

WITH Tasha Kheiriddin, Co-author of *Rescuing Canada's Right*



TASHA KHEIRIDDIN is the Ontario director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. She is fluently bilingual and has worked in the fields of law, journalism and political advocacy for over a decade. Tasha has published opinion pieces in the *National Post*, the *Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Sun*, *Toronto Star*, *Policy Options*, *Fine Print*, the *Western Standard*, and the *Canadian Conservative Review*. Together with journalist Adam Daifallah, Tasha has co-written a book titled, *Rescuing Canada's Right: Blueprint for a Conservative Revolution*, published by Wiley and Sons. Tasha obtained her B.C.L. and L.L.B. from McGill University's Faculty of Law in 1993 and received the Justicia Award for Excellence in Journalism from the Canadian Bar Association. In 2004, Toastmasters presented Tasha with its International Communicator Achievement Award. She was interviewed December 9, 2005, following her speech to a Frontier Centre breakfast.

**Frontier Centre: Your book describes a strategy for restoring a small-“c” conservative alternative on the national stage. What happened to the Tories that got them off the tracks for a whole generation?**

**Tasha Kheiriddin:** As we say in the book, the Conservatives since Confederation have not developed a really strong small-“c” conservative ideology that one can point to and say, “This is a Canadian Conservative.” It has gotten worse in the last forty years because the liberals entrenched statism. The federal Tories never really challenged their dominant ideological view, partly because of the national unity issue—the federal government is seen as working against separatism—and secondly because they just didn’t invest the money and time that other countries such as the U.S. and Britain did, in terms of developing a conservative infrastructure. There was no real emphasis on ideas and ideology in Canada at the political level or at the grassroots. Nevertheless, we are ahead of where the U.S. was in terms of think tanks when they started building their infrastructure. We have some excellent ones, like the Frontier Centre and the Fraser Institute. We have activist groups like the CTF as well. We have to remember that the Conservative Party itself doesn’t drive the ideas.

**FC: Is a large part of the problem the fact that when Conservatives were in national power during the Mulroney years, they were in the same boat as the Liberals? You give them credit for free trade, but in terms of the size of government, its powers and purview, they were doing the same things, which turned away a lot of their base.**

**TK:** Well, they did. They implemented a lot of big-government policies that included more funding for regional development and pork-barrelling, and demonstrated a “big-government” attitude. They also didn’t cut back in certain areas like funding for interest groups or funding for the Court Challenges program, for example. In the book, we interviewed John Crosbie about that and he basically said, “We kept funding it because we would be seen as politically incorrect if we didn’t.” This kind of attitude—that government was not there to reform the state as much as just be in power, and in Mulroney’s view to advance the national unity file. Unfortunately, he failed on both counts. An obsession with national unity clouded the ideology issue and also fractured the country politically.

**FC: Aren’t you swimming against an impossible tide? Hasn’t the movement in Canada’s political classes been inexorably to the left, to bigger, more interventionist government?**

**TK:** A big-government party will always skew that way, but that’s why the Conservative Party has to become a small-government party. I think it can. All trends are reversible. No one thought the Berlin wall would fall, no one thought the Soviet Union would disappear, and no one thought south of the border that someone like Reagan could get elected after Goldwater’s defeat in 1964. If you work hard enough at something, you can do it. Conservatives

have to put their money where their minds are. That is really the bottom line. If they’re not willing to invest the money and the time in institutions necessary to develop conservatism or a “small-government” approach, then in the end they will only have themselves to blame that the party does not reflect that attitude.

**FC: But is that money going to be forthcoming? Aren’t most corporations and people that have large pools of old capital hopelessly entangled with big government?**

**TK:** Some are, some aren’t. There is certainly a cozy relationship between the business community and the federal government in certain areas. I think of subsidies to Bombardier, for example, and other large aerospace companies. But there is also discontent within the business community with what they have got for this. The banks have been giving money to the Liberal Party for years and they are no closer to the kind of politics that will, for example, allow them to achieve mergers. I also think there is a whole pool of new capital coming up, from baby boomers in particular. I know this because CEOs have called me since this book came out and said we have hundreds of people who want to do what you are talking about. We want you to speak to them and we want them to hear your message, because they are looking for outlets for their money. They are the “new capitalists,” so to speak. They are not the old-money families, but they want to make a difference in this country. It is quite heart-warming to hear this, and I do believe it the potential is out there. People have to be sort of made aware that the option exists. A lot of philanthropic people think of giving money to hospitals or other worthy causes, but not to political philanthropy, which is what we are trying to encourage.

