

A black and white portrait of Pierre Poilievre, a man with short, dark hair, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie. He is looking slightly to his left with a subtle smile. The background is dark and out of focus.

**POLITICS,
POLICY,
PEOPLE AND
LEADERSHIP**

THE HILL TIMES'
CURATED GUIDE OF
NEWS & ANALYSIS
COVERING THE
OFFICIAL OPPOSITION
LEADER SPANNING
THE 44TH
PARLIAMENT.

FROM POILIEVRE'S
POLITICS, TO HIS
POLICIES, & HIS TEAM,
**THIS EXCLUSIVE
COMPILATION** GIVES
INSIGHT INTO **THE
LEADER HE IS, &
THE PRIME MINISTER
HE COULD BECOME.**

**PIERRE
POILIEVRE**



The Hill Times' curated guide of news and analysis covering the official opposition leader spanning the 44th Parliament.

From Poilievre's politics, to his policies, and his team, this exclusive compilation gives you insight into the leader he is, and the prime minister he could become.

Compiled by Hill Times Publishing
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01 | POLITICS AND POLICY

Poilievre takes aim at Housing Accelerator Fund despite representing a city that's already received \$44-million from it

A quarter of the federal fund to speed up housing development has already been dispensed to municipalities, First Nations, and Quebec.

The Housing Accelerator Fund has disbursed about \$1.17-billion so far to municipalities and First Nations across Canada, including \$44-million to the city represented by Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre, who has vowed to cut the program if he forms government.

These numbers came to light earlier this month in response to Conservative MP Mike Lake's (Edmonton—Wetaskiwin, Alta.) Order Paper question.

Premiers push back

The \$450-million that Quebec has already received in HAF money is half of the \$900-million previously earmarked by the feds to the province.

Last fall, Quebec said it would match the \$900-million provided by the federal government, meaning that combined there was \$1.8-billion in new funding for new housing development in the province. That money will go towards projects identified by the provincial government's housing organization, the Société d'habitation du Québec.

The federal-Quebec housing deal irked other premiers who have accused the feds of bypassing the provinces by negotiating individual deals with municipalities.

"The lack of collaboration to date on certain important specific issues has resulted in federal programs, particularly in housing, that create duplicate processes and really risk pitting provinces and territories against each other," said Nova Scotia Premier Tim Houston at the Nov. 6, 2023, meeting of the Council of the Federation.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford called the unilateral housing deals "jurisdictional creep," since municipalities are creatures of the province.

Alberta Premier Danielle Smith has since passed legislation, the Provincial Priorities Act, that would require "provincial entities to obtain prior approval from Alberta's government before entering into, amending, extending or renewing an agreement with the federal government."

This Alberta legislation was inspired by Quebec's Act M-30, which bars municipalities from entering in agreements with another government in Canada without prior authorization from the Quebec government.

But Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Que.) said Quebec is the sole province to match what he was putting on the table.

"As a federal government, we're always there to work hand-in-hand with other provinces," said Trudeau at the deal's news conference on Nov. 9, 2023.

"When we put forward \$900-million as Quebec's share of the housing accelerator, the province of Quebec said, 'Okay, we're going to step up and double it.' There's not another province that has offered to do that. When we sign a housing accelerator deal with Guelph, [Ont.], with London, [Ont.], the province isn't there. We welcome them to come and do more with us."

Poilievre's push to cut HAF

But premiers aren't the only ones taking issue with the Housing Accelerator Fund.

HAF has come into the crosshairs of Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.), who said he would cut HAF and the Canada Housing Infrastructure Fund if his party were to form government. This would be done to pay for his proposed tax cuts on new houses sold under \$1-million.

"The government amazingly made the insane decision to put even more money into the accelerator fund after it had failed to build homes. We're going to cut that wasteful program that has actually blocked homebuilding, and put it into axing the sales tax on new homes," said Poilievre at an Oct. 28 news conference.

Poilievre said his proposed plan would save Canadians money, and would spur the construction of more homes.

Despite Poilievre's attacks on the fund, HAF money appears to be in demand from some of his own caucus members.

"What [Poilievre] does not know is that his caucus colleagues have been going behind his back, writing me letters, advocating for their communities to receive funding through the housing accelerator fund because they believe it will get more homes built," said Housing Minister Sean Fraser (Central Nova, N.S.) during Question Period on Oct. 29.

The Canadian Press first reported that a handful of Conservative MPs have written to Fraser in support of their communities' HAF applications. Some of those MPs include Dan Albas (Central Okanagan–Similkameen–Nicola, B.C.), Adam Chambers (Simcoe North, Ont.), Michael Cooper (St. Albert–Edmonton, Alta.), Rob Moore (Fundy Royal, N.B.), and Lianne Rood (Lambton–Kent–Middlesex, Ont.).

Since then, other media outlets have reported more names, bringing the list of reported Conservative MPs to about 17.

Out of the 110 Conservative MPs outside of Quebec, 57 represent ridings that contain or partly cover municipalities receiving HAF money as of June. This includes Poilievre, who represents an Ottawa riding—a city that is set to receive \$176-million in total from the fund.

As for the other parties—excluding Quebec MPs—109 Liberals, 14 New Democrats, two Independents, and one Green MP have municipalities in their ridings that have received HAF funding. There are also another two former Liberal MPs that represented places with HAF deals: John Aldag, of Cloverdale—Langley City, B.C., and Andy Fillmore, of Halifax, N.S., who vacated their seats to run in provincial and municipal elections, respectively.

Money for municipalities

Since the fund launched in March 2023, the federal government said it has signed 179 HAF deals across the country. But the response to the Order Paper question only lists 138 municipalities—excluding Quebec—that have received any HAF payments so far.

A Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) spokesperson told *The Hill Times* that that discrepancy was because the feds have since signed 40 more agreements since June 30—the cutoff date for HAF data asked in the Order Paper question.

CMHC also explained that one of the previously signed deals has since been terminated. Oakville, Ont., had to return about \$1.28-million in HAF money after its town council voted against a motion to boost housing density.

To be eligible for the fund, municipalities and local governments—like First Nations communities—have to meet certain requirements, like providing CMHC an action plan on how they will grow the housing supply, and speed up housing approvals.

Applicants also had to outline how their proposed housing initiatives will meet a certain number of HAF 'best practices', including the reduction or elimination of parking requirements, and the end of exclusionary zoning that prevents mixed-used and high-density housing types in low-density zoned areas.

Once approved, applicants will see HAF money doled out to them annually over four years.

But cities are taking issue with that funding schedule, and are calling on the feds to urgently provide them with all of the HAF money that they have signed up for.

Toronto has received the most HAF money so far—\$117-million—but its mayor, Olivia Chow, told The Toronto Star that she needs the remaining millions promised to reignite construction after reports that housing starts in the city were down.

Under HAF, municipalities are required to submit annual reports outlining their progress and how HAF money had been spent.

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The Hill Times

Housing advocates wary of funding plan after praising Poilievre's GST pledge

Scrapping Liberal funding for housing projects to pay for a tax cut on some new homes 'doesn't make a lot of sense,' says Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness head.

While housing advocates have welcomed Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre's proposal to axe the goods and services tax on newly built homes, his plan to pay for it is making them nervous that a potential Tory government won't be willing to use all the tools at its disposal to build the affordable housing Canadians desperately need.

On Oct. 28, Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.) promised that should his party form government, he would eliminate the GST on newly built homes sold for less than \$1-million, which he said would save homebuyers \$40,000—or \$2,200 in annual mortgage payments—on an \$80,000 home. Currently, Canadian homebuyers receive a rebate of 36 per cent on newly constructed homes purchased for less than \$350,000, for a maximum of \$6,300.

"The GST was not meant to apply to the basic necessities of food and housing," Poilievre told reporters last week in Ottawa, adding that he expects the proposal would spur the construction of an additional 30,000 extra homes.

Poilievre sent a letter to Canada's premiers on Nov. 3, calling on them to match his promise by cutting the provincial sales taxes on newly built homes.

"[I]f you match my announcement with a provincial sales tax cut of your own on new homes, you will save your residents tens of thousands of dollars," Poilievre wrote in the letter.

Following his announcement last week, homebuilders' associations and housing advocates praised the proposal, which Poilievre and other Conservative MPs quoted during Question Period later in the week.

"The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness says that my Conservative plan to scrap the GST on the purchase of housing is, and I quote, 'smart,'" Poilievre said in the House on Oct. 30, citing other organizations like the West End Home Builders' Association who called it "the most significant housing policy commitment made in the past two decades."

Poilievre's fellow Conservatives also cited Mike Moffatt, a housing expert who has regularly been consulted by the governing Liberals on their own housing strategy.

Writing for The Hub, Moffatt called Poilievre's proposal "the boldest middle-class housing proposal released to date from any federal political party," and predicted it would save Canadian homebuyers \$4-billion each year.

However, in the same piece, Moffatt said Poilievre's proposal isn't flawless, pointing to the Conservative leader's plan to cover the estimated \$4.5-billion cost of the rebate.

Poilievre said he would eliminate the Liberals' Housing Accelerator Fund and the Canada Housing Infrastructure Fund. The accelerator fund, introduced in the 2022 federal budget, allocated \$4-billion until 2026-27 to encourage home building in cities. The fund was further topped up last April with an additional \$400-million.

Moffatt wrote that cancelling those programs would be a mistake, though he added that Conservative criticisms of them aren't without merit, noting instances where cities like Ottawa have disregarded the programs' requirements.

Similarly, the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness' (CAEH) praise of the proposal was also selectively quoted. Despite calling the measure a "smart" way to encourage new builds, it also said the proposal "shouldn't come at the expense of critical programs that help build the deeply affordable housing we need."

In an interview with *The Hill Times*, Tim Richter, CAEH's president and CEO, said that while he still believes the overall proposal "makes a lot of sense," he remains "nervous" about how Poilievre would pay for it.

"When housing is such an issue for Canadians, it doesn't make a lot of sense to eliminate any housing programs that can produce results," Richter said. "One of the critical issues right now in the housing system is the cost that the municipalities are piling on to the production of new housing, and we need to reduce that in any way we can."

Richter said that from his perspective, the Housing Accelerator has done a "fairly good job" of helping to reduce those costs and remove barriers to new housing in those municipalities, though he granted the program wasn't "perfect by any stretch."

Richter also said he is curious how Poilievre would stop municipalities from doing what some did after the Liberals removed GST on newly constructed rental apartments.

"When the federal government cut the GST for that, you saw some municipalities increase development charges by almost the exact amount," Richter explained. "So I'm curious how Poilievre would keep the municipal government from eating up that newly freed tax base."

Theoretically, the GST cut could ultimately reduce homelessness by increasing homeownership, thus reducing the demand on the rental market, which would in turn do the same for units for those in the most precarious housing need, but Richter said it couldn't do so by itself.

"The GST alone isn't going to resolve chronic homelessness," Richter said. "So, I'm quite eager to see what else a Poilievre government would do on deeply affordable, supportive housing, and homelessness overall."

Despite Poilievre's criticism and promise to cut the program, Housing Minister Sean Fraser (Central Nova, N.S.) revealed during Question Period on Oct. 29 that Conservative MPs have been "going behind [Poilievre's] back" to write Fraser letters to advocate for their communities to receive funding through the housing accelerator fund "because they believe it will get more homes built."

According to the Canadian Press, which reviewed the letters sent between September 2023 and February 2024, Conservative MPs Dan Albas (Central Okanagan–Similkameen–Nicola, B.C.), Michael Cooper (St. Albert–Edmonton, Alta.), Adam Chambers (Simcoe North, Ont.), Lianne Rood (Lambton–Kent–Middlesex, Ont.), and Rob Moore (Fundy Royal, N.B.) had all written to Fraser requesting their communities' applications to the fund be approved. The *Toronto Star* reported on Nov. 4 that a fifth Tory MP, Frank Caputo (Kamloops–Thompson–Cariboo, B.C.), had also written to Fraser expressing disappointment that a city in his riding hadn't received funding from the program.

While he slammed Poilievre's plan to pay for the GST cut, Fraser remained neutral on the proposal itself in response to questions from *The Hill Times*.

"We welcome any ideas that will potentially help build more homes, and tax measures are an important piece of that," Fraser wrote, pointing to the Liberals' previous cut to the GST on new apartment construction.

