaged 35 per cent. In 2011, he got 39 per cent and won a majority because the Liberal vote collapsed to under 20 per cent and the NDP surged to 30 per cent.

So Scheer winning 34 per cent of the vote is right about where the Conservatives have been for 26 years. Whatever role social conservatism played in this election, it is not immediately evident in the results.

Yet MacKay and others want social conservatism to take the blame. It’s a sign of an ominous trend which restricts religious freedom in Canada.

MacKay’s position, held by others, is that despite Scheer’s public support for same-sex marriage laws currently in force, it is his private religious views that are intolerable. Other Conservative voices, less prominent than MacKay, have made similar arguments, namely that holding certain religious views means effective exclusion from party leadership.

This narrowing has been underway for some time. Already in 2014, Trudeau decreed that no pro-life candidates could stand for the Liberal Party. His government subsequently forced businesses, including charities and churches, to assent to the Liberal Party’s abortion position in order to qualify for a summer jobs’ grant. The government retreated from requiring formal assent, but still will deny grants to any groups who are offside with the government’s social liberalism.

The fact that the Canada Summer Jobs issue had no resonance in the election campaign indicates that restrictions upon religious freedom have little importance for most Canadians.

The situation in Quebec is even more dire. Given the popularity of the provincial government’s ban on religious attire for public officials, none of the federal leaders promised to actively contest it. Not even Jagmeet Singh, who himself wears a turban that would disqualify him from being hired into the Quebec public sector. The best he could manage was that the law made him “sad.”

The Quebec government got the message. Just last week it introduced a new “values test” for future immigrants to ensure that they know what “Quebec values” are.

It’s a short step from there to forcing people to assent to those values as a requirement for admission. It’s the same Canada Summer Jobs principle applied to immigration.

Canada is less free after the 2019 election than before. And people like Peter

Mackay think that's a good thing.

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