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Kellie leitch: authenticity in leadership[[1]](#endnote-1)

Dawn Oosterhoff wrote this case under the supervision of Professor Gerard Seijts solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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On May 27, 2017, the Conservative Party of Canada (the Conservative Party or Conservatives) gathered to elect a new party leader. The previous leader and prime minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, had stepped down as party leader in October 2015 after losing the federal election to the Liberal Party of Canada. The 2017 Conservative Party leadership race attracted an unprecedented total of 17 candidates who campaigned over seven months or more. Thirteen candidates were on the ballot for election. The race was not one of Canada’s finest political events for many reasons, not least of which was the divisiveness of the candidates’ campaign rhetoric. Amid the cacophony, one candidate stood out: Kellie Leitch, the member of Parliament for Simcoe-Grey in Ontario.

Leitch’s platform addressed several issues such as supply management, natural resource planning, and women’s safety,[[2]](#endnote-2) but two issues in particular galvanized the media and came to define Leitch’s campaign: a commitment to institute the screening of newcomers to the country for their adherence to Canadian values and a platform of “anti-elite” initiatives. Leitch emphasized that her platform was based on the values of hard work, generosity, freedom, and tolerance,[[3]](#endnote-3) but many interpreted her commitment to screening newcomers as conflicting with a growing characterization of Canada as a place of multiculturalism and inclusivity.[[4]](#endnote-4) Her position riled several people, including Leitch’s fellow leadership candidates and many party members.[[5]](#endnote-5) Her message found traction, however, among segments of the Canadian population, particularly those frustrated with politically correct attitudes, concerned about preservation of language and culture, or advocating anti-immigration values.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The media were critical of Leitch’s campaign, lambasting her at almost every turn—for her campaign platform to be certain, but more aggressively for a campaign platform that seemed to depart from Leitch’s background, experience, and values.[[7]](#endnote-7) Was Leitch for real, or had she deliberately pushed a divisive issue to garner attention and raise her profile?

Kellie Leitch

Khristinn Kellie Leitch was born in 1970, the eldest of three siblings. She was a fourth-generation Canadian, her father’s family having emigrated from Scotland and her mother’s family from Iceland. In the early 1970s, Leitch’s father, an engineer, started and ran a construction company that built a substantial portion of Fort McMurray, which became the urban centre for Alberta’s booming oils sands project. Leitch’s mother was a stay-at-home mother—a role she cherished—who inculcated her children with the value of community service. Leitch credited her mother for encouraging her to pursue an education and professional success, participate in team sports, and be active in local community groups. The family were practising Roman Catholics, a faith that Leitch had sustained through her life.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Leitch was academically talented. She advanced quickly through elementary school and high school, graduating high school at age 16. She started university at age 17, pursuing a general arts degree without a clear career focus at the time. A little more than a year later, Leitch’s mother died of breast cancer at age 46—an event that prompted Leitch to consider a career in medicine. She graduated medical school, completed a residency in paediatric orthopaedic surgery at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, pursued a clinical fellowship at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, and by age 39 had become the chief of surgery for a large hospital in a rapidly growing community east of Toronto.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Along the way, Leitch also completed her master’s degree in business administration, focusing on health care management. When Leitch accepted a position as a professor of surgery at the Schulich School of Medicine at the University of Western Ontario, she was cross-appointed to the Ivey Business School where she taught in the health sector stream and was the founding chair of what became the Ivey International Centre for Health Innovation.[[10]](#endnote-10) Leitch combined her medical and business talents in multiple volunteer and community roles, such as council member on the National Research Council of Canada, board director of the YMCA of Greater Toronto, board member of Genome Canada, and vice-president of the Canadian Foundation for AIDS Research.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Having been tagged as one of “Canada’s Top 40 Under 40” at the age of 34, then awarded the Order of Ontario at age 40 for her work in child health advocacy, Leitch had been profiled several times in the media.[[12]](#endnote-12) She was variably described as focused and hard-working, academically inclined, smart, driven and strategic, loyal, and “amazingly great at time management.”[[13]](#endnote-13) When Leitch ran for political office in 2010, *The Globe and Mail* described her as a “star candidate.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