"[We] continue to explore measures that can help get more homes built faster and drive down the cost of housing," Fraser's statement continues. "Poilievre says his proposal would help create 30,000 new homes a year, but he proposes to do this by cutting funding that is expected to help unlock 750,000 new homes over the next 10 years."

Housing target unchanged despite reduced immigration targets, say ministers

While Poilievre's GST proposal garnered much of the political focus last week for its potential to increase supply, the Liberals' announced reduction in new permanent residents could also have a significant effect on Canada's housing demand.

During the announcement on Oct. 24, Immigration Minister Marc Miller (Ville-Marie–Le Sud-Ouest–Île-des-Soeurs, Que.) said the reduction in new residents in 2025—down from 485,000 people to 395,000, with further reductions to 365,000 by 2027—will mean Canada would not have to build an additional 670,000 housing units in that time.

While some had taken that to mean a reduction in the Liberals' goal of building 3.87 million new homes by 2031,

Miller later clarified the comment was illustrative of the impact the immigration reduction will have rather than reflective of a change in the government's housing targets.

Speaking with reporters prior to the Liberals' caucus meeting on Oct 30, Fraser confirmed the government would not be adjusting its housing targets.

"We need to build as quickly as we can, and we need to do everything that we can to get there," Fraser said. "We're going full board with everything we got."

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The Hill Times

Good morning, Prime Minister Poilievre—here is your agenda

What would the early days of a Poilievre-led government look like? Andrew Caddell sketches it out.

KAMOURASKA, QUE.—It is sometime in the future. Pierre Poilievre has been elected to lead a Conservative government with an overwhelming majority. Ten days after election night, he has been to Rideau Hall to watch Governor General Mary Simon swear in his 20-member cabinet. He returns to his office to discuss next steps with his advisers before the cabinet is ushered in.

Surprisingly, the Prime Minister's Office team advocates for the "Costanza Strategy"—named after Jerry Seinfeld's sidekick George Costanza, who discovered he could only succeed if he did the opposite of what his instincts told him. Of course, most new governments do the opposite of their predecessors and blame them, summarized by the finance minister's declaration, "We had no idea things were this bad."

But this time, things are different. With 42 per cent of the popular vote, Poilievre has won in a landslide. But while many Canadians voted for Poilievre the hardliner, most supported his Conservative Party to get rid of Justin Trudeau's Liberals. And with the NDP and Liberals' collateral damage, the Bloc Québécois is His Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

So, the new PM and his entourage have a conundrum: govern as they campaigned and alienate half the population, or govern from the centre, and proceed gradually. Keeping in mind the challenge of Quebec, Poilievre decides to follow his campaign pronouncements, but govern as a moderate.

So, on this first day, he cuts the carbon tax as promised, but also puts an end to the 2035 deadline for zero-emission vehicles. "Our oil and gas industry is not the enemy, nor are our car makers," he says. "We contribute a tiny fraction of global emissions, and we are not going to suffer while China laughs at us and pollutes the Earth."

He increases the GST by two points, tagging the increase the Deficit and Environment Tax (DET) to remind Canadians "it was Trudeau who gave us this debt." The tax will pay down \$100-billion in debt over five years, and support private sector environmental innovation. He declares an end to government subsidies for battery plants. "If electric car makers want to come to Canada, they are welcome, but not because we put out a \$20-billion welcome mat."

The cabinet agrees to deal with the size of government without taking a machete to it immediately. While during the campaign he denounced the 40 per cent increase in public servants since Trudeau came to power, the cabinet knows it would be draconian to fire tens of thousands of people overnight.

Instead, he creates a Royal Commission into the Public Service of Canada, to be chaired by Don Drummond, a former assistant deputy minister of finance under Liberal Paul Martin, when the civil service was reduced by a fifth in 1995. The royal commission is the first in more than 60 years since John Diefenbaker gave the Glassco Commission a mandate to reorganize the federal public service. The PMO knows this royal commission will provide the blueprint for broad reductions in personnel and spending.

He will strike another Royal Commission on Productivity, chaired by Robert Asselin of the Business Council of Canada. It will investigate all aspects of the economy, from provincial trade barriers to vocational training, from literacy to immigration.

On the international front, the new prime minister will increase military spending and set a goal of 120,000 active military personnel. However, the National Shipbuilding Strategy will be frozen, and any further naval ships will be purchased from Taiwan and South Korea for a fraction of the price of Canadian-made ships.

Meanwhile, his foreign policy will involve diplomatic and trade collaboration with the Anglosphere—the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia—as well as Europe, while casting a wary eye to Russia, China, and Iran. He declares Canada and India will jointly examine ways of improving their relationship.

All of this he announces in his first address to Canadians that night. A calm and measured Poilievre promises to defend the Constitution, “which has been so neglected by the previous government,” and commits himself to promoting the best of Canada, never apologizing for our past, “for it is our future that matters most.” In the weeks that follow, his approval ratings soar to 80 per cent, even in Quebec. The die is cast.

Andrew Caddell is retired from Global Affairs Canada, where he was a senior policy adviser. He previously worked as an adviser to Liberal governments. He is a town councillor in Kamouraska, Que. He can be reached at pipton52@hotmail.com.

The Hill Times

Voters don't want likable, they want change and results, say pollsters

When Canadians go to the polls, they aren't comparing politicians to perfection, they're comparing them to their opponents, says pollster Nik Nanos.

Canadians aren't looking for perfection in their politicians, pollsters say, and as the next election looms and the electorate's desire for change increases, what voters find appealing in their next prime minister isn't always "nice."

A recent Abacus Data survey released on Oct. 13 suggested 40 per cent of Canadians have a negative view of Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.), compared to 39 per cent with a positive view, his lowest net favourability since October 2023, and his highest negative perception since July 2023.

Despite his favourability numbers holding steady—dropping slightly from his peak of 42 per cent last August—Poilievre's negatives have risen five points since the beginning of September.

While Toronto Star columnist Susan Delacourt suggested Canadians may be "souring" on Poilievre, Abacus Data CEO David Coletto noted in his analysis on Oct. 15 that vote intention had not changed in the last month.

According to Abacus' latest survey, 43 per cent of Canadians intend to vote Conservative, followed by the Liberals at 22 per cent support, 19 per cent for the NDP, eight per cent for the Bloc Québécois, and four per cent for the Green Party.

In an interview with *The Hill Times*, Coletto said that while Abacus uses the word "likability," the more appropriate term may be "appeal," and what voters find appealing doesn't necessarily mean likable.

"It doesn't mean they're the kinds of people [voters] want to spend a lot of time with, but they're appealing for the moment and the problem that they think needs to be solved," Coletto explained.

He said that, like during the 2015 federal election, what appeals to voters is as much about how a candidate contrasts with an incumbent as it is about personal characteristics.

However, unlike the current mood of the electorate, Coletto said voters in 2015 were more optimistic and looking for a "hopeful and progressive" candidate to match, following nearly a decade of then-prime minister Stephen Harper.

"Fast forward to today ... Canadians think the kitchen's on fire, and they're looking for somebody to put it out," Coletto said. "It doesn't matter whether that person is tough or maybe even mean in some people's minds because they think that's what you need to be to get the job done."

Coletto said he isn't convinced that being perceived as "nice, kind, or even collaborative" is necessarily a requirement for winning an election today.

Yet, while the electorate's mood has swung drastically in the past nine years, Coletto said the pendulum can and will eventually swing in the other direction.

"I don't think we should assume that the mood of the country is locked in stone and is not going to want to see some change down the road," Coletto said, noting similar swings in contrasts during successive United States presidencies from George W. Bush to Barack Obama, to Donald Trump, followed by Joe Biden, and the possibility of another swing back to Trump.

"I think if you have nine, or even just four years of prime minister Poilievre, you will probably see a growing appetite for something different," Coletto added.

However, Coletto cautioned against the advice of some Liberal supporters calling for Prime Minister Justin Tru-

deau (Papineau, Que.) to stop being nice and go on the offensive against Poilievre.

Since Trudeau has built his personal brand—and, by extension, that of the Liberal Party—around positivity and hopefulness, going too negative would be seen by many voters as politically inauthentic.

“If what you’re saying and how you say it conflicts with the brand you’ve developed, it’s going to feel wrong,” Coletto said. “So, when Trudeau goes low, for many people, it doesn’t feel quite right.”

As one example, Coletto pointed to U.S. Democratic vice-presidential candidate Tim Walz and his description of his Republican opponent J.D. Vance as “weird,” which the federal Liberals attempted to adopt with comparatively meagre results.

“Walz is a good example because the way he talked about that fit his brand as a football coach who calls it out as he sees it,” Coletto explained. “Being brand-consistent with what people expect from you matters.”

Coletto highlighted that desire for authenticity in his recent analysis of Poilievre’s and Trudeau’s reputations with voters. While Poilievre’s positive perception depends on his “openness and honesty,” Trudeau’s reputation is anchored in a combination of four attributes: “integrity, openness to others’ opinions, follow-through, and accountability.”

Additionally, in a peer-reviewed academic study analyzing how voters in seven different countries evaluate their politicians, Coletto noted that alongside competence and integrity, authenticity plays a “crucial role.”

“That’s why it worked for Walz; it felt authentic for him to talk like that,” Coletto explained. “For Trudeau to go super negative—unless it’s tied to him defending his values—it will continue to feel inauthentic, so he needs to find a way to talk about Poilievre that feels true to who people think he is.”

Darrell Bricker, president of public affairs at Ipsos-Reid, told *The Hill Times* he doesn’t believe there is a correlation between likability and political success, particularly among Conservative candidates.

“The left are the ones who tend to need the love,” Bricker said. “They need to be inspired by their leaders, while the right wants their leaders to get things back on track.”

Bricker said that like a personal trainer or forensic auditor, Conservatives are “more interested in their skills rather than the vibes they give off.”

“Harper wasn’t particularly well-liked, and he won three elections, including a majority,” Bricker added, noting that the one major exception to that rule was former prime minister Brian Mulroney, who was elected on a “wave of popularity.”

“Conservatives are looking for somebody who will authentically represent change and actually deliver it, which is why they ‘liked’ Harper,” Bricker explained, adding that Poilievre now represents that change for the current Conservative Party.

“Poilievre is defining the Conservative brand now, and that brand is also defining him, but they both represent the same thing now: change,” Bricker added. “Maybe some lack of likability goes along with that, but that’s only a liability on the progressive side of the agenda. On the conservative side, it doesn’t really hurt.”

Nanos Research Group’s chief data scientist Nik Nanos told *The Hill Times* that, by default, “most Canadians don’t like any politician.”

“Voters are picking people they believe are marginally better than their opponents,” Nanos explained. “We have to be careful when focusing too much on likability. It’s important and interesting, but asking anyone whether they actually like a politician is a bit of a stretch.”

Nanos said that many of Canada’s most successful politicians—like Harper—took office with the expectation that they would be disliked.

“Harper wasn’t interested in being the most popular person because he knew he just had to be marginally better than his opponent,” Nanos said.

In contrast, Nanos said some politicians like former NDP leader Ed Broadbent—arguably the “most likeable” politician in the 1980s—have been unable to convert that popularity into becoming prime minister.

For politicians like Trudeau who can translate that popularity into electoral success, they will inevitably find that popularity fleeting, he said.

While Nanos Research doesn’t poll on “likability” specifically, it does track voter’s choice of “preferred prime minister.”

In the months following the 2015 election, Trudeau consistently polled over 50 per cent, reaching the peak of his popularity at 56 per cent in August 2016.

As of Oct. 11, Trudeau was polling at 20 per cent, 14 points behind Poilievre at 34 per cent.

When Nanos polls on the qualities of Canadians’ preferred leaders, instead of likability, he said the most striking data point is credibility.

“When we ask people to score the credibility of Trudeau and Poilievre, the credibility of both is rated quite low,” Nanos said, explaining that both men rank between three and four out of 10.

“They both have low credibility scores, but one leader has a 14-point advantage,” Nanos said.

However, while their credibility scores are low, voters aren’t looking for a perfect 10, he noted.

“If politicians were compared to perfection, no one would ever get elected,” Nanos said. “The reality is that they’re compared to their opponents. That doesn’t mean they’re credible or likable; they just have to be a little more credible and likable than their opponent.”

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The Hill Times

Poilievre's real 'hidden' agenda?

Conservatives talk like conservatives while in opposition, but govern like liberals when they're in power.

