

# Social conservatives hope new leader remembers their support

The product of an Irish Catholic family, Ontario Conservative MP Erin O'Toole became the leader of the Conservative Party of Canada, and although he's not a social conservative, he has the eye of social conservatives who want him to recognize the role they played in his election.

O'Toole largely steered clear of issues like assisted suicide and abortion during the Conservative leadership campaign, but in a leaked video in June he told social conservatives in Quebec he would "probably" vote against legislation to expand assisted suicide, saying that as a Catholic and a lawyer he has "a lot of uncertainty" about euthanasia.

In an interview with pro-life organization Right Now during the campaign, O'Toole asked social conservatives – who supported candidates Leslyn Lewis and Derek Sloan – to make him their second choice.

While social conservatives have real and deeply held opposition to positions O'Toole has taken on social issues, their opposition to the other frontrunner Peter MacKay ran even deeper because of a comment MacKay made after the last federal election about social conservative issues being a "stinking albatross" around the neck of the party.

While O'Toole has said he won't reopen the abortion debate, he said he would let caucus members make up their own minds on what he called "moral issues."

In 2016 he supported Bill C-225, known as Cassie and Molly's Law, which would have made it an offence to cause injury or death to an unborn born child while committing a crime. He also told Right Now he supports Stephen Harper's policy of not using Canada's foreign aid to fund abortion.

Those positions, which distinguished him from Mackay, were noted by some groups like Right Now which recommended voters cast O'Toole as their third choice in the four-candidate ballot.

Now they want O'Toole to remember them. The fact that two candidates strongly supported by social conservative organizations – Ontario MP Derek Sloan, who finished fourth, and especially Toronto-based lawyer Leslyn Lewis, who placed third – attracted more than 35 per cent of the vote on the first ballot, has pro-life organizations hoping O'Toole won't take them for granted during the next federal election.

"Contrary to the red Tory and media narrative that dismisses socially conservative candidates, these results prove that pro-life and pro-family candidates like Lewis and Sloan, who are unafraid to champion life and family

issues, can draw strong support and be contenders,” said Jeff Gunnarson, national president of Campaign Life Coalition.

“We expect that Erin O’Toole will ensure that social conservatives are respected and their values represented within the party going forward,” Gunnarson said.

“If he disrespects the tens of thousands of grassroots members who voted for Lewis and Sloan, he will definitely lose the next general election. Everybody knows you can’t win a general election without your base,” he said.

The call for O’Toole to take the concerns of socially-conservative party members into account is being echoed by other organizations that want Canada’s non-existent laws surrounding abortion to at least be debated in the House of Commons in the future.

The pro-life organization We Need A Law expects O’Toole to honour his commitment to allow sitting Conservative MPs to vote as they wish on matters of conscience.

“Mr. O’Toole needs to ensure that the Conservative Party makes room for and respects the pro-lifers that assisted in getting him elected as leader,” said Tabitha Ewert, a spokesperson for We Need a Law.

“As the results show, pro-lifers who supported both Leslyn Lewis and Derek Sloan were very influential in getting Mr. O’Toole the support needed to win.”

Campaign Life Coalition criticized former Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer after the last federal election for trying to be too liberal, although Scheer’s personal faith as a practising Catholic and his views on issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion were used against him by the Liberals. Now the coalition expects O’Toole to heed the views of social conservatives or face dire electoral consequences.

“Although a pro-life candidate did not win, by having pro-life standard bearers in the race, including Richard Decarie and Jim Karahalios, who were nixed earlier, it forced the other candidates to make some concessions to social conservatives, such as a pledge to protect conscience rights for health-care workers, to eliminate Justin Trudeau’s values test for Summer Jobs applicants, and in MacKay’s platform, to defend religious liberty at home and abroad,” Gunnarson said.

“We will hold the new leader to account on his promises,” he said.

According to the final ballot numbers, O’Toole garnered about 57 per cent of the votes compared to 43 per cent for MacKay.

Lewis, who finished third in the campaign, quickly congratulated O’Toole after he was named leader and pledged her support going forward.

“Now is the time to work together and make sure a strong and united Conservative Party is ready to win the next election,” she said on Twitter.

In his speech after being named the Conservative leader, O’Toole said building up trust in the Conservative Party and offering Canadians “a real principled Conservative” alternative to the minority Liberal government will be his number one goal.