The Naissance of a Political Career

Leitch became politically active at the age of nine, when her father, a Conservative Party riding president, became the campaign manager for a friend seeking office. Leitch joined the Conservative Party as soon as she was eligible at age 14 and was politically active as a volunteer throughout high school and university.[[15]](#endnote-15) She was well known in the party; Leitch and her friends referred to the party as Leitch’s second family. In 1993, Leitch threw her energy behind Jean Charest, a liberal-minded Francophone, in his bid to become party leader.[[16]](#endnote-16) At university, Leitch helped pay her way through school by working for David Turnbull, a member of Ontario’s provincial parliament, and later by working for Barbara McDougall, then federal minister of external affairs.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In 2006, Jim Flaherty, a well-known Conservative and then finance minister, invited Leitch to chair an expert panel on developing tax incentives to improve children’s fitness. The work was the start to what would become Leitch’s niche for policy initiatives to advance children’s health and wellness. In 2008, Leitch released a government-backed study that concluded Canada was slipping behind its peer countries in indicators of child health.[[18]](#endnote-18) The report called for a national strategy, which Leitch undertook. In 2009, she founded what became the Sandbox Project, a Canadian non-governmental organization that worked across disciplines to advance the health and well-being of Canadian children and youth.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Flaherty continued to mentor Leitch. He was highly regarded for his fiscal management skills balanced with social financial initiatives, and he was liked and respected by politicians and business people regardless of party affiliation. That Flaherty took Leitch under his wing to groom her for a successful political career was a credit to Leitch, and his influence on her was not lost on Leitch. In 2014, she was with Flaherty the morning he suffered a heart attack and, despite Leitch’s best medical efforts, died. Leitch was devastated, but she spoke through her grief the next morning in the House of Commons to give a moving tribute to Flaherty, “a colleague, a mentor, my champion, and a very close friend.”[[20]](#endnote-20)

Elected Politician

In 2010, Flaherty encouraged Leitch to run as the Conservative candidate in the upcoming 2011 federal election. Leitch was being parachuted by the party into the Simcoe-Grey riding to replace the incumbent member of Parliament who had been expelled from caucus. The campaign was bitter. The incumbent was liked in the riding and still identified herself as a Conservative, even if she was, unwillingly, no longer a member of the Conservative Party. The party put a great deal of effort behind Leitch’s campaign, sending no fewer than three Conservative cabinet ministers, a well-known Conservative senator, a well-known and highly regarded party strategist and previous senator, a previous provincial premier, and the prime minister himself to stump for Leitch.[[21]](#endnote-21) She won the riding, the Conservatives won the election, and Leitch was rewarded with government appointments.

Leitch was first appointed parliamentary secretary to the minister of human resources and skills development. Two years later, she was promoted to minister of labour and minister of status of women.[[22]](#endnote-22) Her accomplishments as a parliamentarian, however, did not follow the thread of initiatives she had established in health care or regarding children. Rather, when asked, Leitch identified a women’s entrepreneur mentorship program and changes to the *Federal* *Accountability Act*[[23]](#endnote-23) as key accomplishments. The changes to the accountability act amended conflict of interest guidelines to allow parliamentarians to practise their profession as volunteers. This amendment aligned with both Leitch’s belief in service and her own professional activities in medicine: to sustain her medical skills and credentials, she had continued to practise, on a volunteer basis, at the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario.[[24]](#endnote-24)

In 2014, as minister of labour and minister of status of women, Leitch introduced the government’s CA$25-million[[25]](#endnote-25) plan to address violence against Aboriginal women and children. The Conservative government had been resisting ongoing calls to investigate and launch a public inquiry into an ongoing problem with missing and murdered Indigenous women. The media and the government opposition criticized Leitch’s plan as a weak response to such a significant problem.[[26]](#endnote-26) The next year, in the same role, Leitch introduced a women’s mentorship program. *It Starts with One* encouraged leaders in the public and private sectors to become mentors and champions for young women to “increase women’s economic prosperity in Canada.”[[27]](#endnote-27)