OAKVILLE, ONT.—When Liberals accuse Conservatives of harbouring a “hidden agenda,” they might be right about the “hidden” part, but they're wrong about the agenda.

What do I mean by that?

Well, when Liberals bring up the “hidden agenda” idea, they're usually trying to imply the Conservatives are hiding some sort of scary, right-wing, populist plan designed to turn Canada into an evangelical Christian theocracy, or a militaristic fascist police state, or an oil-pipeline-riddled dumping ground for toxic pollutants.

Once the Conservatives take power, the Liberals warn, this frightening agenda will be unleashed on an unsuspecting public.

Probably the most classic example of this tactic occurred in the 2006 federal election when the Liberals produced a TV ad suggesting the Conservatives were secretly planning to deploy “soldiers in our streets.”

And, yes, former Conservative leaders Stephen Harper, Andrew Scheer, and Erin O'Toole were all accused of hiding right-wing agendas.

This is why it's no surprise that the Liberals are playing the “hidden agenda” card against current Conservative Party Leader Pierre Poilievre.

Indeed, recently in the House, Government House Leader Karina Gould declared, “The only people that are afraid, Mr. Speaker, are the Conservative MPs, because they know the longer this House sits, the more their hidden agenda is exposed, and the more Canadians don't want to vote for them.”

Mind you, it's understandable as to why the Liberals consistently use this particular strategy.

First, it's a good way to scare Liberal Party supporters into voting on election day, and second, it's a good way to scare their donors into contributing money.

After all, hate and fear are the two most powerful motivating emotions in politics.

By the way, the current Conservative version of the “hidden agenda” ploy is to accuse the Liberals of pushing a radical “woke” agenda, since that's a good way to scare and anger their base.

Anyway, getting back to my point, I'd argue that, despite all the Liberal fearmongering, the Conservatives actually don't have a scary, right-wing, hidden agenda—or if they do have one, it's hidden so well, no one will ever find it.

To see what I mean, just consider former prime minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government.

Even though Harper was a one-time libertarian-conservative activist, his government—at least when it came to fiscal and economic issues—was pretty much wishy-washy and middle-of-the-road.

If anything, Harper's lack of an actual right-wing, hidden agenda likely disappointed many rock-ribbed conservatives in his base.

And this brings me to what I think is the Conservative Party's real hidden agenda.

Whenever they come to power, the Conservatives don't—as the Liberals like to contend—suddenly lurch to the right. Instead, they steadily move to the centre.

In other words, Conservatives talk like conservatives while in opposition, but govern like liberals when they're in power.

This happens because, once they win power, Conservative leaders typically surround themselves with what I like to call “power people,” political consultants and advisers who will gladly jettison any and all conservative principles in the name of power politics.

Will this happen to Poilievre should he attain power?

Well, I wouldn’t rule it out.

Interestingly, for instance, former Conservative strategist Ken Boessenkool recently predicted that Poilievre won’t scrap the carbon tax, as he promises to do.

Noted Boessenkool, “There’s a huge gap between what Conservatives say, and what Conservatives do ... Jason Kenney ran on ‘axe the tax,’ and he beefed up the industrial carbon price in Alberta.”

So, my message is basically this: it’s not liberals who should worry about a hidden Conservative agenda. It’s conservatives.

Gerry Nicholls is a communications consultant.

The Hill Times

Poilievre says Conservatives ‘go around’ Hill media, alleges ‘anti-conservative bias’ after ending CTV News boycott

CTV News dismissed two staff over altering a soundbite from Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre, which the union says it's looking into. Meanwhile, Poilievre says the Hill media is 'largely state funded or has indirect reasons to suck up to the federal government.'

The ice has apparently thawed between the Conservative Party and CTV News following the network's airing of an altered clip of the party's leader, and the subsequent firing of two Bell Media employees.

“We are allowing our caucus members to speak with CTV again,” said Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.) to News Talk 580 CFRA's Bill Carroll last week. Bell Media is the parent company of radio station CFRA, as well as CTV News, CP24, Noovo, TSN, and more. “And I'm glad that CTV fired those who are involved. But this is part of a broader pattern of the Parliament Hill media, which is largely state funded or has indirect reasons to suck up to the federal government.”

Said Poilievre: “The examples of anti-conservative bias in the bought-and-paid-for Parliament Hill Press Gallery go on and on and on and on. And that's why we go around the Parliament Hill Press Gallery to communicate our common-sense plan to axe the tax, build the homes, fix the budget, and stop the crime directly to Canadians.”

A Conservative spokesperson previously announced that Conservative MPs would no longer “engage” with CTV News reporters after the party accused them of “splicing” a clip of Poilievre out of context on the network's flagship CTV National News program.

The “splicing” incident at the heart of the matter concerns an altered clip of Poilievre that misrepresented the leader's then-forthcoming non-confidence motion, and his calls for a “carbon tax election.”

Poilievre said in a scrum to reporters on Sept. 18: “That's why it's time to put forward a motion for a carbon tax election.”

However, the Poilievre clip that CTV aired on Sept. 22 in a segment about the federal dental care program: “That's why we need to put forward a motion.”

The spliced soundbite followed a CTV reporter saying “the events of the last week have raised new questions over the plan's future”—giving viewers the impression that Poilievre's non-confidence motion was related to the dental care program negotiated between the Liberals and NDP.

The next day CTV National News issued an on-air apology and retraction saying it was a “misunderstanding during the editing process resulted in this misrepresentation.”

But that wasn't good enough for the Conservatives.

“Yesterday's so called ‘apology’ from @CTVNews doesn't cut it. This wasn't a simple ‘misunderstanding’. Until they explicitly acknowledge their malicious editing & omission of context to undermine @PierrePoilievre, Conservative MPs won't engage with CTV News & its reporters,” posted Sebastian Skamski, director of media relations in Poilievre's office, on X (formerly Twitter).

Three days after Skamski's social media post, two CTV News employees were dismissed after the network launched an internal investigation into the incident.

“The investigation found that two members of the CTV News team are responsible for altering a video clip, manipulating it for a particular story. Their actions violate our editorial standards and are unacceptable. Those individuals are no longer members of the CTV News team,” said a CTV National News statement.

A tale of two cities

The Hill Times spoke to some CTV News employees on background about what happened. The problems for the network stemmed from their recording of the Sept. 18 Poilievre scrum, which was missing part of the leader's "that's why it's time to put forward a motion for a carbon tax election" quote.

Audio and video from different parts of Poilievre's scrum were patched together in an effort to salvage the soundbite.

Sources told *The Hill Times* that the part where Poilievre said "for a carbon tax election" was originally in the reporter's script, but ultimately did not make the final published item—unintentionally resulting in the original context of the quote being lost.

This situation featured a 'remote edit' where the news file's reporter and the editor were operating out of different bureaus. In the case of this incident, the reporter was in Toronto, and the editor was in Ottawa.

Remote edits are not uncommon, but ideally there would also be a producer involved on the news item to help co-ordinate things between the reporter and the editor in different cities. In this case, there wasn't a producer in the parliamentary bureau assigned to oversee the reporter's story on the dental care file.

But why was a Toronto reporter assigned a federal political story? *The Hill Times* didn't get an answer for that.

The network has relied more on its national reporters in Canada to cover international stories since CTV News shuttered its foreign bureaus in 2023—with the exception of its Washington, D.C., bureau.

That same day—Sept. 22—a CTV National News parliamentary reporter was assigned the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, while another reporter was in New York City to cover Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's (Papineau, Que.) speech at a United Nations summit.

Fourth-estate fallout

The incident led to a firestorm of criticisms of CTV News, with some people accusing the network of liberal bias. Conservative House Leader Andrew Scheer (Regina—Qu'Appelle, Sask.) said this incident was a case of the network trying to "protect the Liberals."

Pendulum Group's Yaroslav Baran, a former Conservative Party campaign communications lead, described the incident as "pretty egregious" and an "outlier," and said the now-ended boycott engagement with CTV News was a "fair response."

"I've been working media relations for a long, long time, and I don't think I've ever seen that before in Canada. So this incident is definitely in a league of its own," said Baran to *The Hill Times*.

Others pointed to the diminished state of the media industry as a whole for creating the perfect storm for journalistic errors.

Unifor, the union which represents one of the fired CTV employees, said "Canadian media is in crisis."

"Unifor has repeatedly warned of the consequences of the erosion of journalism across the country. Newsrooms have been devastated everywhere, including by the latest round of massive cuts by Bell Media earlier this year," said Lana Payne, Unifor national president, said in a statement to *The Hill Times*.

Unifor also said it's investigating the incident, and "will use the tools available under the collective agreement on behalf of our member."

When asked to respond to Unifor's statement, Bell Media did not provide a response to *The Hill Times* by deadline.

Last February, Bell Media laid off a number of CTV National News reporters and producers. The year before that, CTV News' parliamentary bureau chief in Ottawa was swept up in a round of layoffs—that role has yet to be officially filled.

Pressing on

Now that the boycott has been lifted, can we expect to see Poilievre on CTV News? Based on his track record, it depends.

Poilievre has not done a televised one-on-one interview with CTV News' parliamentary bureau in the past year. However, the Conservative leader has done interviews with Bell Media's local CTV News stations, CP24 in the Greater Toronto Area, and various radio stations, including CFRA in Ottawa.

Poilievre's media strategy to generally eschew parliamentary media has garnered applause from some conservative circles, and raised concerns from Hill media.

Months after winning the party leadership in 2022, Summa Strategies wrote a report that said "Poilievre's team relies heavily on social media—a direct messaging doctrine that circumvents traditional media intermediaries. In the leadership campaign, this served his candidacy well."

This strategy to disengage with Hill media is also serving Poilievre well as leader of the official opposition given that his Conservatives have steadily maintained a sizeable lead over the governing Liberals in national polling.

Enterprise Canada's Mitch Heimpel, a former director of parliamentary affairs for then-Conservative leader Erin O'Toole, said that Poilievre can reach a larger audience via social media than through traditional news outlets.

"If I can, through social media, talk to 200,000 people who are at least open to talking to me, why give an interview to The Toronto Star who probably doesn't even have 200 subscribers that are considering voting for me? It's not just about your ability to control the content, it's about your ability to pick your audience," said Heimpel to *The Hill Times*.

Baran said a party's relationship with media is on an "ever-sliding scale of who needs who more."

"In a formidable situation, they find themselves in a situation where the media tends to need them more than they need the media. If you are the leader of the third or fourth party, and you're trying to get exposure, you're trying to get attention, etc., and you're well behind, then you need the media more than they need you," said Baran.

He pointed out that the inherent clash between the media and political parties is that journalists view political media relations through an "ethical lens"—a function of the democratic system—while political communicators look at journalism through a "pragmatic lens"—which outlet has the best reach and the right target audience.

But disengaging with parliamentary media is one thing. The party's attack on media is raising some alarm bells.

For The Globe and Mail, right-wing media personality Andrew Lawton contributed an essay earlier this year titled 'Pierre Poilievre's attacks on the media are bearing fruit for the Tories,' where he wrote that the leader "often goes on the offensive, attacking premises he and his Conservative colleagues view as being inherently and unfairly biased against them."

Lawton, who's seeking the Conservative Party nomination for the riding of Elgin-St. Thomas-London South, Ont., and who has authored a book about Poilievre, wrote that the leader "holds a healthy suspicion of most members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery."

Searchlight Strategy Group's Greg Weston—also a Parliamentary Press Gallery honorary life member—said fights with reporters and trying to go over the press gallery are nothing new for political leaders.

But he added that things are different now since the Conservatives appear to be taking a "big page out of the Trump playbook."

"If you want to say a lot of really crazy stuff and you don't want people then to hear that it's crazy and that it's not truthful, there are two ways of doing it. One is you use social media where you can speak directly to the masses. Or 'B,' in running almost a campaign to disparage the media so that readers, listeners, viewers, no longer believe media," said Weston to *The Hill Times*.

Baran said he does not see Poilievre's media strategy as an 'attack' on traditional media.

"I think what's happening there is that he's laying down a marker that 'I will not be pushed around, and I expect to be dealt with fairly and ethically,'" said Baran.

The future of the free press

When asked if Poilievre's media strategy might change if the Conservatives were to form a majority government, Heimpel said the Tories might be cautious of changing tactics in light of the current prime minister's political fortunes.

