

# **Conservatives should shift focus to 'equality of opportunity' for Canadians as 'the antidote to populism,' says Kheiriddin**

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**Tasha Kheiriddin, co-chair Jean Charest's leadership campaign and author of *The Right Path: How Conservatives Can Unite, Inspire and Take Canada Forward*, talks about how the Conservatives can win the next election.**



The Conservative Party leadership candidates, from left: Pierre Poilievre, Leslyn Lewis, Jean Charest, Roman Baber, and Scott Aitchison. 'People become populist when they're blocked, when they don't have social mobility, when they feel that they do all the right things and they can't get ahead,' says Tasha Kheiriddin. *The Hill Times* photographs by Andrew Meade, Sam Garcia, and handouts

The Conservative Party faces "an imperative" to reach a broad, diverse voter-base if it hopes to form government again, says Tasha Kheiriddin, a co-chair of Jean Charest's leadership campaign and author of the recently released book, *The Right Path: How Conservatives Can Unite, Inspire and Take Canada Forward*.

Despite the Conservatives winning the popular vote but not control of the government in the past two federal elections, Kheiriddin said the next leader and the party need to pursue

supporters outside their traditional base.

"It doesn't help if that vote is concentrated in Western, rural, and older voter bases," said Kheiriddin, who is a political columnist for *The National Post*, noting Conservatives have long been falling behind in urban and suburban centres, which are home to most new Canadians.

"You're seeing a sort of a snowball effect...if Conservatives do not succeed in reaching these groups, they will not be a force in Canadian politics to form government in the next decade. It is an imperative," she said. "It's not about changing what you believe in. It is not about putting water in your wine, so to speak. It's really about looking at what is conservatism and how can it appeal to those groups and which parts of those groups are accessible."



Conservative author and commentator Tasha Kheiriddin has a new book out: *The Right Path: How Conservatives Can Unite, Inspire and Take Canada Forward*. Photograph courtesy of Navigator Ltd.

Kheiriddin said her new book looks into groups—especially young people—who are accessible to the party and who believe in conservative ideas. Her book, which she also launched at the Calgary Stampede last week, offers her thoughts on which direction the party should take as it seeks to win government.

“We need to market those ideas in a way that those groups will find appealing.”

She also said the party needs to address populist sentiments, and pivot to the language of opportunity over a hyper-focus on freedom, which she said has alienated “common-sense Canadians.”

When many hear the “freedom cry from the [Trucker] Convoy,” she said, “they see Trumpism, they see a call for what they may consider not very appropriate behaviour.”

“The party has to find a way to address the anti-elite sentiment that is bubbling around populism, but not by tearing down the elites or the gatekeepers,” she said. Conservatives should instead focus on the “positive and uplifting” lens of opportunity.

"It's by helping other people raise themselves up and feel that they have a shot at the Canadian dream, and that their kids do too."

Kheiriddin spoke last week with *The Hill Times*' executive editor Peter Mazereeuw, [host of \*The Hot Room\* podcast](#), about her book and the big issues facing the party right now.

*Here's that conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity.*

**Let's start with the elephant in the room. You are the co-chair of Jean Charest's candidacy for the Conservative Party leadership. Why should supporters of one of the other candidates read your book?**

"Well, it's a great question, and simply because I've talked to hundreds of them. In the course of writing this book, I spoke to people from all various different camps. I started writing it well before the leadership. I started writing it after the last election in October of 2021, when the Conservatives had lost for the third time, and I thought that perhaps they would need some guidance. And I began exploring this concept of writing another book."

"It's not about who should lead the party. It's about how the party should lead the country. So, what you'll find in the book

is really an exploration of the two currents that are presently in the leadership race: populism and conservatism. I look at them from a historical perspective as well as what's going on in the race currently. But then I look at that larger perspective, not through the lens of the individual candidates per se, but on how the party could use these currents to attract new voter bases is going forward. And that's really what the book is about. And anyone who becomes a leader, whether it it's my preferred choice or other, I think would be very wise to look at what's in here about new Canadians, urban Canadians, and young Canadians and how we can get those people going forward to vote Conservative."