**FC: You cite research that says think tanks with free-market orientations are the best source of new policy ideas for all parties. Why do you think they have become so influential? Was there a vacuum to be filled?**

**TK:** I think that political parties have increasingly become election machines. As politics becomes more of a professional sport, it is not about deep thoughts. Everything in society has accelerated and politics is no exception. You know Kim Campbell said, “A campaign is no time to discuss policy,” but she really should have said, “A campaign is no time to develop policy, you have to develop it first in an environment where it can be properly thought out.” Think tanks are composed of people who have access to more time, research and knowledge banks, and they are in a better position to flesh out and develop innovative policy solutions, which then filter up to parties. Parties draw from both the expertise of these people and their ideas to then create their platforms, but you can’t expect a party to fund them. Preston Manning said that if a private-sector company invested as little in development as political parties do, it would be bankrupt within a year. He is right. So that money and energy has to come from somewhere else.

**FC: In the past, much of Canada's intellectual energy came from universities. What has happened to them? Why have academic contributions to the business of ideas become so one-dimensional and predictable?**

**TK:** Academia is a bastion of the left in Canada. In general, it skews leftwards in terms of course offerings and perspectives offered to students. The United States had the same experience with this, and there are two approaches you can take. One, you can do an end-run around it. You don't go through the faculty, you bring speakers on campus, you educate young people outside the confines of the lecture hall, but in a campus environment. That is what the Americans have done. The other option is to start private universities or bring in more faculty who share conservative points of view to achieve balance. Why have universities more or less completely gone to the left in terms of perspective? Not to be crude about it, academia doesn't pay very well. A lot of conservatives are concerned about money. They go into professions such as business and law where they do very well but where you don't reach people. Academic and journalistic professions are perhaps more idealistic in some ways but less remunerative. That's why we say you also have to create fellowships to encourage conservatives to pursue academic and journalistic careers. Make it worth their while from a financial perspective; in the States they are doing that.

**FC: Is there any hope for a sustained conservative revival in the face of an almost universally hostile university culture? Should we rethink pouring so much public money into institutions that are so hostile to wealth creation?**

**TK:** The fact that these institutions take public money and are preaching statist values is not that surprising. Because they are getting their money from the state, they are going to underpin what the state does. If you have more private universities and more private involvement in education, you would see a different perspective. You would see it even from lecturers who are brought in from the private sector. Guest lecturers or part-time professors are more likely than tenured professors to have a free-market approach because they are exposed to it every day of their lives. One of things that has to happen is the creation of a better balance between the public and private mix in universities. That would help shift the goal posts politically.

**FC: Another institution you mentioned where opinion generally favours the left is the collective media, journalists and editors. You recommend that conservatives infiltrate these ranks and become the media. But are those doors going to open so easily?**

**TK:** They won't, but conservatives have to force them open, if they have to, and create more of those doors themselves. That involves setting up alternate publications and magazines. The left started up the Walrus about two years ago and it has become very successful. It started with private philanthropy. I used to work with Ken Alexander at the CBC; it was his vision to create that magazine and, kudos to him, he did it. Why didn't the conservatives do the same thing? We have the Western Standard, for example, a more conservative magazine, but we need more like that. In terms of media, we need to go on the Internet, where there is no filter. Conservatives have to start doing Internet broadcasting, which is quite frankly the future of television, and find ways around the current prohibitions on opinion stations like radio stations. You always have to have balance, according to the broadcasting act, but that balance always seems to skew to the left. On all fronts Conservatives have to make an effort to change the media culture. As someone who has worked in media, I can tell you it is important for us to be there.

**FC: You also advocate schools to train future politicians. Can you explain that idea?**

**TK:** This is something that Preston Manning is working on with the Manning Centre, to create a professional political culture. You see a lot of this in the U.S., where they have political schools like Morton Blackwell's Leadership Institute. It is very important to mentor leaders, to mentor young people and teach them how to be leaders and campaign workers, and how to do all the things in politics. You're not necessarily going to get that education on the front lines working for a party. It is always better to get a mix of education and experience. The unions do it with their people; they offer internships for students and bring in people for leadership courses. The same thing has to happen on the conservative side.

**FC: Canada's experiment with an overbearing federal government is now at least two generations old. How badly has Ottawa intruded over that time into provincial jurisdictions and is it reversible?**

**TK:** I think it is reversible. Ottawa has used the purse strings to intervene in a number of jurisdictions and impose its vision of what healthcare should be. I think as the provinces agree to disagree, that will change things. I think there will be more of willingness for Ottawa to disengage itself of trying to mould policy by withholding or giving money. I think there will be more of an outcry from Ontario on equalization issues, which will help the cause.

**FC: Medicare is probably a good template for the failure of big government to live up to its promises. What do you think we should do about it?**

**TK:** We talk in the book about the need for private healthcare and a parallel private system, a European-style system. You can't call it American, because then people get worried. In fact, it is not American because we don't want not to have public health care and have people outside the system. It is a question of giving the opportunity and choice for people to spend their dollars on private care if they want to, to take pressure off the public system, by having private insurance like we now have in Québec, for example, where you combine to alleviate the waiting lists, the problems and the inefficiencies basically by breaking the state monopoly. Whenever you have a monopoly, it is inherently inefficient. In this case it is a state monopoly which is doubly inefficient. We say competition and choice would improve the system for everyone and that's what we would like to see.