"I think we're seeing, from a media strategy perspective, issues with overexposing the prime minister to media just in what's happened to Justin Trudeau in the last two to three years. There's a risk to being too visible. You get kind of an allergen effect with the Canadian public," said Heimpel.

Heimpel also said that there will always be an audience and a "necessity" for traditional media, but he added that news outlets need to get better at adapting to how audiences have changed.

"The idea that they can succeed on the same content models and business models they did in the 1990s is what they're struggling with," said Heimpel.

Weston agreed that media are struggling. He said national media are now dangerously "running on a skeleton staff."

But Weston added that "journalists are always equipped to handle it, and it just means you need to work twice as hard to report on political parties."

"No political party in this country can afford to completely remove itself from the coverage by a major network," said Weston.

He said major networks will continue to cover politics with or without comment from the parties, and that the parties will eventually want to comment to refute allegations or provide their angle on issues.

"It makes for a big good show for a couple of days to say we're going to ban somebody, but after that, it's just not smart politics, not smart communications, just generally not smart," said Weston.

Disclosure: This *Hill Times* reporter was part of the June 2023 Bell Media layoffs.

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The Hill Times

No confidence, but no rush: Conservatives keep mum on platform amid bid for snap election

Lack of pressure from the governing Liberals, and a distant election provides room for the Conservatives to leave policy 'undefined,' say politicians.

As they put forward back-to-back non-confidence votes, the Conservatives continue to keep their policy plans under wraps, and maintain a wait-and-see posture on what will become of big-ticket programs like dental care, pharmacare, or the National School Food Program if they form government. But with the NDP and Bloc Québécois indicating they won't necessarily move to bring down the government until possibly next year, strategists say there's no political gain for the Conservatives in providing more substance unless their rivals make a non-answer cost more.

On Oct. 1, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Que.) and his governing Liberal Party survived its second confidence vote out of a possible five the Conservatives have said they plan to introduce through opposition day motions between now and the winter holidays.

The first of those arrived on Sept. 25, when the Liberals, NDP, and Bloc Québécois voted to defeat the motion introduced by Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre's (Carleton, Ont.) the day prior. On Oct. 2, the government will also call a standard confidence vote via its ways and means motion on its capital gains tax reforms.

However, with two unsuccessful attempts and at least three more tries to get an election before Christmas, the Conservatives are still keeping quiet when it comes to answering what a Poilievre-led government would do beyond well-worn catchphrases like "axe the tax, build the homes, stop the crime, and fix the budget."

During an interview with CPAC's Michael Serapio on Sept. 24, Conservative House Leader Andrew Scheer (Regina-Qu'Appelle, Sask.) did not directly answer when repeatedly asked whether a Conservative government would cut or keep the government's national dental care, pharmacare, and or childcare programs.

When asked whether those programs would "be on the chopping block" if his party forms government, Scheer said that while there is "a lot of interest in what the Conservative platform might look like, we're still a long way from that because of decisions of the NDP ... and Bloc to keep the Liberals in power."

While the NDP and Liberals may see a line of attack on pressuring the Conservatives to commit to an answer sooner rather than later, former Conservative staffer Fred DeLorey said he expects the Tory line to hold as long as the government does.

"At the end of the day, the government hasn't fallen and may go another year, so putting out their platform now would be foolish," explained DeLorey, who served as the Conservative Party's campaign director during the 2021 election.

With possibly another year before the government falls, DeLorey said voters are looking for the "core values" each party will champion rather than specific platform or policy details.

"Elections are generally about those values, and what they think a political party will do when in power, not specific policy items," DeLorey explained. "I think voters already understand where each party's priorities are."

Additionally, it won't just be the Conservatives who will wait until the last minute to drop their respective platforms, DeLorey said. He noted that during the 2021 election, the Liberal Party only released its election platform on Sept. 1, just 19 days before voting day on Sept. 20.

"The Liberals dropped their last platform two weeks before the election, but the Conservatives are expected to release theirs a year before the next one?"

DeLorey said he has no doubt the Conservatives will have a platform ready to go whether the election comes next week or next October.

Whether or not the Conservatives can succeed in bringing down the government sooner rather than later will ultimately depend on the decisions of the Bloc and NDP. However, even if every non-confidence motion is defeated for the next year, DeLorey said it would be effective to force the NDP to “talk out of both sides of their mouth” as they continue to vote to keep the Liberals in power while simultaneously accusing them of “cav[ing] to corporate greed.”

Bluesky Strategy Group’s Jordan Paquet agreed that for the average voter, specific platform and policy details might be “a little wonkish” even during the election period. With potentially another year to go, the Conservatives couldn’t afford to commit to anything now, even if they want to, he said.

With the Bloc’s latest demands serving as an indication of future trends, the Conservatives can’t be certain what the country’s financial commitments will be next year, said Paquet, who is a former staffer to then-prime minister Stephen Harper and interim opposition leader Rona Ambrose.

Of the endless variables the party would already have to consider, the Conservatives will now be wondering “how many more concessions will the government make to stay in power, what impact will that have on the federal treasury, and how much wiggle room will that leave any future government,” he said.

“That’s not to say any of those programs would be on the chopping block, but that’s why I don’t think any party is in a position to put out a platform,” Paquet said.

Olivier Cullen, a former Liberal ministerial staffer, told *The Hill Times* that while he would prefer more specifics from the Conservatives as to what they would do with key programs, “they don’t have to come out with anything new because what they’re already doing is clearly working.”

While the Conservatives have plenty of time to tease out platform details and suggestions from voters and stakeholders, Cullen also said it would be wise for them to avoid taking any more concrete positions than they already have.

“Those are not priority items for the Conservatives, and I don’t think they want to start digging into those weeds about what they’re actually going to do because that’s when Canadians might start to get concerned,” Cullen said.

While the Conservatives may want to avoid providing more substance than their usual catchphrases, the Liberals have an opportunity if they continue to demand answers and present themselves as “the more mature party,” he added.

On Sept. 26, the Liberals announced that MP Mona Fortier (Ottawa–Vanier, Ont.) would chair the party’s National Platform Committee—a role she held in the previous two elections alongside co-chairs Liberal MP Terry Duguid (Winnipeg South, Man.) in 2021 and former minister Ralph Goodale in 2019. Duguid is the current co-chair of the party’s National Campaign Committee alongside Tourism Minister Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Que.).

The Conservatives have yet to decide on chairs for their committees, though unlike the Liberals, those roles are largely ceremonial, with the majority of the work and decisions going through “the boss of bosses” Jenni Byrne, according to a party source who spoke with *The Hill Times* on background.

The Conservatives’ 2021 campaign chair was Walied Soliman, the current Canadian chair of Norton Rose Fulbright; and its platform committee was chaired by Dan Mader, currently a senior vice-president at Loyalist Public Affairs.

Cullen said Fortier is an excellent choice for platform committee chair, noting her economic portfolio experience as a former Treasury Board president, and her status as a well-liked “veteran” in the caucus.

While there’s no set deadline for the pseudo-group project Fortier will lead in concert with Duguid and Ferrada, getting it right will take a long time, so the sooner they get to work, the better, said Cullen.

While Cullen isn’t suggesting the Liberals should release their platform before the next election either, he said the more work that gets done behind the scenes, the more “substance” the Liberals can provide in contrast to the Conservatives while they are “busy playing games” with confidence motions.

But until the Liberals can produce something substantial—and substantially new—the context of the next election will remain a “referendum on Trudeau,” said NDP political strategist Jordan Lechnitz.

“That means most Canadians aren’t diving deep into policy details, for better or for worse,” explained Lechnitz, the former deputy chief of staff to then-NDP leader Tom Mulcair. “And that means the Conservatives have some space to leave some of their positions undefined—but they can’t do that forever.”

Lechnitz said that, as time goes on, it will become harder for Poilievre and his party to remain mum on what they will do with programs like dental care, pharmacare, or the national school food program, particularly as more and more Canadians begin to benefit from them.

“Those programs will start to become vulnerabilities for the Conservatives if people are concerned they will cut the programs they rely on,” Lechnitz said. “There will come a time when they have to answer those questions, but they’re going to wait as long as they can to do that.”

However, Lechnitz said that time wouldn’t arrive any sooner without sustained pressure from the Liberals, NDP, and journalists to continue pressing for answers to those questions.

Lechnitz said Poilievre’s Conservatives have enjoyed a “pretty light ride” until now, particularly due to the Liberals’ decision to not run negative ads against them.

While the NDP will also need to keep the pressure on, the party was in a far stronger position on the policy front than the governing Liberals in terms of substance, said Lechnitz.

“The New Democrats have spent the past year and a half articulating their policy agenda through the supply-and-confidence agreement,” Lechnitz said. “It’s quite clear where they stand on those issues because they’ve championed them, so they have something very concrete to point to when people ask ‘what would their leadership be about?’”

While the NDP will still have to present a “forward-looking agenda” to voters in the next election, Lechnitz said the party is still on much stronger footing than the Liberals because “they supplied a governing agenda for the Liberals this term, full stop.”

“All of the things that the Liberals are talking about accomplishing are things that they would not have done without the supply-and-confidence agreement,” Lechnitz explained. “The challenge for the Liberals is that it’s unclear what their vision is for Canadians looking forward because they can’t even point to an offer looking backward.”

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The Hill Times

Bloc Québécois gains at Liberals' expense could ease path for Conservative majority in 2025, say political players

While Quebec is not typically Conservative-friendly territory, as long as the Bloc prevents the Liberals from maintaining their base, it will help the Tories, says pollster Darrell Bricker.

The growing support for the Bloc Québécois poses a challenge for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberals as it will pave the way for an easier path to a Conservative majority in the 2025 election.

"It's not that the Bloc Québécois needs to win a national election. They only need to win there [in Quebec]," said Darrell Bricker, CEO of Ipsos Public Affairs in an interview with *The Hill Times*. "But what they're doing is they're doing the work of the Conservative Party because the Conservative Party doesn't need to win a lot of seats in Quebec in order to form a majority. So if the Bloc does their work for them in the province of Quebec, it's the same thing."

Bricker noted that the Conservatives secured their 2011 majority by winning just five of the then-75 seats in Quebec, achieving success primarily in Western Canada and Ontario. In that election, they won 166 of the then-308 House seats, including 72 from the four western provinces, and 73 from Ontario. They could adopt a similar strategy in the next election. Quebec—Trudeau's (Papineau, Que.) home province—has been pivotal to the Liberals' wins in 2015, 2019, and 2021.

Quebec is not traditionally seen as Conservative-friendly territory, but as long as the Bloc prevents the Liberals from maintaining their support base, it serves the same purpose, Bricker said. Given the current level of Conservative support nationally, gaining more seats in Quebec—beyond their existing nine—would make it easier for the Conservatives to secure a majority, though it's not essential. Bricker said that if the Conservatives sweep Western Canada, win half of Atlantic Canada, and secure victories in the 905 region, other suburbs, and small-town rural Ontario, they could comfortably achieve a majority government.

Bricker said the Liberals should be concerned about their electoral performance, a clear example being their loss in the Sept. 16 byelection in LaSalle-Émard-Verdun, Que. The Bloc Québécois managed to flip this historically safe Liberal riding which was a significant blow. Since the mid-1960s, the Liberals have only lost this riding twice: once in 1984, and again in 2011. But it was close.

Bloc candidate Louis-Philippe Sauvé won the riding with 28 per cent of the vote, while Liberal candidate Laura Palestini narrowly followed with 27.2 per cent, and NDP candidate Craig Sauvé came in third with 26.1 per cent. In the second byelection held on Sept. 16 in Elmwood-Transcona, Man., the NDP secured 48.1 per cent of the vote, while Conservative Colin Reynolds garnered 44 per cent, and Liberal Ian MacIntyre received just 4.8 per cent. MacIntyre will not qualify for election expense rebates as candidates must receive at least 10 per cent of the vote to be eligible for reimbursement.

Nationally, the Liberals have been trailing the Conservatives by 15 to 20 points for more than a year now. Even in Quebec, the Bloc is running neck and neck with the Liberals, and the Conservatives are also highly competitive.

Nanos Research's most recent polling numbers, released Sept. 13, suggested that the Liberals had the support of 28.9 per cent of Quebecers, the Bloc 26.04 per cent, the Conservatives 21.4 per cent and the NDP 17.3 per cent.

