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Canadian social conservatives will make their voices heard

By JOHN IBBITSON

*How do people who believe that wide-open immigration is diluting Canada's European heritage, who oppose an unrestricted right to an abortion, or who want to reverse the legalization of same-sex marriage express those beliefs politically?*

A clutch of leadership candidates is determined to make the Conservative Party more socially conservative. They are likely to fail. But this raises questions.

How do people who believe that wide-open immigration is diluting Canada's European heritage, who oppose an unrestricted right to an abortion, or who want to reverse the legalization of same-sex marriage express those beliefs politically? Is there room for them in the Conservative Party? And if there is not, should we reform the electoral system to give them a voice?

Between now and next May, this debate will consume much of the oxygen in federal politics.

Leadership candidate Kellie Leitch created a stir last week when she sent out a questionnaire to supporters asking, "Should the Canadian government screen potential immigrants for anti-Canadian values?"

Stir became shake when she later released a statement saying: "Screening potential immigrants for anti-Canadian values that include intolerance towards other religions, cultures and sexual orientations, violent and/or misogynist behaviour and/or a lack of acceptance of our Canadian tradition of personal and economic freedoms is a policy proposal that I feel very strongly about.

"...Canadians can expect to hear more, not less from me, on this topic in the coming months."

Imposing loyalty tests on Muslim immigrants – because, let's face it, isn't that what we're talking about? – in defence of Canadian multiculturalism is a circle not easily squared. But in a broad sense, Ms. Leitch is appealing to socially conservative voters within the Conservative coalition, and she is not alone.

MP Brad Trost and former MP Pierre Lemieux both entered the race on a platform opposing abortion and same-sex marriage.

And MP Andrew Scheer, the former Speaker of the House of Commons, is also considering a run. He too is seen as a social conservative, although of a more moderate variety.

Although Stephen Harper, as Conservative leader, offered the occasional sop to so-cons, for the most part he espoused economic rather than social conservatism. In his third administration, he prohibited his caucus from even raising abortion-related issues in the House.

Most of the candidates or potential candidates for the leadership, such as former cabinet minister Peter MacKay, MPs Maxime Bernier, Michael Chong – who condemned Ms. Leitch's questionnaire as "dog-whistle politics" – Tony Clement, Erin O'Toole and Lisa Raitt, favour social tolerance.

One of these candidates is more likely to win the leadership than one of the so-cons. Canadian conservatives are, in the main, far more socially progressive than Tea Party or Donald Trump Republicans.

But if social conservatives have no future within the Conservative Party, how are they to express their values politically? The Special Committee on Electoral Reform may have the answer.

The committee is considering whether to replace the first-past-the-post method of electing MPs with something different, which could include proportional representation.

This could give social conservatives significant influence on the policy agenda of the federal government.

As I wrote here1, one advantage of PR, under which MPs are elected based on a party's percentage of the popular vote, is that marginal parties of both the left and the right could make it into the House of Commons.

Since governments under PR would almost always be coalitions, the Conservatives might have to treat with a new party of social conservatism to form a ministry, just as the Liberals or NDP might have to treat with the Greens.

Do we want that, or do we prefer the Canadian variant on the U.S. system, where only two parties compete for power, and various interests seek influence within those parties?

If the electoral reform committee recommends a move to proportional representation, and the Liberal government introduces enabling legislation next spring, then Parliament will debate that legislation as Conservatives choose a new leader.

One way or another, social conservatives will make their voices heard.