**FC: Estimates of the optimal size of government—the size at which the economy functions best—range quite widely. What do you think is the best formula for the size of the public sector relative to the private sector?**

**TK:** I haven't given that enough thought. On the Laffer Curve, I really don't know where we would fall. I would tend to say a lower ratio is better. You always get inefficiencies when you redistribute, so I think that the basic premise for the size of government should be as small as possible. But I don't have an idea of what the best percentage would be.

**FC: Governments notoriously cite budget inputs as responses to public policy problems. How do we get them to focus instead on results, on outputs?**

**TK:** That's a good question. I think that's what's neglected when policies are made, along with the unintended consequences of policies. Sometimes governments do focus on outputs. They say, "We are going to create so many hospital beds or we're going to fund this daycare program and create so many spaces." They focus on outputs in some ways, but the flip side is that they create disincentives or unintended consequences. I would disagree that they don't necessarily focus on outputs, I just think that they don't focus on all of them. They have to pay attention to the fact that, when you subsidize a problem or try and help people overcome it by redistributing money, you in fact create disincentives for people to do things for themselves and you can also create disincentives to other values one holds dear, like the family. For example, a

guaranteed annual income may perhaps be considered a good tool to eliminate poverty, but such a program creates a disincentive for the family to stay together, and a strong family unit is also a key to less poverty. The same could be said for state daycare, for example. You are going to create a disincentive for parents to try and fund daycare themselves or perhaps for them to stay home because they won't have a choice.

**FC: How can the Conservative Party revive its Québec wing, without which it has little hope of obtaining national legitimacy as a governing party? Mulroney managed it, but that ended up as a disaster. What would you suggest they do in Québec?**

**TK:** We have two chapters on Québec and we say two things should happen. One is implanting a conservative culture. You have to put in almost twice the energy there as you do in the rest of the country, because we've seen a more statist track in Québec for the last forty years. The kind of institutions we are talking about elsewhere in the country have to be invested in a greater extent in Québec. The second thing is the Tory party should find allies in parties like the Action démocratique du Québec. A lot of political talent from previous years that's not involved in the party anymore has been ignored, and that's a mistake. The Conservatives can't afford to ignore people who share their ideas and they should be reaching out to those people and bringing them into the party mechanism there.

**FC: Special interest groups funded with government money are part of the policy landscape. They get concentrated benefits from the funding, and it costs each of us just a few pennies, so in many cases the tail wags the dog. How do you solve that problem?**

**TK:** You have to defund them, to make a level playing field with groups who don't take public money. But obviously people will complain when you take away funding they regard as an entitlement.

**FC: But a government, especially a minority one, is open to the death of a thousand cuts.**

**TK:** A minority government is a very difficult situation for downsizing government, especially when you have very few people on the conservative side of the spectrum to coalesce with. Tories really don't have anybody who would support them on small-"c" conservative ideas. If they were to form a majority government, I think that then it will be a question of having the political will. Mike Harris did it in Ontario; Ralph Klein did it in his

first term in Alberta. It can be done. You will face opposition, but if you have enough of a groundswell of support from the silent majority, I think you can do it. The public has to understand why these cuts are being made and to show the special interest groups don't represent the general public.

**FC: Recently we heard bragging about statistics that show Canada's unemployment rate at 6.4 percent, the lowest in thirty years. How can we be satisfied with that? What kind of economic growth might Canada see if your conservative revival succeeded?**

**TK:** I think you would see a more productive country. All other countries that adopted lower tax rates, Ireland, for example, turned their economies around and became leaders in technology to boot. Latvia, Estonia, and the east block countries that have flat taxes, spurred investment in their economies. I think you would see a more dynamic economy in Canada in terms of the diversification and investment and also you would see an end to this flat-lining of income. Canadians may think things aren't too bad but, if you look at it, our personal incomes have flat-lined because of tax increases. When your money is being taxed away you can't invest it, you can't spend it and you can't consume, so it is a vicious circle. When you look at the top ten percent of tax filers in the United States, they start at ninety-three thousand dollars American. In Canada, it is sixty-four thousand Canadian. To me, that says it all.

**FC: In a search for a more effective government, what sorts of reforms that reinvent it interest you? Do you think we should have a permanent civil service, for instance, or should they be on performance contracts with time limits?**

**TK:** You have to give people incentives to behave in an economically responsible way. In terms of the civil service, certainly you can give performance bonuses, or penalties if certain targets aren't met. It is important to reward people for good behaviour and not just because they have been there for years and years. Interestingly, in Ontario right now, an auditor-general's report came out that said contracting-out has cost more money because it wasn't done with competition. Work was contracted out to friends of the government as opposed to the best people. You have to be careful with government. When you do involve the private sector, you always have to involve it in the best way possible for the taxpayer and avoid cronyism and nepotism. That can be just as hard to do as it is to manage a public service. I just think the public service should be as small as possible.