Bricker said that the loss in LaSalle-Émard-Verdun is not due to a sudden surge of sovereigntist sentiment in Montreal's West Island. Rather, it reflects a broader vote of no confidence in the incumbent government. If these trends continue, it could be disastrous for the Liberal Party, as once they lose a seat in Quebec, it will be extremely difficult for them to make this up elsewhere in the country.

“They [the Liberals] absolutely should be worried about this because those ridings [Quebec] they’re the bulwark, they’re the core of the Liberal base,” Bricker told *The Hill Times*. “They build their coalition from Quebec out, and if they’re not, if they’re losing seats that are their core seats in the province of Quebec [that’s going to be a serious problem].”

Liberals MPs say their drop in the polls is primarily due to affordability issues. MPs said that during their 2021 and 2022 national summer retreats, they learned that 2023 and the first half of 2024 would be challenging because of the economic slowdown and inflation. However, they were told by senior Liberals that conditions would improve in the second half of 2024, and further into the first quarter of 2025. They argued that if the cost-of-living crisis is addressed, they can regain lost support. They also assert that Canadians’ frustration with Trudeau stems from affordability concerns rather than an endorsement of Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.).

But Bricker said, based on his experience, when things go wrong the incumbent governments often bear the blame, but when those things improve, they don’t receive the same level of credit.

Greg Lyle, president of Innovative Research, agreed, adding that even if inflation and interest rates decrease, it won’t fully resolve the affordability issue.

“The problem is not interest rates; the problem is declining real income,” said Lyle. “So people can’t buy what they used to be able to buy. And if inflation comes down, it just means a bad situation is getting worse, more slowly. It doesn’t mean anything’s better.”

Lyle said that the Liberals’ winning coalition in 2015 was driven by the excitement and passion of young voters, but with low interest rates, housing prices are likely to rise again making home ownership more difficult for them.

Lyle said the Liberals should be very concerned about losing core ridings like LaSalle–Émard–Verdun. He said that based on seat modelling he conducted over the summer, the Trudeau Liberals were projected to win 57 seats nationally, with LaSalle–Émard–Verdun being one of them. If they’re losing traditionally safe seats now, they could end up with even fewer than 57.

“Trudeau could double the number of seats he’s likely to win, and still be completely out of the running to form a government,” said Lyle. “So, at this point, I don’t think anyone can have any illusion that the Liberals led by Justin Trudeau are anywhere in sight of any type of victory at all in the next election.”

Liberal MP Darrell Samson (Sackville-Preston-Chezzetcook, N.S.) told *The Hill Times* that his caucus colleagues are unhappy with the party’s recent byelection losses, and the party lagging behind the Conservatives in the polls. He said that the party needs to regroup, retool, and improve the communications of the government’s message. Samson added that people in his riding do not want a Poilievre-led government, which he believes will cut essential programs and services. He said that Poilievre is still relatively unknown to Canadians, and once voters compare him to the current prime minister, they will favour the Liberal leader.

“Oh, just wait and see,” said Samson when asked if the Liberals have any plans to define Poilievre using advertising.

“We’ve got to get our message out much better. [We have to] be very specific on where we want to take Canadians. We’re the party that represents Canadians, [we’re] there to protect them. We’re not there to do cuts. We’re there to balance between investing and keeping the economy strong, and we’re going to continue doing that.”

Liberal MP Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Ont.) said her party has an election strategy in place, which they are continually refining as they receive more feedback from Canadians. She also echoed Samson’s sentiment that when voters compare the two main leaders, they will choose Trudeau over Poilievre.

“We need to continue to one, listen to them, and once we listen to them, then we’re addressing their issues,” said Dzerowicz. “And that is what we’re doing. We’re addressing their issues from an affordability perspective. We’re addressing their issues on housing. We’re addressing their issues on immigration. So we are taking steps.”

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The Hill Times

Urban and rural voters find themselves on a collision course as Poilievre seeks to unite

The Conservative leader has an opportunity to cement himself in the history books by centring his agenda on core issues that unite Canadians across the urban and rural divide.

OTTAWA—Building a lasting legacy can be very tricky for present-day politicians. As Canadian politics becomes increasingly tense and polarized, it becomes much more difficult for party leaders to stand by the pillars of the policy agenda upon which they were first elected. For instance, the resurgence of the Bloc Québécois has put Quebec nationalism back on the agenda. The Liberal Party of Canada has ended up with a vote share largely concentrated in urban centres, while the NDP has struggled to make any kind of gains in urban or rural regions.

Former Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper can boast about many things, but perhaps his greatest feat was making incremental gains in the suburbs of urban areas like Toronto and Vancouver, as well as winning previous Liberal-held ridings in Atlantic Canada, and increasing the party's vote share in Quebec. After being denied a majority government in 2006 and 2008, he understood that to win, the Conservative Party would need to focus on pragmatic policy shifts with an emphasis on economic policies, contrasted by the threat of a government run by the Liberal-NDP-Bloc Québécois coalition.

While the Conservatives would be defeated in 2015 following the Liberal Party's majority win, the Tories walked away with nearly 100 seats, allowing them to receive official opposition status in the House of Commons. With time on the clock until the next election, this meant the Conservatives were able to run a lengthy leadership contest, and rebuild their electoral war chest, all while holding the governing Liberals to account for ethical missteps.

While the party was well positioned from a seat-count perspective, the caucus was made up of representatives for rural held ridings. Up until this past June, the Conservatives had failed in the last three elections to crack the Liberal fortress in the vote-rich 905 region.

Fast forward nine years. Canada is once again on the precipice of a change election that stands to shake up the parliamentary power dynamics, and Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre is at the very centre of the shift.

On the heels of last week's two-year anniversary of his decisive leadership win, Poilievre has much to celebrate. A 20-plus-point lead in the polls has left him with a caucus that is not only motivated, but more importantly, also united and on message.

For anyone who has watched Poilievre's ascension from opposition pitbull to pragmatic frontrunner, early success can be attributed to a couple of things.

Poilievre has shown an affinity for successfully identifying the mood of the country, defining the problem, and giving voice to the concerns that Canadians are feeling. Take the issue of housing for example. In the 2023 federal budget, big commitments made by the Trudeau government focused on health-care transfers, dental care, Indigenous reconciliation, and the transition to clean energy. Housing commitments mostly took the form of previously announced measures and the rollout of the First Home Savings Account.

Concerns around the lack of housing supply and questions of affordability reached a head that summer just as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was responding that housing wasn't a "primary federal responsibility."

The Conservative leader seized on the moment to indicate he would use parliamentary tools like tabling a private member's bill to put forward solutions such as requiring municipalities to cut red tape to fast-track housing construction in exchange for infrastructure dollars. While the legislation was ultimately defeated, Poilievre used the bill to solidify his policy chops, and demonstrate there was a real plan behind the slogans.

This is a problem that unites Canadians from one end of the country to the other, across urban and rural divides. This message works at the doors, whether candidates are in the suburbs of Toronto or northern British Columbia.

Poilievre's strategic decision to focus on four core policy pillars that will form the basis of his election platform and boil them down into catchy soundbites is working. These are the right messages at the right time, and leave little room for gaffes or missteps.

Legacies aren't built solely on electoral wins. While Poilievre has had quite the run as opposition leader, he has an opportunity to cement himself in the history books by centring his agenda on core issues that unite Canadians across the urban and rural divide.

Josie Sabatino is a senior consultant at Summa Strategies. Prior to joining Summa, Sabatino spent nearly a decade as a Conservative political staffer, providing communications and issues management advice to Members of Parliament and the leader of the official opposition.

The Hill Times

Poilievre says he can negotiate a softwood lumber pact with the U.S., but trade analysts are skeptical

Trade analysts say domestic political calculations in the U.S. are what is standing in the way of resolving the softwood lumber dispute.

As Pierre Poilievre lambastes the Liberal government for failing to secure a softwood lumber pact with the United States, trade observers question if a Conservative-led government could fare any better in the face of U.S. obduracy.

The federal government is once again launching a trade dispute over increased American duties on Canadian softwood lumber, but the Conservative leader said last month that the Liberals “failed” to reach an agreement with Washington, remarking that “only” Conservatives “will deliver a deal for Canada’s forestry workers.”

Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.) noted that then-Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper had negotiated a deal shortly after taking office. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Que.) and Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland (University-Rosedale, Ont.) “on the other hand, have had nine years and three separate presidents, yet not only has he failed to strike a deal, but the tariffs are getting worse,” Poilievre said in an Aug. 14 statement.

Trade analysts told *The Hill Times* that a potential Poilievre-led government would likely face similar difficulties trying to push its southern neighbour to negotiate a new agreement. The agreement reached between the Harper government and that of then-U.S. president George W. Bush in 2006 expired days before the 2015 election.

Queen’s University emeritus professor Robert Wolfe, an expert on Canadian trade, said it wasn’t just the Liberal government that has been unable to reach an agreement since 2006, but the previous Harper government also failed to renew the pact.

Had there been a new deal there to get, of course, they would have gone for it,” he said. “The political economy of the lumber industry in the United States is not going to change overnight just because of a change of government on either side of the border.”

“The nature of the lumber industry works against our interests,” he said. “There’s still going to be powerful domestic lobby groups in the U.S. who will do what they can to keep Canadian lumber at a high price so they can sell their lumber at a high price.”

“We are faced with this because we don’t vote in U.S. elections. If people in lumber communities across Canada were sending members to the House of Representatives, then the situation would look different,” he said.

Carlo Dade, director of trade and trade infrastructure at the Canada West Foundation, said the U.S. is likely happy to take the increased fees and continue with the status quo.

“Folks in Canada just don’t realize the geography of softwood lumber production in the U.S. It is in the Pacific Northwest, it’s Texas, it’s Georgia, it’s the Carolinas. You look at a perfect lobby group composed of red and blue states and Congressional districts,” he said, remarking that if the White House negotiated a softwood lumber agreement with Canada, it would become an issue for American lawmakers back in their districts.

“You would probably have a couple of dozen Congress folks that have to go back to their districts and do some explaining,” he said.

U.S. unwilling to negotiate, asserts Liberal government

The Canadian government remarked in March that the U.S. “has not demonstrated any concrete interest in meaningful negotiations” in response to a report on softwood lumber duties by the House International Trade Committee.

“Resolving the softwood lumber dispute is a top priority,” the response noted. “The government has deployed significant efforts and resources to achieve a mutually beneficial and durable resolution to the dispute, and to defend the interests of the Canadian softwood lumber industry through litigation and in U.S. trade remedy proceedings.”

While Poilievre’s August statement indicated that the government “failed” to raise the topic during U.S. President Joe Biden’s visit to Ottawa in 2023, the government’s response to the House committee noted that during the visit Trudeau “took the opportunity ... to again remind President Biden of the need for a mutually acceptable outcome and to encourage active U.S. engagement toward a resolution.”

Dade said he doubts that a solution to the dispute is possible, as it has been ongoing since the 1800s.

“I think it’s a feature of the North American trade architecture at this point,” he said. “Businesses have learned to internalize the costs.”

The U.S. has consistently defended the additional duties on Canadian softwood lumber by arguing that Canada subsidizes its lumber industry. While American lumber comes from privately owned land, most Canadian lumber comes from Crown land paid through a stumpage fee.

Dade said the deal that was struck in 2006 was “partially fortuitous circumstances” as Canada had built goodwill with the Americans through combat camaraderie.

“It wasn’t brilliant negotiating, it was the result of our involvement in Afghanistan,” he said.

He said the industry could do more to diversify away from the U.S., and look at additional market access opportunities in countries like Mexico.

“If you’re selling softwood lumber in Brownsville, Texas, why don’t you go 50 yards across the border?” he questioned. “I don’t think the industry has taken the diversification thing as hard as they could.”

“If you are having that much trouble with the Americans, you really should be pushing harder on all fronts to try to diversify,” he said.

‘We’re in a much more protectionist time,’ says Eric Miller

U.S.-based trade consultant Eric Miller, president of the Rideau Potomac Strategy Group, said the last softwood lumber agreement in 2006 was a “unique moment” that was created out of a close relationship between Harper and Bush.

“Unfortunately, though, instinctively we’re in a much more protectionist time. Both [former U.S. president Donald] Trump and Biden have been highly resistant to negotiating anything that looks like market access,” said Miller, a former senior adviser in the Canadian Embassy in Washington. “Getting market access is increasingly difficult at the present time, and it would only come from a prime minister that built a close enough personal relationship that the president would be willing to overcome the natural reticence within the U.S. system to negotiate such an agreement.”