Leitch may not have yet had a high political profile in the general public, but her status within the party was secure. She was regarded as “smart, focused, strategic, driven and, most of all, loyal.”[[28]](#endnote-28) Her devotion to the party had been particularly noted; a party insider described Leitch as “a loyal soldier of the party. . . . For good and bad she [was] there.”[[29]](#endnote-29) Her allegiance to the party had been tested early in her parliamentary career. Once Leitch was elected, physicians and public health professionals lobbied her as a health professional to push the government to end its export of asbestos.[[30]](#endnote-30) The issue was not on the government’s agenda, and the Harper government[[31]](#endnote-31) was renowned for requiring the cabinet and caucus to speak with one voice. Leitch sided with the party and abandoned the request, later justifying her actions: “I had a choice. I could speak my mind publicly and be removed from having a voice within caucus. Or I could achieve a longer-term goal in the best interests of Canadians. I chose the latter. . . . Sometimes you have to take it on the chin for the team,” she said.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Federal Election 2015

Canadians went back to the polls in 2015 to elect a new federal government. The Conservatives had formed the government for nine years, and the national desire was for change. Change was what they got: the Liberals swept the election, exceeding expectations. Although not far behind the Liberals in terms of the popular vote, the Conservatives lost 89 seats, dropping from 188 to 99.[[33]](#endnote-33) The Conservative platform—“Proven leadership for a strong Canada”—had offered Canadians more of the same, which seemed to be *not* what Canadians wanted. The party had also lost some campaign steam when an extended media cycle was taken up with the trial of a Conservative senator for fraud, a charge linked to questionable dealings in the prime minister’s office. However, it was widely believed that it was not the trial that lost the race, but the party’s inability to respond to the needs of young, middle-class, and immigrant Canadians, and its insistence on maintaining and strengthening what many saw as anti-immigration policies.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Canada prided itself on its multicultural reputation, so Canadians cried in protest to both the prime minister’s use of the appellation “Old Stock Canadians” during a nationally televised debate and the party’s fuss over whether women could wear a niqab during a citizenship ceremony.[[35]](#endnote-35) The campaign tension over immigration escalated in the face of the Syrian refugee crisis. The Conservative government had been criticized for having failed to do enough for the refugees and for having passed over certain religious groups in the selection process. The Conservative Party denied the claim and renewed its commitment to Syrian refugees, promising to increase the number of refugees who would be accepted. However, citing security concerns, the government suspended the review process for an audit.[[36]](#endnote-36) Then just a few months later, at the height of the election campaign, the body of a toddler washed up on a beach in Turkey. With the world watching, the child who came to symbolize all those who had lost their lives in their flee to safety was identified as Alan Kurdi, the nephew of a Canadian woman who had been attempting to bring her brother and his family to Canada. Canadian bureaucracy had prevented the child’s family from seeking asylum in Canada.[[37]](#endnote-37)

The death knell for the Conservative Party, according to many, was a “snitch line” introduced by Chris Alexander, the immigration minister, and Leitch. The Conservatives had earlier passed legislation that reinforced strict penalties on acts that were already crimes in Canada but might have been considered acceptable by some cultures, such as polygamy and honour killings.[[38]](#endnote-38) During the election campaign, Alexander and Leitch promised additional resources to back the legislation, including a proposed tip line, to be managed by Canada’s federal police, specifically for reporting suspected violations of the new law.[[39]](#endnote-39)

The Conservative Party was no longer focused on fiscal management and, instead, had self-identified as the defender of Canadian values. Alexander declared, “We need to stand up for our values. . . . We need to do that in citizenship ceremonies. We need to do that to protect women and girls from forced marriage and other barbaric practices.”[[40]](#endnote-40) Leitch indicated the values involved “difficult issues that impact women.”[[41]](#endnote-41) Accusing the opposing parties of being preoccupied with political correctness, Leitch announced, “The Conservative government is not afraid to defend Canadian values.”[[42]](#endnote-42)

The Conservative Party lost the election, but it earned 32 per cent of the popular vote and increased the number of Conservative seats in Quebec, where language and culture were two key issues.[[43]](#endnote-43) Clearly, some Canadians had picked up and backed the party’s shifting position to protecting Canadian values.[[44]](#endnote-44)

Leadership Campaign

Harper announced his resignation as leader of the Conservative Party on the night of the party’s election loss. Leitch, known inside the party but still a political newcomer to the Canadian public, was the first to announce her intent to run to replace Harper as leader of the party. Her announcement on April 6, 2016, triggered the beginning of a long year of campaigning.[[45]](#endnote-45)

Defending Canadian Values

Leitch’s association with the snitch line, seen by many to have been largely anti-Muslim, dogged her every step of her leadership campaign. During a televised interview early in her campaign, Leitch apologized for her role in introducing the proposal:

