



Abortion Rights
Coalition of Canada

*Your
Voice for Choice*

Coalition pour le droit à
l'avortement au Canada

Canada's only national political pro-choice advocacy group

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Position Paper #50

Abortion and the Conservative Party (Tories)

The Conservative Party of Canada was formed in 2003 through the merger of the Canadian Alliance (previously the Reform Party) and the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada. In 2004, Stephen Harper was elected leader of the new party. He was a founding member of the Reform Party and had previously been a Reform MP in Calgary.

The 2003 merger was motivated by the goal of presenting an effective right-wing opposition to the Liberal Party of Canada, and of creating a new national party that would not split the right-wing vote. Such splitting contributed, in part, to Liberal victories in the 1997 and 2000 federal elections.

The Conservative Party has historically demonstrated its anti-choice position. In 1989, the Progressive Conservatives introduced Bill C-43 to recriminalize abortion, authorizing criminal charges against physicians who performed abortions that were not deemed medically necessary. On May 29, 1990, the House of Commons passed the bill. Before Senate approval, however, the media reported two cases of clandestine abortions. In June 1990, a teenager from Kitchener, Ontario, was injured during a botched abortion performed in a man's home. Several days later, a Toronto woman died from a self-induced, coat-hanger abortion. On January 31, 1991, Bill C-43 was defeated in the Senate by a tie vote.

Stephen Harper became Prime Minister in 2006 with a minority Conservative government, eventually winning a majority in 2011. (He lost the 2015 election to Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau and resigned his seat the following year.) Throughout his tenure as Prime Minister, Harper repeatedly said he would not legislate on abortion, and would not re-open the abortion debate.¹

However, Harper allowed his backbenchers to bring forward private member bills and motions that threatened to restrict abortion rights, and permitted a free vote for his MPs. Between 2006 and 2014, six Conservative backbenchers introduced anti-choice bills or motions. None of them succeeded, but Bill C-484 passed second reading in 2007. That bill would have treated fetuses as legal persons by making them separate victims when a pregnant woman was killed or attacked. Harper himself voted in favour of C-484, as well as against Dr. Henry Morgentaler's Order of Canada in 2008.²

Harper also had said in 2004, when running for the leadership of the Conservative Party, that he would oppose any bill limiting provincial funding to abortion services and would not support a referendum on abortion. However, as soon as the Conservatives were first elected in 2006, they largely stopped enforcing the *Canada Health Act*, allowing provinces to flout the Act openly. For

example, the new (anti-choice) federal Health Minister simply dropped the arbitration process that the previous Liberal Health Minister had initiated with New Brunswick, essentially giving NB the thumbs-up to continue its illegal refusal to fund the Fredericton Morgentaler Clinic (now Clinic 554 and still not funded for surgical abortion).

In 2010, Canada hosted the G8 Summit and Harper pledged \$1.1 billion for maternal health. However, funding for safe abortion was explicitly excluded from the pledge, as was contraception initially, until Harper was forced to back down due to the outcry.³ He never rescinded the abortion funding prohibition, however, which required ignoring the advice of his own experts at CIDA, as well as many global experts in the field.⁴

After his election in 2015, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau mandated that all future liberal MPs “are expected to vote pro-choice on any bills”.⁵ As of 2018, 92 MPs are anti-choice from both parties (85 Conservative, 7 Liberal). To be considered anti-choice, MPs must have done at least one of the following: have an anti-choice voting record; have spoken publicly at or attended events organized by anti-choice groups; have publicly stated they are "pro-life"; or have stated they would support abortion only in limited circumstances.⁶

The current list of anti-choice Conservative MPs and those with an unknown stance can be found here: <http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/politics-election.html>.

In 2017, the Conservative Party of Canada elected Andrew Scheer as its new leader. He is avowedly anti-choice. His election may have been assured due to the intervention of three anti-choice groups who sold thousands of Conservative Party memberships and urged strategic voting for anti-choice candidates.⁷

¹ CBC News. *How the abortion debate has reared its head in Parliament*. Apr 26, 2012. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/how-the-abortion-debate-has-reared-its-head-in-parliament-1.1200237>

² Arthur, Joyce. *A Harper Majority? Say Goodbye to Abortion Rights*. Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada. April 19, 2011. <http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/action/harper-majority.html>

³ Ibbitson, John. Contraception a part of maternal-health plan, Harper says. *Globe & Mail*. March 18, 2010. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/contraception-a-part-of-maternal-health-plan-harper-says/article4312322/>

⁴ ARCC / FQPN / The Anna Project. *Harper Defies the Experts*. June 9, 2010. <http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/press/release-jun9-10-english.html>

⁵ Mas, Susana. Anti-abortion candidates need not apply in 2015, Justin Trudeau says. *CBC News*. May 7, 2014. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/anti-abortion-candidates-need-not-apply-in-2015-justin-trudeau-says-1.2634877>

⁶ Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada. *Members of Parliament with an Anti-choice Stance*. Jan 12, 2018. <http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/presentations/anti-choice-unknown-MPs-2016.pdf>

⁷ MacCharles Tonda. Scheer’s election as Conservative leader cheered by anti-abortion groups. May 29, 2017 *Toronto Star*. <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/05/29/scheers-election-as-conservative-leader-cheered-by-anti-abortion-groups.html>