“It’s not impossible, but the bar is high, and has gotten higher in the years since the softwood lumber negotiation,” he said.

Miller said the pathway towards a softwood lumber agreement will largely depend on looming Canadian and American elections, with any work towards a compromise not expected beforehand.

“Generally speaking, these things have only got put into a temporary holding pattern because the president has been willing to do that for his friend, the prime minister,” he said.

The question will become—in a potential Conservative government—whether Poilievre is able to build a close relationship with his American counterpart, but not be seen as being too close.

But with other trade priorities emerging in the coming months and years, such as the review of the North American trade pact in 2026, there is an open question of whether a Canadian prime minister would want to spend their political capital with the U.S. president on softwood lumber.

“I think the situation certainly needs resolution, but they’re going to have to assess at the time, what’s the art of the possible,” Miller said.

“It’s good [the Conservatives are] showing that they’re focused on the issue. It’s good that they want to get some resolution on the issue because that would be something that the Canadian industry—both in the East and the West—would dearly love to see. But we should also be realistic about how difficult this process will be,” he said. “But, of course, the first step to negotiating any agreement is prioritizing a willingness to want to do it.”

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The Hill Times

Poilievre lacks pizzazz, and that's OK

For conservative politicians, lacking star power is actually a feature, not a bug.

OAKVILLE, ONT.—A political party doesn't necessarily need a popular or likable leader to have a big lead in the polls. This is especially true if we're talking about a conservative leader.

Case in point is Canada's Conservative Party, which is doing well in the polls, but which also has a leader in Pierre Poilievre who isn't exactly a rock-star politician.

Don't get me wrong. Poilievre is certainly an intelligent, experienced, and capable individual. But there's no "Piermania" erupting in this country right now. Canadians aren't flocking to his banner because they're attracted to his charisma or to his winning, affable personality.

Rather, the polls tell us Canadians are seemingly parking their votes with the Conservatives not because they like Poilievre, but because they just don't like Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Indeed, according to a recent Abacus Data poll, 40 per cent of Conservative supporters say their vote is more about disliking the prime minister and the Liberals than it is about liking Poilievre.

More interestingly, that same poll also indicates 65 per cent of those who have a neutral or negative view of Poilievre who still plan to vote Conservative say it's because they dislike the Liberals and Trudeau.

In other words, people who don't like Poilievre like Trudeau even less.

Meanwhile, another Abacus poll—this one conducted in July—showed that only about one in three Canadians even recognized Poilievre when shown a picture of him.

In short, Poilievre is not a celebrity-style charisma machine, dazzling voters with his glamour.

So why doesn't that seem to matter? Why is Poilievre still poised to win the next election?

Well, the fact is for conservative politicians, such as Poilievre, lacking star power is actually a feature, not a bug.

Things like charisma, personal magnetism, and aspirational rhetoric are traits normally associated with politicians on the left.

say that because politicians on the left usually win elections when the voting public is in the mood for new ideas, new ways of doing things, and new visions of the future.

Basically, voters want to replace boring and bland leaders with exciting and non-traditional ones.

In the past, charismatic politicians like John F. Kennedy, Pierre Trudeau, Barack Obama, Jack Layton, and Justin Trudeau have filled this need.

Currently, U.S. Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris seems to be channelling this sort of energy.

Inevitably, however, the positive political spirit of the left eventually collides with political reality. Lofty expectations are not met, disappointment sets in, then disillusionment.

When that happens is the public shifts gears and seeks strong leadership. Voters will want a leader capable of cleaning up any messes in government, and who will set the country back on the right track.

It's in this sort of political environment where conservative politicians have a chance to shine.

Yes, they may lack pizzazz and flash and may even be unlikable, but they offer something anxious and disillusioned voters desire: stolid competence.

Politicians like Richard Nixon, George W. Bush, Donald Trump, Stephen Harper, and Doug Ford would fit into this category. One notable exception to this rule is former U.S. president Ronald Reagan, who somehow managed to combine hardcore conservatism with likable charisma.

This is why Conservative strategists don't need to be concerned if polls continue to show that Poilievre is seen as the "lesser of two evils."

It doesn't matter if he isn't perceived as lovable or cuddly; it doesn't matter if he can't enthrall the masses.

As long as he continues to stress that he's the only guy capable of mending a "broken" Canada, then—lovable or not—he has a clear path to victory.

Gerry Nicholls is a communications consultant.

The Hill Times

Conservatives' TV ad tells us a lot

Conservatives will employ negative ads to get their message across even though the polls indicate they are well ahead in the race. This is a little surprising since the 'book' says if your party is way out front, you should probably stick to positive messaging.

OAKVILLE, ONT.—The Conservatives just released a TV ad, which even though it's only 30 seconds long, tells us a lot about their party's long-term messaging game-plan.

And some of what it tells us is surprising.

Before I get into all that, however, let's go over that TV spot, which is basically an attack ad aimed against NDP leader Jagmeet Singh.

It features a narrator saying, "Jagmeet Singh is used to getting what he wants. He went to a high-priced American private school in Beverly Hills, Rolex watches, BMWs, Versace bags, but now he's got a problem. He needs to delay the election until next year, when he qualifies for his \$2-million pension, so he sold you out, signed on with Trudeau, to raise taxes, crime and housing costs."

The ad then concludes with the line, "Sellout Singh. He gets his pension; you pay the price."

So, what does this ad tell us?

Well, first off, it tells us the Conservatives will employ negative ads (or if you want to use the more euphemistic term "comparative ads") to get their message across even though the polls indicate they are well ahead in the race.

This is a little surprising since the "book" says if your party is way out front, you should probably stick to positive messaging.

After all, why risk the stigma usually associated with going on the attack?

This is why negativity is usually a tactic reserved for tighter races or for when you're behind.

Heck, sometimes going negative is even a sign of desperation.

Yet, here are the first-place Conservatives bashing away at the last place NDP.

Interesting.

The other thing we learned from this TV spot, is the Conservatives are willing to employ old school communication gimmicks.

For instance, referring to Singh as "Sellout Singh" is blunt but clever.

Yes, I know it's kind of silly, but believe me, using alliteration in an ad is a trick that helps people remember the message.

The other trick employed by the Conservatives in this ad is a little bit sneakier.

I'm talking about how the ad says Singh attended a private school in "Beverly Hills".

That statement is true, but the school he attended was apparently in Beverly Hills, Michigan, not the more famous one in California.

Of course, what the Conservative are hoping is that most people watching that ad will assume Singh attended

some fancy school in one of America's most upscale communities.

If you think that's poor form, well, what can I say, welcome to the cynical world of political communications.

At any rate, the last thing this ad tells us is the most obvious: The Conservatives are making a concerted effort to win over blue-collar voters, people who traditionally support the NDP.

That's clearly what this ad is all about. The Conservatives are basically saying to working class Canadians that Singh isn't one of them, he's just a rich, out-of-touch politician who, more than anything else, wants to get his hands on a gold-plated MP pension, a pension which no regular Canadian could ever hope to afford.

Make no mistake, that's a powerful "Us vs Them" emotional message that could strike a chord.

Anyway, the Conservative Party's own polling must be telling them that targeting the NDP's base is a winnable strategy, or else they wouldn't be spending money producing costly TV ads.

Those polls might also be telling the Conservatives that the Liberals, in their current weakened state, are no longer much of a threat, meaning they can now pivot and hammer the NDP.

So yeah, that one ad reveals a lot.

Gerry Nicholls is a communications consultant.

The Poilievres' mom-and-pop shop

In the sea of political merchandise, Anaida Poilievre's personally curated line stands out.

Political paraphernalia has become ubiquitous, not just at political rallies, but also anywhere supporters are happy to act as mobile billboards promoting politicians, policies, parties, or whatever political beliefs they espouse. I recall once going through airport security standing behind a woman proudly wearing a faded Ford Nation t-shirt. I doubt she was heading to an Ontario Progressive Conservative political rally. Yet of all the clothing options available to her that day, she chose to clearly signal her political identity.

These days, no one seems to be able to dress for the part and get his followers to do the same better than Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre, at least in Canada. While it doesn't compare to the paraphernalia on display at Donald Trump rallies in the United States, it is nevertheless impressive by Canadian standards.

The term "paraphernalia" used to designate articles of personal property given to a married woman by her husband before or during marriage, and regarded in law as her possessions over which she has some measure of control. It's from the Greek *parapherna*, meaning "bride's property beyond her dowry." In the context of political merchandise, "paraphernalia" refers to the items that supporters use to express their allegiance to a particular candidate or cause.

It's a particularly fitting term for the merch available for sale on the Conservative Party of Canada's website. If one is looking for caps, T-shirts, and hoodies, the web redirects to bringithome.ca, where visitors are invited to join the movement and to "shop the look."

This is where one learns that the Conservative leader's wife, Anaida Poilievre, has a great deal of control over the paraphernalia available for sale. Her personal touch and involvement in the creation of the merchandise add a layer of authenticity and family values to the items offered by the Conservative Party. The pitch for the Bring It Home merch is commonsensical. The product line "embodies the desire for change and the need for the common sense of the common people, united for our common home." Supporters can purchase a unisex "axe the tax" or "fire the gatekeeper" hoodie for \$50, or get a notification when the \$35 camouflage "Bring It Home" hat with a leather logo is no longer out of stock.

We also learn that: "From its very inception through to its final realization, Anaida Poilievre spearheaded every facet of the Bring it Home Merchandise. She is the creative mind behind the vision, and is the lead of its operational and branding aspects. She created the designs of the Special Edition logos with the help of a talented graphic designer, Greg. Anaida is responsible for supplier and merchandise selection, fulfilment logistics, marketing, branding and more. Bring it Home Merch is inspired by Canadian patriotism and the need for change."

The call to action encourages supporters to be seen and heard: "There is a growing movement gaining in strength and momentum across our country and it's because of YOU. You are the ones who get up every day, you work hard, and you boldly stand up for what you believe in. Let's show the rest of the country just how powerful this movement is. Whether it's a Common Sense shirt on your back, a Bring it Home hat, or a sleek tumbler sitting on your desk, 'represent and make your mark.' Be seen. Be heard."

For \$35, you can be seen wearing a "W.T.F." T-shirt, for "Where's The Funds," and be heard on #ArriveScam! This particular item is only available in English. So are the "Axe The Tax" and "How Do You Like Them Apples?" T-shirts.

Undecided voters who choose to browse in the Liberals' online boutique will find a much broader assortment of apparel, including baby onesies, as well a wide range of accessories including an apron, a cheese board, beer glasses, and a whiskey gift set. But it's all very uninspiring. All items feature only the party logo, without any additional slogans or messages. You won't find a T-shirt with the inscriptions "Sunny ways, my friends. Sunny ways," or a Women For Trudeau hoodie with the line "Because it's 2015."

If the official paraphernalia offered by the Conservative Party isn't bold enough to express one's strong desire for change, there are plenty of more provocative items for sale by vendors looking to tap into the movement on platforms like Etsy. There's a "Justin Trudeau tax climate patriotism shirt political sweatshirt axe the tax Canada

Day Trudeau election conservative Pierre Poilievre gift” sold by the Common Sense Coalition. The word salad item description must be an attempt at search engine marketing. The text on the pure comfort crewneck is also a mouthful: “I identify as an over taxed under represented non woke pissed off Canadian!”

Cathy, the creator of this Etsy shop, writes that she wanted to express her frustrations with the direction this country is taking: “Creating t-shirts and other merchandise that people can display to express their feelings, while not having to directly engage people. When others see how you feel, it can spark unity or conversation with others that think they are alone. No matter what side of the political isle [sic] you are on, we all want Canada to prosper so that future generations do not have to go through what we are going through right now.”

This sums it all up. We’re increasingly on separate islands—not opposite aisles—wearing T-shirts expressing our political views.

Cathy also writes that the Common Sense Coalition supports local business in Canada for Canadians. She has plenty of foreign competitors selling on Amazon.ca, including Ruizaua which is based in Taiwan’s rural township of Zhuqi, which sells F-Trudeau decals. Other items—grouped by Amazon under the category “funny trudeau stickers”—include Canadian Tire’s logo with the line “Canadian Tired of Trudeau”—something the retailer’s legal team might want to look into.