I’ve had a lot of time to think about this since the [federal election] campaign took place and if I could go back in time, which I can’t, I would change things. . . . As minister of status of women, I was focused on making sure that we eliminated violence against women and girls, especially making sure we advocated for women’s rights. . . . We weren’t talking about race; we were talking about kids . . . but that message was completely overtaken and I regret that, and I regret that it occurred, and it shouldn’t have been done.[[46]](#endnote-46)

Nonetheless, and despite the controversy generated during the federal election, Leitch’s platform picked up where the snitch line left off: proposing to screen newcomers to the country for “anti-Canadian values.” Leitch identified Canadian values as equality of opportunity, hard work, generosity, freedom, and tolerance—especially freedom and tolerance, which, according to Leitch, were “at the core of what makes us uniquely Canadian. I’m proud of that value set,” she said. “That value set built our country. [It’s] worth protecting [so we can] continue to be the beacon of hope around the globe, the reason why individuals want to immigrate to our country.”[[47]](#endnote-47)

Leitch canvassed Canadians with a questionnaire asking for their feedback on screening potential immigrants and rescinding citizenship of dual citizens who violated Canadian values.[[48]](#endnote-48) Her eager engagement of a proposal that was widely seen as just a variation of that for which she had apologized invited public scorn and furious criticism. High-profile Conservatives denounced the plan. Several of Leitch’s party colleagues, including the party’s interim leader (who would normally remain neutral during a leadership campaign), distanced themselves from the proposal.[[49]](#endnote-49) The media had a heyday, calling out every reference Leitch made to a practice from a Muslim nation—and there were many.

Opinion columnists recalled previous failed attempts to guard Canadian values, such as the residential school system that stripped Indigenous communities of their language and culture in favour of instilling Canadian values.[[50]](#endnote-50) Leitch emphasized that her intent was to protect Canadian women from those who “believe that women are property, that they can be beaten and bought or sold.”[[51]](#endnote-51) She made it clear that she wanted to protect gay men and lesbians from those who believe they “should be stoned.”[[52]](#endnote-52) Opinion columnists responded by pointing to the inconsistencies with that philosophy within Canada:

In our country, a woman is murdered by her intimate partner every six days. Indigenous women are killed at a rate six times greater than non-indigenous women. About every two days, a gay person becomes the victim of a hate crime. Until this year, it was the official stance of Leitch’s own political party that gays and lesbians be denied the right to marry.[[53]](#endnote-53)

A Conservative senator questioned why a former minister responsible for the status of women was not advocating for those living in poverty, for greater access to daycare, and for other policies that would address the already existing and pressing needs of women.[[54]](#endnote-54)

Denying Racism

On January 29, 2017, a gunman entered a mosque in Quebec City during evening prayers and opened fire, killing six people and injuring 19. Quebec had a higher proportion of Muslim immigrants than any other province, and the university near the targeted mosque attracted a high proportion of French-speaking students primarily from Muslim-dominant countries. The gunman was later identified to be a far-right white nationalist with anti-Muslim views.[[55]](#endnote-55)

Politicians and columnists quickly identified the attack as racist, making it clear they believed the attack was a result of fear-mongering and discriminatory politicking. Without naming her, many blamed Leitch and her exclusivist policy of immigrant screening. One Conservative leadership candidate tweeted:

This mosque attack is no accident: It’s a direct result of demagogues and wannabe demagogues playing to fears and prejudices . . . . This is Canada. This was an attack on real Canadian values enshrined in the Charter: religious freedom.[[56]](#endnote-56)

Protestors hung a banner on Leitch’s campaign office that said “Hate puts us all at risk.” The banner also named the six murdered men and called for Leitch to resign.

Leitch responded in an interview, asserting as she had at every turn during her campaign, that her belief that screening immigrants for anti-Canadian values was not intolerant, racist, or isolationist, and that supporters of her campaign and the screening policy were not racists. She contended that Canada was “built on immigration,”[[57]](#endnote-57) and her proposal was “about acceptance of a framework by which we agree to live as Canadians and the tolerance that goes with that, because here in this country, we are tolerant.”[[58]](#endnote-58) When challenged with the suggestion that Canadians celebrated tolerance as difference, not conformity, Leitch disagreed. She claimed that “without a common set of values, a common identity, we can’t have integration of newcomers.”[[59]](#endnote-59)