**For the sake of argument, some people might say, the Conservative Party won the popular vote in the last two elections, why do you need to attract more people? Shouldn't you just try and make your vote more efficient?**

"Well, this is about making the vote efficient, exactly that. Because the vote isn't right now. You're absolutely right. The Conservatives won 34 per cent of the popular vote, they had won more of the popular vote the previous election as well. But it doesn't help if that vote is concentrated in Western, rural, and older voter bases. And that is what we're seeing, increasingly, research shows that in fact, since the 1960s,

since the days of [former prime minister John] Diefenbaker, the Conservatives have been falling behind in urban and suburban centres. And new Canadians, as we know, also now form the bulk of immigration to cities. So, you're seeing a sort of a snowball effect that will, if Conservatives do not succeed in reaching these groups, they will not be a force in Canadian politics to form government in the next decade. It is an imperative. It's not about, you know, changing what you believe in. It is not about putting water in your wine, so to speak. It's really about looking at what is conservatism and how can it appeal to those groups? And which parts of those groups are accessible. And I go into a lot of detail about young people, in particular, there are some very accessible groups of young people to Conservatives who believe in Conservative ideas. So I think we need to market those ideas in a way that those groups will find appealing."

**You wrote a lot about the idea of elites, a rejection of elites within the party, what that means, how it should be handled. We look at the current crop of leadership candidates and we have a former minister and career politician, a former premier, a former professional lawyer, a former law professor. These are not exactly your everyman or everywoman. So, why aren't they being rejected by the convoy Conservatives who now form a large part of the party space?**

"That is it just an interesting point. I think that this actually goes to the point that I make in the book, which is that rather than denigrating elites saying, we actually need to aspire to be elites. And excellence and elitism is nothing to be ashamed of. Elitism is a problem, certainly, if it blocks people from social mobility and advancement. If people only get jobs because of their connections, for example, or being born into the right family, or this kind of thing, 100 per cent you have to deal with that issue. And there are societies where elitism is a big, big factor in government. I don't see that here. In fact, if you see the people who are the elites, as you put it, you know, many of them come from very ordinary backgrounds, but they have through their own work and struggle have become what we would consider elites. So it is a paradox, 100 per cent, that you have everyone who's on stage would be considered an elite yet, there's a lot of denigration of elite that's going on."

"So that's one of the pieces I say that about populism that turns off a lot of people and, in fact, demonizes the elites within the Conservative Party that the party has relied on in past elections. And going forward, as part of its engine, part of its organization, you can't simply cut off your nose to spite your face. So the party has to find a way to address the anti-elite sentiment that is bubbling around populism, but not by tearing down the elites or the gatekeepers, or this kind of language. It's by helping other people raise themselves up

and feel that they have a shot at the Canadian dream, and that their kids do, too."

**So that leads me up nicely to talk about opportunity, which is a big point you make in your book: the idea of using freedom as a rallying cry or a campaign slogan, which Pierre Poilievre has leaned into the hardest, that instead Conservatives should be talking about opportunity. Can you explain the difference in your view?**

"Freedom is a Conservative concept that goes back to the early days of conservatism and certainly freedom speech and a lot of other freedoms are considered cornerstones. Unfortunately, the word has become tarnished. The convoy cry for freedom does not resonate with a lot of people who I've spoken to. A lot of Canadians, the sort of common-sense Canadians I call them, in the middle. That accessible voter base, that Blue Liberal, Red Tory, or Conservative voter base that may not be as politically engaged. But what they see with the freedom cry from the convoy, is they see Trumpism; they see a call for what they may consider not very appropriate behaviour. People who are on the anti-vaxx side simply want freedom to not take a vaccine. The vaccine has been a big divider in this, whereas some common-sense Canadians will say, 'Well, you know, I took the vaccine is good for other people, I don't believe that freedom is not absolute.' And you get this whole conversation around

freedom, that actually ends up being very negative and divisive.

“So, I say why not pick a word that is actually responding to what people really want. They don’t want the freedom; they want the opportunity to do the things that they have been denied in the last few years, and also previous to that: opportunity to buy a house where they live, opportunity for their kids to advance and do better than they do, opportunity for young people to do better than their parents to succeed in the career of their choice. All these things are through the lens of opportunity. It’s a much more positive and uplifting word. And it’s really funny, I’ve been Alberta for a week [during the Calgary Stampede], and one of the candidates in the Alberta UCP election has already said to me, ‘I read your book, and I’m going to talk about opportunity, because that’s actually what I think we need to talk about.’

“So, it’s resonating. It’s resonating even beyond the book itself right now, which is great, because, to me, equality of opportunity is the antidote to populism as well. People become populist when they’re blocked, when they don’t have social mobility, when they feel that they do all the right things and they can’t get ahead. And when you remove those barriers, not only the gatekeepers, but removing barriers that are to opportunity, and you level the playing field, people have a fair shot. They feel satisfied with that,

even if they don't all have the same outcome. And that's what to be a Conservative really is it goes back to the days of Edmund Burke. He even talked about equality of opportunity. So that's the word I think we should hang our campaign on. And I think it would be something our future campaign that would be very successful."