In the sea of political merchandise, Anaida Poilievre’s personally curated line stands out. By taking the reins of the Bring It Home merch, she adds a touch of authenticity that resonates with supporters, and sets it apart from the generic offerings of its opponent.

Should her husband bring it home, become prime minister, and axe the tax, I suspect Mrs. Poilievre will unveil a new collection to keep the movement moving. As the Conservative Party looks to the future, it will be interesting to see how this strategy evolves, and whether it continues to resonate with supporters. Hopefully, any future collections will focus on themes of unity and tolerance, helping to bridge the divides that currently characterize Canadian political discourse.

Éric Blais is president of Headspace Marketing in Toronto.

The Hill Times

Poilievre's grand strategic plan

When the next federal election rolls around, Pierre Poilievre won't be hoping a stronger NDP will weaken the Liberals. He'll be hoping a weaker NDP will benefit the Conservatives.

OAKVILLE, ONT.—According to a headline I saw recently, Conservative Party Leader Pierre Poilievre's non-confidence motion over the Liberal government's carbon tax had “failed.”

But I think that headline got it wrong; I don't think Poilievre failed at all.

In fact, in my view, his non-confidence ploy was a big success.

Now, before I go on, let me say that I fully understand that, factually speaking, the headline I mentioned above was correct; Poilievre's motion failed to garner enough votes to topple the Liberal government.

That's to say, the Liberals, NDP and Bloc Québécois all teamed up to outvote the Conservatives.

But, despite losing the vote, I'd argue Poilievre ended up winning a key political battle.

Certainly, CTV journalist Don Martin recognized something along these lines when he noted, “In one move, he [Poilievre] has lumped the NDP, BQ, and Liberals into an unpopular trio of tax-loving, inflation-boosting, unrepresentative, leader-whipped MPs who fail to feel the pain of the average voter.”

I agree with Martin, but I don't think his analysis goes quite far enough since I'd argue that Poilievre's true end game with his confidence vote stunt wasn't just to score points off the carbon tax, but also to rewrite the NDP's place in Canada's traditional political equation.

What do I mean by that?

Well, somewhat ironically, the standard theory of Canadian politics is that the right-leaning Conservatives have always benefited from a strong left-leaning NDP, since, supposedly, a strong NDP would sap votes away from the left-leaning Liberals.

In other words, from a tactical point of view, it would sometimes make sense for the Conservatives to build up the NDP.

Heck, I did this from time to time.

Back in the 1988 federal election, for instance, while working for a conservative advocacy group called the National Citizens Coalition, I helped put together an ad campaign which attacked then-NDP leader Ed Broadbent as being “too socialist” and “too left-wing.”

On the surface it sounds like an anti-NDP message, but its true purpose was to persuade NDP voters who were thinking about voting Liberal to go back home.

Yes, it was a sneaky attempt to help the NDP and hurt the Liberals.

After all, the natural reaction for partisans is to rally around a leader who's under attack from an ideological enemy.

Anyway, I think Poilievre wants to do away with this sort of three-dimensional strategy so he can play a much simpler game.

In short, he'd rather operate in a “bi-polar political universe,” where instead of having three choices—the Liberals, the NDP and the Conservatives—Canadian voters would only have two: the Conservatives, who want to change things for the better, and all the other parties who just want to maintain the status quo.

To put that another way, Poilievre will lump the NDP together with the Liberals, framing them as two identical parties, both of which are hopelessly out of touch with the needs of regular Canadians.

So, if you don't like what the Liberals are doing, don't vote for the carbon-copy NDP.

My point is Poilievre's non-confidence vote was part of a much larger plan.

It wasn't just about forcing the NDP to support the carbon tax, it was also about demonstrating Canada's new bipolar political order.

To sum it all up, when the next federal election rolls around, Poilievre won't be hoping a stronger NDP will weaken the Liberals; he'll be hoping a weaker NDP will benefit the Conservatives.

As he put it after the non-confidence vote, for "true change, common sense change," voters have only a Conservative choice.

Expect to hear that line a lot.

Gerry Nicholls is a communications consultant.

The Hill Times

Understanding Poilievre's conservatism

Conservatism is increasingly all about opposing the three main 'isms' of the 21st century: globalism, wokism, and elitism.

OAKVILLE, ONT.—When it comes to criticizing Conservative politicians, the left really needs to update its play-book.

I say that because there are those on the left who still haven't figured out that the conservatism of today is evolving into something much different than the conservatism of yesterday.

For instance, while campaigning in the Toronto-St. Paul's byelection, Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland declared the Conservative alternative to her government was "cuts and austerity."

Meanwhile, for her part, Toronto Star columnist Linda McQuaig recently blasted Conservative Party Leader Pierre Poilievre, saying "His dream Canada is an austere place that few Canadians would recognize or want to live in."

She also argues that, if he forms the next government, Poilievre would implement severe fiscal cutbacks that would hurt "working people" and that his agenda "seems very much in line with the far-right Fraser Institute."

I should note that the Fraser Institute is a Canadian economic think tank which represents what might be considered a libertarian viewpoint, an ideology which, in simple terms, stands for free market capitalism, minimal government and individual freedom.

And, yes, libertarianism can certainly be considered a strand of conservative thought.

What's more, during the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were the world's most pre-eminent conservative leaders, libertarianism was arguably one of the most dominant aspects of conservatism.

Free trade, free markets, less bureaucracy were the conservative rallying cries of the day.

Former Canadian prime minister Brian Mulroney's push for freer trade with the United States in the late 1980s, for example, was certainly part of that pro-free market surge.

Anyway, back then attacking conservative politicians for making "cutbacks that hurt working people" at least made rhetorical sense.

But nowadays pro-free market libertarianism as a political philosophy is on the wane amongst conservative politicians.

Conservatism, in short, is slowly altering its priorities and goals, moving away from the Reagan/Thatcher/Fraser Institute free market/small government viewpoint and towards a more populist mindset.

What does that mean?

Well, basically it means conservatism is increasingly all about opposing the three main "isms" of the 21st century: globalism, wokism, and elitism.

In other words, the conservatism of today is less about "dismantling the state" and more about protecting culture, nurturing a national identity and standing up for "regular" people who feel ignored or forgotten by the system.

If all that means sacrificing libertarian principles such as freer trade, so be it.

This shift in conservative opinion is also happening on the grassroots level.

In fact, Freedomworks, a once influential American libertarian-leaning advocacy group, recently had to close its doors because its message was no longer resonating with its base.

The group's president, Adam Brandon, told the media a "huge gap" had opened up between the libertarian principles of Freedomworks' leadership and the populism of its members.

I'd also note that the National Citizens Coalition, once a strong Canadian libertarian advocacy group, has now seemingly fully embraced a strident populist messaging.

At any rate, my point is Poilievre has, like so many other conservative politicians around the world, jumped on the populist bandwagon, meaning he's not a Reaganite or a Thatcherite or a Fraser Institute devotee.

This is why he's been able to make a concerted effort to win over working-class voters, people who typically support left-wing parties.

Heck, he even voted to support a bill seeking to ban federally regulated workplaces from using replacement workers during strikes or lockouts, a move which flies directly in the face of free-market libertarian philosophy.

Now you see why I think the Freeland/McQuaig attack on Poilievre misses the mark.

Simply put, the brand of conservatism they're attacking is all but extinct.

Gerry Nicholls is a communications consultant.

The Hill Times

Poilievre's transparency promises fall short

Pierre Poilievre says he wants the federal information commissioner to take on Ottawa's 'gatekeepers.' But he's not offering to cut back on ATIP exemptions or exclusions. Nor is he promising changes to the many sentries whose special secrecy privileges prevent greater transparency and stymie good government.

OTTAWA—Pierre Poilievre's recent "pledge" to create a new transparency era may seem exciting, but could go nowhere and falls short.

Poilievre suggests access-to-information responses under his government would mean quicker response times and more enforceable freedom-of-information orders. He wants a federal information commissioner to take on Ottawa's "gatekeepers."

But he does not offer any cutbacks on the many Access to information Act exemptions and exclusions that these same gatekeepers currently enforce and that delay responses. Nor is he promising changes to directly confront the many vested sentries whose special secrecy privileges prevent greater transparency, and that stymie good government.

His previous legislative work while in government as parliamentary secretary to the Treasury Board president produced the weakest whistleblowing protection act in the world, and not much more accountability under the Accountability Act.

Why should voters trust his transparency promises when Stephen Harper and Justin Trudeau each made similar promises and failed to deliver more open governments?

With Treasury Board and special interests still controlling access-to-information management, gridlocks and denials continue to get worse.

And greater secrecy practices have been backed by the Supreme Court of Canada in its decisions upholding broad cabinet secrecy and agreeing to widening secret policy advice.

Breaking such a severe stranglehold on disclosure requires more than a limited patchwork fix-up.

Official inquiries—like the current one on foreign interference in Canadian elections—struggle to get government data released. Parliamentary committees, too, continue to be stymied, for instance, when trying to untangle government contractual arrangement and violations in the ArriveCan project.

Small recent steps—such as setting up a government pay transparency website or further declassifying a decades-old report on Nazi war criminals who were let into Canada—have not signalled an eminent overhaul of disclosure practices.

So, you want to know about secret AI practices? That will be a 150-day time extension beyond the 30 days reply that's not likely to be honoured, with the probable outcome meaning excessively redacted records.

Meanwhile, the struggle to get access-to-information responses continues. That's if and when you get them, and they usually include deletions after months of delays.

Here are two examples of data uncovered in the public interest that are not what the government exactly wants published.

On the issue of government preparedness in emergencies, Agriculture Canada documents from 2019 indicate that Canada has no stockpiling of bottled water or food items in anticipation of growing emergencies from wildfires to potential earthquakes. Four years later, Agriculture Canada documents again show that it does not "have a stockpile of emergency food or water that could be rapidly deployed, nor the capacity or infrastructure to deliver and

distribute such products. Therefore, AAFC is not in a position to provide immediate assistance to aid in a humanitarian response of this nature.”

This does not equate to real emergency preparedness.

A second example of unchanged practices is on the touchy subject of the RCMP’s use of a controversial neck-hold to subdue suspects, and on just how much police force is acceptable. Back in 2021, Public Safety Canada records revealed that the neck-hold was still being used. A June 15, 2020, a RCMP memo to Public Safety noted that, “There are instances in RCMP Police Defensive Tactics training whereby it is appropriate for an officer to use their knee and place it on a citizen’s upper body during an arrest.”

Recently-obtained Public Safety records again state that the use of the carotid restraint technique is still in place, though the RCMP Management Advisory Board urged caution, and to never use choke holds that cut off a person’s airways with potential lethal consequences.

In the United States, “I can’t breathe” were the last words uttered by Black men like Eric Garner, an unarmed man who was killed in 2014 after being put in a choke-hold by a New York police officer, and by George Floyd before he died in 2020 in Minneapolis in a similar law-enforcement encounter. The lethal use of this hold in Floyd’s case went viral worldwide. Deaths by such holds are still leading to widespread protest against police brutality and racial inequality.

Such sought-after records are crucial to holding the government accountable, but election promises of greater transparency alone will not fix getting greater access to many hidden government actions.

Governments have put open government in a penalty box, and are holding users hostage.

The pre-election promise by Poilievre’s Conservatives does not go far enough to score a winning stance that will bring transparency out of the sinkhole it’s in.

Political parties had better ramp up and give priority to their election game-plans to tackle excessive secrecy practices in Ottawa.

Ken Rubin writes on transparency matters, and is reachable at kenrubin.ca

The Hill Times

Poilievre and the politics of perception

Pierre Poilievre should not release detailed policies because the minute he shows his 'hand on some key policy areas,' is the minute he could blunt his perceived momentum. Don't do it.

OAKVILLE, ONT.—Right now the Conservative Party of Canada is an unstoppable juggernaut that seems headed for certain victory.

But is it, really?

True, the Conservative Party currently seems to possess an all-conquering momentum, but perhaps that's simply a political mirage, a media created impression?

Certainly, for the past few months, the media has been churning out a string of reports which seem to reinforce the idea of the party's unrelenting dominance.

For instance, not long ago, media reports came out noting how the Conservatives had a "record-breaking fundraising haul in 2023."

Of course, the Conservatives smartly spun this news to suggest that their fundraising achievement was a clear sign Canadians were eagerly jumping on the Conservative bandwagon.