Leitch continued her campaign, accusing opponents of trivializing the issues or being “elites” out of touch with what the “average guy or gal on the street” wanted.[[60]](#endnote-60)

Opposing Elites

Campaigning against the elite had become popular politics, made infamous by Donald Trump’s presidential campaign of 2015/2016. Who the elite were was open for debate, but in political rhetoric, it was “the other.” *Elite*, according to the dictionary, referred to quality, class, and culture. It could also refer to a group of individuals with power and influence in a society, usually as a result of wealth or privilege. According to analysts, political anti-elite rhetoric engaged an even broader group by referring to those known for liberal ideas and “highbrow consumer preferences.”[[61]](#endnote-61)

Leitch defined an elite as “an individual who is out of touch and seems to think they know better what, how, someone should think.”[[62]](#endnote-62) She described her anti-elite platform as an effort to address the disconnect between “hard-working” Canadians, “the average guy or gal on the street,” and their government.[[63]](#endnote-63) Reducing both taxation and regulations represented the traditional Conservative policy position, which Leitch endorsed, but added, “I think our party can be bigger than that.”[[64]](#endnote-64) Referencing her listening skills and collaborative approach in her medical practice, Leitch added, “I think if [we] work together . . . we actually are doing better public service. It’s about listening first, developing a plan together and then going out and implementing it in the best interests of Canadians.”[[65]](#endnote-65)

Leitch defended her immigration screening program as a response to the interests of average Canadians. A Forum Research poll in September 2016 concluded that 67 per cent of Canadians were in favour of a program that screened immigrants for anti-Canadian values. The idea met with even higher approval among those supporting Leitch’s party.[[66]](#endnote-66) Leitch argued that her screening program also protected the needs of “Canadians [who] work hard”—the non-elites. The program was “different than having an elitist attitude of thinking you know best and you can tell people what to do,” she said.[[67]](#endnote-67)

When Trump won the U.S. presidential election, Leitch again aligned herself with hard-working Canadians in an email message to supporters: “Tonight our American cousins threw out the elites and elected Donald Trump as their next president. It’s an exciting message and one that we need delivered in Canada, as well. It’s the message I’m bringing with my campaign to be the next prime minister of Canada.”[[68]](#endnote-68)

The media pressed Leitch, questioning whether she wasn’t an elite herself. She had two advanced university degrees, had been a professor and chair in the university system, was a member of Parliament and had been a member of cabinet, and was a specialist surgeon who had been chief of surgery. Leitch had especially insisted on her distinction as a physician being noted: despite tradition that eschewed professional titles on Parliament business cards, Leitch insisted on the inclusion of “Dr.” on her cards and in her ministerial correspondence, noting that she was maintaining a medical practice while serving as a member of Parliament.[[69]](#endnote-69)

Nonetheless, Leitch denied that she was an elite, noting that she grew up in “small town” Fort McMurray, Alberta, and that her first home there had been a trailer. She worked hard, she said, and while she had an “elite education and great jobs,” she was “not out of touch. I don’t think I know better than everyone,” she added.[[70]](#endnote-70) On another occasion, Leitch suggested that if she were an elite, that status was countered by oppression: “You may call me an elite but look, I dealt with the most challenging old boys’ club there is in the country. They’re called surgeons.”[[71]](#endnote-71)

However, at a campaign event organized for young Conservative Party members, Leitch again brought into question whether she was an elite herself. When asked what her policy was on Aboriginal affairs, Leitch informed her questioner that she would “abolish the *Indian Act*,” noting that “every Canadian should be treated the same.”[[72]](#endnote-72) Leitch’s proposal was, in effect, to remove Aboriginal identities, their legal status, and their reserved land. When the questioner pointed this out, Leitch retorted, “Please understand that I do have 22 letters at the end of my name; I’m not an idiot.”[[73]](#endnote-73)

When the questioner further challenged Leitch by asking whether she felt she had consulted widely enough to reach her conclusion, Leitch broke from her commitment to work together and listen first, replying:

I think that the people of Canada, and the Parliament of Canada, is supreme. And when people decide, that’s what we should do. And every Canadian should be equal. And if you think I need to go out and speak to Aboriginal Canadians across the country to ask them for their consent to change the law, it won’t happen.[[74]](#endnote-74)