**Conversations of economic opportunity can't ignore class, racial bias, and other factors that mean one person might start life with a leg up over someone else. So how do you make opportunity a central point of a political campaign without getting caught up in identity politics?**

"Well, I think if you talk to new Canadians, their primary goal—and as daughter of new Canadians, I will say—is they want opportunity for their children. It is not about the colour of your skin, or where you from, the overriding concern is that their kids do better than they do. Increasingly we have immigration from parts of the world where we've not had it traditionally. And in the last 30 years, the source countries for immigration have greatly changed and we have been dealing with a lot of issues around racial equality in the last few years. Black Lives Matter and other movements have brought this to the fore. But playing identity politics frustrates people as much as playing the sort of, you know elitism favouritism card. This is because when people feel

that you may actually be favoured because of your identity, that becomes a problem, too, and it becomes a problem between ethnic groups. You've seen universities in the United States, for example, have quotas that deny Asian students or students of Asian background access to university because there are too many of them who have succeeded. This kind of weird paradox that ends up actually prejudicing certain groups against another."

"The equality of opportunity takes the premise that government is there to provide a level floor. So what does that do? Many things are at the provincial level, not the federal, but they still matter: health, education, are two of the big ones. Access to education, ensuring that our schools actually teach our kids properly that, to your point, kids aren't left behind that you do have, for example, equality of funding across school boards. And this gets down to a micro level that federal politics isn't engaged with, but it is one of the premises of equality of opportunity. And the same thing with health care, we need to ensure that our health-care system gives people as much equal access to health care as possible and also quality access. That's a huge problem and the federal government has not been, in my opinion, talking enough about health care, especially post pandemic. Because if your workforce isn't healthy, they'll not be able to take advantage of opportunities that may present themselves. So those are two of the aspects. The other,

though, is simply the idea that you're going to also remove barriers to opportunity. For business owner, for example, a pile of red tape that prevents a restaurant owner or business owner from establishing themselves is going to be a barrier. This is not a gatekeeper thing, this is simply a function of regulation and making sure that people have access to whatever opportunity they want to pursue and it's they're not inordinate barriers from the government. Taxation is another one."

"The opportunity to do anything depends on how much capital and how much money you can raise to do it if you're an entrepreneur, for example. So there are ways for the government to enter into the picture that have nothing to do with race, nothing to do with all these things. People often bring that into the equation, but if you give people that level playing field as much as possible, then you will give them a fair shot. I will note this, too, that actually children of new Canadians, most of them who are what we consider BIPOC, they actually go to university in greater numbers than the children of native-born Canadians who are mostly white. So, it's interesting to see that, there's definitely an element of striving that new Canadians have. And it's a question of then ensuring that their kids, once they get those degrees, can use them and do not face discrimination."

**You wrote about how conspiracy theories were starting**

**to gain a foothold in the party, or used by some of the leadership candidates, and MPs. What happens when a party that tolerates conspiracy theories becomes the government, which of course, is ultimately the villain in a lot of conspiracy theories. What do you think flows out of that outcome?**

"I don't think there's room for conspiracy theories in government. I really don't. Governments should have, and not to paraphrase Justin Trudeau, but they should have evidence-based policies. I don't necessarily think this government does. But I think that, basing things on research and truth and information. And not basing things and conspiracy theories, because then we've seen what that does. For example, Donald Trump subscribed to many theories that were very questionable. And we've seen the rabbit holes that can take you down. So no, I don't think there's any room for conspiracy theory in government. This is one of the great concerns in the current race, because I think most common sense Canadians would agree with that. And when you, as a party, align yourself with people who do believe those things, you become associated with them as well."



Conservative MP Pierre Poilievre answers a question during the Conservative party of Canada's first leadership contest debate held at the Canada Strong and Free Network's conference in Ottawa on May 5. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

"The conversations around the World Economic Forum and the WHO that we've seen from some of the candidates' leadership race, I think had been a big distraction and very negative. It's kind of ironic, because these things have not always been what these candidates have said. In fact, to take one example, Pierre Poilievre has dumped very much on the World Economic Forum, but in the past, he has cited the World Economic Forum study that shows Canada's doing better than other countries. So, it seems to be this bandwagon, as people who subscribe to these theories. And perhaps you can get memberships that way, but I don't think

it's constructive for the party going forward because you're going to wear that. One of the things in this leadership race, in the past too, that I think is really important to note is you have to be authentic as a politician. People will see through you if you change your spots, do you change your positions? That's happened to Erin O'Toole and to Andrew Scheer, as well. I think it's a mistake to subscribe to those theories because if you do, and then you reject them once you're in office, or you're seem to have changed your positions, people will question: are you just doing this for votes? So, I really think that there's no place for them, and our party should stay away from them."

