

Maxime Bernier is furious after being interviewed by the CBC — and he may have a point

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September 25, 2018

After a CBC interview aired Sunday, Maxime Bernier's Twitter account launched into an angry rant, accusing host Wendy Mesley of a "smear job."

The tweets linked to the video, arguing that Mesley fabricated a story "about a libertarian conspiracy funded by US billionaires, and implies with her repeated questions about it that I violate Canadian electoral laws."

Mesley pushed back on the same platform, saying she never made that claim. Bernier said she implied it via repeated questions.

There's no question it was a strange interview. But while Bernier, the founder of the People's Party of Canada, has been making headlines recently for his tweets and statements decrying increasing diversity in Canada, how strong are his connections to the two libertarian American billionaires Charles and David Koch?

First off, who are the Koch brothers?

The Koch brothers are two American oil-and-gas billionaires who have become renowned in the last decade for massive donations to free-market think tanks and right-wing politicians. Just like people on the right describe George Soros as the mastermind of all nefarious activity on the left (for example, type "Justin Trudeau George Soros" into Google), the Kochs are the scary billionaires on the right.

Along with other like-minded rich people, they have raised hundreds of millions of dollars to support sympathetic, usually-Republican politicians.

What do the Kochs have to do with Bernier?

Bernier once worked at the Montreal Economic Institute, one of the nearly 500 think tanks partnered with the Atlas Network, which is heavily funded by the Koch brothers.

In Sunday's interview, Mesley asked Bernier if he would accept help for his new party from the Koch brothers or the Atlas Network. Bernier explained that Canadian election laws prevent him from accepting money from American billionaires and said he was seeking small donations from "ordinary Canadians that want a change in Canada."

Later in the interview, Mesley asked Bernier what he would do "if the Koch brothers call you?"

“I don’t know why you are asking that question,” Bernier responded.

Twelve of Mesley’s 17 questions or follow-ups are about the Koch brothers or libertarianism.

So there’s a connection. Does it matter?

It’s hard to make an argument that Bernier’s 13-year-old connection to a think tank that was partly funded by a network of think tanks that is partly funded by the Koch brothers is relevant to the average Canadian.

The preamble to the interview on the CBC website gives a clue as to what Mesley was hinting at, though: “Bernier has linked his political beliefs to libertarianism, an ideology that forms the bedrock of many of the populist governments which have swept into power from the U.S. to Brazil.”

This is an odd sentence. Although it’s fair to say that U.S. President Donald Trump rode to power on a wave of right-wing populism, it’s bizarre to describe libertarianism as the “bedrock” of his government. In fact, the Koch brothers were so appalled by Trump’s populist rise that Charles Koch described a ballot featuring Trump and Hillary Clinton as a choice between “cancer or heart attack.”

“When you look at our guiding principles, you see that (Trump’s) guiding principles are in many ways antithetical to them,” Charles Koch told Fortune Magazine, specifically mentioning Trump’s position on tariffs.

Libertarianism is a political philosophy focused primarily on individual freedom, and its proponents argue that limited government is vital to ensuring that liberty.

Like Bernier’s crusade against supply management — the system that manages Canada’s dairy industry and reduces competition from foreign suppliers — many libertarians ideas are almost anti-populist. In fact, that policy probably cost Bernier his bid for the Conservative Party leadership.

In the aftermath of Barack Obama’s victory over Mitt Romney in 2012, there was some talk of “libertarian populism” as the next logical step for the American right to gain power. The movement didn’t get far. The Federalist, a conservative online magazine, wrote that “the fundamental paradox of libertarian populism (is that) the more libertarian it becomes, the less populist it is.”

In preparing for the Bernier interview, CBC producers may have been influenced by an investigation by the left-leaning investigative news site The Intercept, which demonstrated the influence of the Atlas Network on Latin American politics. That movement, which is working in opposition to leftist populism, is distinct from the Trump-style right wing populism that is also sweeping across Europe, which has nationalist and authoritarian overtones. Koch-linked think tanks warily keep an eye on right and left-wing authoritarianism, which they see as a threat to economic freedom.

If libertarians are generally pro-immigration, why has Bernier been arguing against “ever more diversity?”

Good question.

Although the CBC interview goes to great lengths to tie Bernier to the Koch brothers, it's worth pointing out that Bernier's most controversial policy position — decrying increasing levels of immigration — is at odds with the Kochs.

Like many libertarians, the Kochs are pro-immigration and have focused some of their political activism recently on pushing back against Trump's populist, hard-line immigration stance. The Cato Institute, a massive libertarian think tank founded by Charles Koch, argues a particularly hard line in favour of immigration, pushing back on myths and arguments against it.

For many libertarians, the freedom to move across borders is as fundamental as economic freedom or the freedom to smoke pot.

For Bernier, who has always been stridently libertarian, his immigration position is a diversion from his ideological playbook. It could be a major shift in his thinking or simply political opportunism. And if the CBC gets him back for an interview, that would be a good question to ask.