Her retort garnered the day’s media attention with the criticism that an anti-elitist closed down conversation by referencing her own elite status. Leitch later tweeted an apology for miscounting the number of letters after her name, noting that she had 18 letters, not 22. “Each is an achievement I worked hard for,” she added.[[75]](#endnote-75)

Opposing the Media

Leitch had hired Nick Kouvalis to run her leadership campaign. Kouvalis was a controversial figure with a track record for getting unlikely candidates elected on populist campaigns. His prior notable victory was the election of Rob Ford as mayor of Toronto. Ford was an atypical, bumbling politician from the suburbs whose term in office was characterized by his drug and alcohol abuse, criminal acquaintances, and disdain for the media. Leitch was a different candidate—highly educated, respected in policy circles, and free of criminal suspicions, although awkward speaking in public and developing a reputation for being high-handed as a cabinet minister. What was similar to both was Kouvalis’s pitch: both campaigns advanced divisive, populist positions, and both dismissed the elite and cast the media as bullies.[[76]](#endnote-76)

As Ford and, more recently, Trump had done, Leitch cast herself in an adversarial relationship with the media. Leitch expressed her condemnation of the media in interviews, regularly accusing the “media elite” of attacking her or misunderstanding her.[[77]](#endnote-77) She had also embedded her position on the media in her campaign platform: while many Conservatives proposed some form of funding cut for Canada’s national broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Leitch promised to completely dismantle the “left-wing media elite” broadcaster.[[78]](#endnote-78)

Social Media

On February 25, 2017, Leitch advanced her campaign using social media, posting a video to YouTube.[[79]](#endnote-79) Leitch spoke to the camera about her Canadian values policy for the full eight-and-a-half-minute clip. There were no visual aids or props beyond a desk and the Canadian flag. The video was marked by awkward, prolonged pauses; wooden verbal pacing; and multiple, sometimes extended, glances off-screen.

Leitch was known as an inelegant public speaker, and it was thought she had received coaching, so she could have been attempting to implement for the camera what she had learned.[[80]](#endnote-80) Regardless, the result was posted and subject to extensive ridicule on social media. People edited the video in multiple ways for comic effect. The Canadian satire team from CBC Television’s comedy show *22 Minutes* prepared two new sketches to add to their growing collection of Leitch sketches for television and YouTube, fuelling the social media traffic.[[81]](#endnote-81) Within days, the link to Leitch’s video had been displayed approximately a million times on Facebook; the video itself had been viewed by more than 500,000 people.[[82]](#endnote-82)

When speaking in Calgary several days later, Leitch pointed to the viral interest in her video as evidence that her proposal on immigration was resonating with Canadians. Leitch applauded the ridicule, identifying it as an opportunity to share her message, “unfiltered,” with the Canadian public. She dismissed concerns about the video’s production quality. When asked what she thought of the response to the video, Leitch replied, “That I should take acting lessons.”[[83]](#endnote-83)

Ridicule on social media aside, it was the staging of the video that generated attention. What was Leitch saying amid the prolonged pauses and glances off-screen? One columnist summed it up as “little more than saying she loves her country and its ‘shared values’ of generosity, hard work, freedom, tolerance, and equal opportunity.”[[84]](#endnote-84) Another columnist criticized the video as “clickbait . . . Trumpian politics of distraction: bizarre optics become the topic of discussion while content and substance are left unexamined or unchallenged.”[[85]](#endnote-85) A political commentator who had seen and made note of Leitch early in her political career was more charitable and remarked, “She is, or was in her earlier life, a compassionate, charitable, charismatic personality who saved or repaired hundreds of young lives while educating other doctors on advanced surgical skills. That does not compute with the person in this week’s bizarre Facebook production.”[[86]](#endnote-86)

Whatever Leitch intended, in one day the video “set the Internet afire with chatter, larks, and memes.”[[87]](#endnote-87) A communication specialist pointed out that the video should be considered a success because media organizations were talking about it, even if the talk was about the video’s failures. “It’s a hijacking of the news cycle,” the specialist noted. “If I were still in journalism, I’d be covering it too, just like Trump.”[[88]](#endnote-88)