**You also wrote a lot about traditional Conservative ideas. I want to ask you about a sort of a dualism that used to seem to exist more in conservative discourse, which is the need for personal freedom and personal responsibility, balancing each other. We see a lot of talk now in Conservative circles about personal freedom, and not very much at all about responsibility. Why do you think that's disappeared from the conversation?**

"I think the pandemic has accelerated some trends that were already there. Really the vaccine issue brought forward, among some people who really felt that they wanted a personal medical decision left to them, as opposed to being compelled to take a vaccine to keep their job, or do other

things, not be denied access to places. So there was a sense that built up in some people that this was unfair, that they were entitled to this, and this was a violation of their freedoms. The issue that Conservatives have to grapple with is that conservatism is very much rooted in community. People have forgotten that and ... unfortunately [been] conflated with things that it does not represent. It does not represent anti-social behaviour. Freedom is not about not helping your neighbour, and just helping yourself. The conversation has moved to 'Government should not tell me what to do.' Freedom is not about that; freedom is not absolute. The Charter is very clear: there are limits on our freedoms, so that we can co-exist with each other. And conservatism is about that. It is about respect for the community, as well as the individual. And that balance, I agree with you Peter, it's been lost. And I think Conservatives have not done enough to stand up for it. I know some candidates in this race are. I support Jean Charest, he's stood up for that; he's one of the few who has who said, 'I don't subscribe to what was represented at the convoy.'"



Jean Charest has spoken out against the so-called Freedom Convoy and criticized his opponent Pierre Poilievre for his support for it. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

“It’s a difficult thing, because you also see it as a regional issue and being out in Alberta this week has been very eye-opening as well. Talking to people here, there’s a great culture of freedom in Alberta that is stronger, I would say, than the rest of the country. But again, because of the pandemic, it’s now being conflated with a freedom to do things that could, in theory, and in reality, actually hurt other people because if you don’t have a certain number of people who take a vaccine, you’re not going to have herd immunity. Not to get into all the science about it, but there’s been a reluctance to accept among some parts of the Conservative Party, and I’d say also the People’s Party very clearly, which is sort of bled into this race. That sort of feeling is that you shouldn’t be told what to do on anything and your personal

choice should trump every other aspect of social decision-making. And, unfortunately, a pandemic—which is a once in a 100-year event, hopefully—is not a usual situation. It is not a usual situation of freedom. I think, really, it's been skewed. I don't think we would have seen the People's Party, [which] had close to five per cent in the last election, if we'd not had a pandemic. So as the pandemic subsides, I do believe this issue will also subside and there's some research to back that up. A couple of the researchers I cite say that it's happening in other countries where there have been crises, and this kind of conversation has sort of risen to the fore and then dropped away. So, I'm hoping that it drops away as well. So, Conservatives can focus on the positive elements of freedom, but really, also on the responsibility that you talk about."

### **Have we gotten to a point where people are sort of substituting government for community in their minds?**

"I think that governments tried to substitute itself. I think, Justin Trudeau, one of his main policy drivers was to create a sense of 'Government is your friend, and government provides that community, government provides economic support, government provides a sense of cohesiveness, government is there for you.' And that has actually been quite damaging, economically too, to the middle class that he was supposed to be helping. But beyond that, I do think

that people have a hunger for community and government does not satisfy that. All the people I talked to, especially young people ... actually want IRL [in real life] community; they want to have a sense of face to face interaction. And real community is rooted in those local organizations, institutions, people coming together on a voluntary basis. And the smallest unit, of course, is a family. But it also could be your faith group, it could be an activism group, it could be a local neighbourhood, watch group, it could be anything. It's where people come together for common purpose and they do so, not through the act of government and not necessarily on the web, they come together to tackle a problem or deal with an issue that matters to them. It's often very local. And this is why I also say in the book, that Conservatives need to pay attention to that because that is really the root of their philosophy, but also, it's the root of politics. You need to run more people at the local, municipal level: school board trustees, ward councillors. You need to get into people's lives in the most basic way and have representation so they feel comfortable being a Conservative and they see that Conservatives are not just the stereotypes they see in the media or wherever. So that is something that Conservatives need to really work on. And I think it's something that's very positive for them because their view of community ... it's not rooted in government. It's rooted in the people themselves."