Public Response

Leitch may not have had much support within her own party or with the mainstream media, but she did have public backing. Despite being comparatively new in her political career, Leitch was the front-runner early in the leadership campaign. A poll of Conservative supporters had identified Leitch as the top choice for leader.[[89]](#endnote-89) At that point, Leitch was also the top fundraiser in the leadership campaign. She was later surpassed by two other candidates in total funds raised, but Leitch relied on fewer, larger donors than the others; halfway through the race, the average donation to the leading candidate was $137, and to Leitch, $310.[[90]](#endnote-90) The bar for contributions was also high at a fundraising dinner held for Leitch by Bay Street lawyers: the tickets were $500 each. Ironically, for an anti-elite platform, Leitch’s campaign was attracting elite donors.[[91]](#endnote-91)

The Forum Research poll from September 2016 found that Leitch’s proposal to screen immigrants appealed to two-thirds of the Canadians surveyed. A different company conducted another poll in January 2017, the same month that the gunman entered the mosque in Quebec City, killing six people. The January 2017 poll indicated that, again, about two-thirds of Canadians polled would support screening immigrants for adherence to Canadian values.[[92]](#endnote-92) Some commentators also saw merit in Leitch’s idea of promulgating Canadian values and improving the immigration system, but challenged the details of Leitch’s plan, suggesting it was unworkable and that, by focusing on immigrants alone, the plan failed to address value clashes within the country.[[93]](#endnote-93)

However, by May 2017, as the Conservative Party prepared for the leadership election, Leitch’s campaign had become nothing but polarizing. Her criticism of Torontonians for lack of community—she claimed that when she lived in Toronto, she felt she could never reach out to a neighbour—elicited a social media response of good neighbour stories in Toronto, posted under the hashtag #OurTO.[[94]](#endnote-94) Constituents in Leitch’s own riding of Simcoe-Grey had begun a campaign against Leitch. They posted signs and launched a social media campaign under the hashtag #NotMyMP.[[95]](#endnote-95) A poll in January 2017 indicated only 2 per cent of Canadians of all political affiliations wanted Leitch to be leader of the Conservative Party.[[96]](#endnote-96)

Still, Leitch entered the convention (and the election for leader) with more than 30,000 members supporting her campaign—representing more than 20 per cent of the votes to be cast. The last poll to assess the ranking of candidates ranked her fifth in a list of 13 candidates. There was no question that Leitch was mentioned most often in the headlines, even if most of the content below the headlines was critical. Canadians seemed to be repulsed by Trump’s leadership politics, but Leitch claimed she would not have changed anything: “I don’t have any regrets, because I think this has been a really—and is now becoming even more so—a thoughtful dialogue that Canadians are having.”[[97]](#endnote-97)

Conclusion

Election of the new leader of the Conservative Party took an extraordinary 13 rounds of balloting.[[98]](#endnote-98) The result was an upset: the front-runner on the previous 12 ballots was overtaken by Andrew Scheer, a 38-year-old social-conservative[[99]](#endnote-99) whose political experience was as speaker of the House of Commons. He had not held any ministerial post. He was known as “the nice guy” who ran a race with a positive tone.[[100]](#endnote-100)

Leitch’s 20 per cent showing before the election evaporated into a 7 per cent result on the first ballot and increased to only 7.95 per cent by the ninth ballot.[[101]](#endnote-101) The once well-regarded member of the political world, initially considered to be a front-runner in the leadership race, was eliminated with “an embarrassing seventh place showing after the first ballot.”[[102]](#endnote-102) She held a position in the election until the ninth round of voting, at which point she was eliminated.[[103]](#endnote-103)

How had Leitch’s reputation shifted from well-regarded physician and community leader to criticized political candidate? With the bid for leadership ended, how could she rebuild her position, and what strengths and experience would she need?

**Endnotes**

1. This case has been written on the basis of published sources only. Consequently, the interpretation and perspectives presented in this case are not necessarily those of Kellie Leitch, the Conservative Party of Canada or any of its members. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Leitch’s campaign platform proposed, for example, a cap on government spending, use of supply management, restricting marijuana to distribution by pharmacists, abolition of the carbon tax, protecting pipelines and natural resource development from politically motivated activists, and making pepper spray legal for women to use for protection. However, these positions were similar to those advanced by other Conservative leadership candidates and so were largely sidelined by the media. Kellie Leitch, interview by Laura Lynch, *The Sunday Edition*, CBC Radio, November 20, 2017, accessed July 12, 2017, www.cbc.ca/listen/shows/sunday-edition/segment/10833135; Kellie Leitch, correspondence with the case authors, July 14, 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
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