Conservative Party Leader Pierre Poilievre triumphantly declared, "These results prove support for my common-sense plan to axe the tax, build the homes, fix the budget and stop the crime."

Meanwhile, the party also benefits from regular news reports which indicate the Conservatives hold a commanding lead in just about every public opinion poll.

However, fundraising success in politics doesn't necessarily translate into electoral success.

More importantly, the Conservative lead in the polls—while dramatic—might lack intensity. It might be tenuous and fragile.

My point is: the Conservatives might not really be the implacable steamroller they appear to be.

But in politics, perception matters more than reality.

As my mentor, the late Arthur Finkelstein, used to say: "it's what you perceive to be true that's true, not truth."

And if Canadians perceive the Conservatives to be winners, the Conservatives will indeed be winners.

Simply put: people, as a rule, like to join the winning side.

So, with that in mind, it makes perfect strategic sense for the Conservatives to keep this perception of their ascendancy alive in the minds of voters.

This is why Poilievre would do well to ignore the advice of some pundits and journalists out there who are urging him to release some sort of detailed policy platform.

And yes, this is happening.

For example, writing in *The Globe and Mail*, journalist Campbell Clark recently argued, "Mr. Poilievre is focused on painting a picture of his new Conservative-run home. But Canadians should now know more about how he plans to build it. What would Mr. Poilievre do?"

Likewise, former Conservative adviser Tim Powers told the media, “I don’t think he [Poilievre] can go through all of 2024 constantly criticizing the government without showing his hand on some key policy areas.”

Now on the surface the argument put forward by Powers and Clark—that leaders should release a comprehensive policy plan—seems basic.

So why, then, do I think Poilievre should reject their counsel?

Well, it’s because the minute the Conservative leader shows his “hand on some key policy areas” is the minute he could blunt his perceived momentum.

As I used to tell my clients, if you give voters 10 concrete policy proposals, you’re also giving them 10 concrete reasons not to vote for you.

To put it bluntly: if Canadians dislike only a few of Poilievre’s detailed policy ideas, it could hurt him in the polls, undermining his aura of inevitability.

Plus, if Poilievre comes out with a detailed plan, it’d give the Liberals an opportunity to attack any controversial Conservative proposal, putting him on the defensive.

It’s hard to create the impression that you’re moving forward when you’re constantly forced to stop and defend yourself.

So, the Conservatives should keep their proposals vague, i.e. “axe the tax, build the homes, fix the budget and stop the crime”.

That’s surely the best way to keep their perceived momentum going.

Gerry Nicholls is a communications consultant.

The Hill Times

Lobbyists prepping clients for possible federal election shakeup, and a Conservative government

Policies that are being enacted and money that's being spent could be reversed by a Conservative government, warns a senior consultant at Summa Strategies.

The prospect of a federal election next year—or sooner—has government relations firms preparing their clients for possibilities ranging from a re-elected Liberal government with a renewed mandate, to the first federal Conservative government in nearly a decade.

“I think the important thing that we’re doing as a firm is just ensuring that our clients are looking at the political landscape from the perspective of two sides of the coin,” said Josie Sabatino, a senior consultant at Summa Strategies, and a former director of communications in the office of then-Conservative leader Erin O’Toole. “With the possibility of an election in the next 18 months, you can’t just look at the legislative landscape as you could, say, under a majority government, because the policies that are being enacted and the money that’s being spent, that could be reversed by a [Conservative] government.”

The next election is scheduled for October 2025, but one could be called earlier because Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Que.) leads a minority government. The NDP is also warning that it may end its supply-and-confidence deal with the Liberals if they keep dragging out negotiations on pharmacare legislation. The incumbent could also request that the governor general dissolve Parliament and ask for an election. Nik Nanos, chief data scientist for Nanos Research, said this could be “the most difficult election” for the Liberals since before 2015, due to factors including weak polling numbers, as previously reported in *The Hill Times*.

Sabatino said that as the election draws near, lobbyists are looking at “the movers and shakers around town and the decision-making landscape” to understand how policies are being processed by Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.).

“I think there’s a lot more volatility, and where once you could count on the dependency of Liberals passing a policy and it being in place, now you really have to ensure you have a firm understanding of how the Conservative leader is looking at potential issues and pieces of policy, and how his shadow cabinet is, as well,” she said. “If you know the background of the person who is speaking to the leader, then you can translate some of that stuff to your clients as well.”

Sabatino told *The Hill Times* that some people within the Ottawa political ecosystem may criticize Poilievre for not putting “any policy ideas at the table,” which she argues is not the case. Poilievre has made broad commitments around removing the carbon tax, increasing the housing supply, fixing the budget, and getting tough on crime, she said.

“Once you have those big ideas put in the window, you can help communicate to your clients on how to fill the gaps in terms of policy. As they’re trying to formulate these relationships and get in front of Conservative decision-makers, they’re thinking about their policies in terms of the broader Poilievre agenda. I think that is the big one,” she said. “Those four broad themes that he talked about ... they all feed into this idea that Canadians want government to step away and they want life to be more affordable. And that’s really where I think he will be driving his commitments in the next several months as we see more policies roll out.”

Andrea Sarkic, lead public affairs counsellor for Compass Rose Group and a former ministerial staffer under the Conservative minority government of then-prime minister Stephen Harper, told *The Hill Times* that “any savvy government relations shop in town” is likely well-underway in making preparations for the upcoming election. Part of that is engaging across all of the parties when it comes to broad policy issues, she said.

“For us at Compass Rose, definitely ... we are aiming to have as seamless a transition for clients, in that sense, as possible,” she said. “One thing that incoming governments hate ... is any sudden interest from a stakeholder who

has shown no or little interest in them before an election win. You're dead in the water, so to speak, as a stakeholder ... if you have shown really no interest until an election win."

Compass Rose is preparing their clients for how to approach "a change in narrative and framing of the issues," which will take place following the election, whether the Liberals are re-elected or a new government comes in, according to Sarkic. She said that a Poilievre government could "look and sound a bit different."

"It's not a secret [Poilievre] cut his teeth under a Harper government. With that, we can expect a tightly managed cabinet," she said. "He's a smart communicator [and] smart debater. He definitely prefers non-traditional communication platforms and social media and engaging Canadians. It's that direct, cutting out the government-speak, [and] cutting out some of the noise and getting the goods straight to Canadians."

Ashton Arsenault, a vice-president at Crestview Strategy and former ministerial staffer in Harper's Conservative government, told *The Hill Times* that there is an awful lot of uncertainty at the moment regarding the timing of the election, but federal campaigns are always busy times for any government-relations agency.

"I will say a change in government is significant for our clients because they don't happen all the time," he said. "For example, if the Conservatives were to win, there will be an entirely new cabinet, entirely new ministerial priorities and mandates, [and] maybe even new departments or restructured departments, and an entirely new cast and crew of staff. Most of them are going to have entirely different perspectives and goals than the outgoing cabinet and staff. Accounting for those changes is mission critical. There's a lot to factor in."

Arsenault said that a Conservative government would likely be ambitious in its early days, and understanding what will and will not be prioritized by that government will be important for advocacy organizations.

"The reality is we're constantly planning because we have to. We prepare customized strategies on behalf of our clients, and those strategies quite naturally reflect the federal government of the day, because they have to," he said. "In scenarios where we need to account for considerable change in circumstances, which a federal election would certainly be, we go back to the drawing board and refine our strategies."

Duncan Rayner, vice-president of Temple Scott Associates, and previously a director of operations for the former Progressive Conservative Party of Canada, told *The Hill Times* that anticipation of an election means being honest with clients about what is — and is not — possible based on the political climate.

"I will often tell the client, 'okay, if you've got six priorities, maybe three you can advance under one government, [and] there's three you can advance under another government,'" he said. "Pierre [Poilievre] has been very clear what his four priorities are. Pay attention to what's going on politically and assess where your priorities stand within the shifting landscape."

Rayner said paying attention to staffing changes is key, but not as important as policy announcements.

"I've seen this with any government. If you're advocating for things that resonate with their priorities, I think you'll get a good hearing. But if you're going in and trying to advocate for something that's diametrically opposed to what their stated priorities are, I don't think you're going to get far," he said.

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The Hill Times

A western Conservative's advice to Pierre Poilievre

Voters also want to like the people they vote for, so have fun on the stump. Hold them to account using humour and make fun of yourself, too. That shows humility, something that is in short supply in politics, but that voters highly value.

CALGARY—When first elected in 2015, the Trudeau Liberals went for big climate ideas, the progressive-chic look, and a splash of sunny ways. That worked with the left and a swath of the wavering middle, but in post-COVID 2024, Canadians are in deep financial trouble, and a gender-balanced cabinet doesn't buy hamburger for a struggling family. Affordability is such a dominant issue that the Liberals are rebranding what is probably their biggest policy win to date. It's easy to see why. Lauding the merits of the consumer carbon tax during an affordability crisis is like handing drowning consumers a bowling ball with an autographed picture of Steven Guilbeault taped to the side, and then wishing them a nice day. The polls reflect the disconnect.

Pierre Poilievre, you saw the signs two years ago and have been pounding on housing and affordability since. You are attracting big crowds. Your videos are getting millions of views. You're connecting. The Liberals are now 14 points behind. Still, Pierre, if I were you, I'd be uneasy. The next election could still be 18 months away, and the crafty Liberals are just starting to push back.

My advice: you need a majority, and 40 per cent support is not enough when chance or folly can erode support in the dying days of a campaign. Yes, Justin Trudeau is overexposed and has a wagon-train of baggage. Even many Liberal supporters would prefer someone new at the helm, but the Liberal brand still compels in the country's biggest cities and in Atlantic Canada. In times of uncertainty, it would be easy for undecideds to drift back to the Liberal security blanket, and we should expect uncertainty, especially if Donald Trump wins the U.S. presidency in November. If that happens, you and your team will be scrutinized for signs that you'd toady up to the Trump administration—which could be fatal. You need to be ready with a message that says you will stand up for Canada and Canadian values against Trump, while still being respectful of our biggest trading partner. We all need to remember how Trump insulted and taunted Trudeau.

Housing and affordability are messages that got you to where you are, but you need something more to reach the next five per cent, many of whom will be in the suburbs, in newcomer communities, and among blue-collar workers. Yes, for many voters, the next election will be an up or down vote on Trudeau himself. Voters start to sour on their leaders after eight years. Take advantage of that. Push his name and face out in every ad buy because you know the Liberals will attempt to hide him. But in those swing ridings, especially, you will need more than that.

A strong message on safe streets, crime, opioids, and addictions will help. The Liberals are vulnerable in scores of ridings on immigration, but again, take care. That's where your partner Anaida comes in: an immigrant herself, charming, and a gifted public speaker who can give newcomers and women the assurance that her husband has their interests at heart. You also need a responsible but practical message on climate. Get rid of the consumer carbon tax but incentivize clean technology, and when you say you intend to tackle climate change, mean it. A practical, but credible plan on climate will matter for thousands of potential Conservative voters in tight urban ridings.

And remember that voters aren't just machines. They want to see your humanity. In your videos, you do a great job of reflecting the stories of struggling Canadians. Keep doing that. It shows that you're a listener. Voters also want to like the people they vote for, so have fun on the stump. Better to lampoon your political opponents than to insult them. Hold them to account using humour and make fun of yourself, too. That shows humility, something that is in short supply in politics, but that voters highly value.

Pierre, you have a great shot at winning a majority government, but the election is far from decided. Your work is only just beginning.

Monte Solberg is the CEO of New West Public Affairs, and is a former Conservative federal cabinet minister under prime minister Stephen Harper. He was the MP for Medicine Hat, Alta., from 1993 to 2008.

Conservatives change 2023 policy convention date to maximize momentum for Poilievre

This week's expected Conservative shadow cabinet announcement will indicate the direction Pierre Poilievre will take the party in, says pollster Frank Graves.

The Conservative Party is trying to stay ahead of the curve. To generate momentum for Pierre Poilievre in advance of next year's fall session of Parliament, the Conservative Party has decided to change the date of its biennial policy convention and will push it to Sept. 2023, say Conservative sources.

The policy convention was scheduled for Aug. 10-12, 2023 in Québec City, but it's now expected to take place from Sept. 8-10. According to Conservative sources, the change has been made to provide momentum to the leader prior to the start of the fall sitting of Parliament. Also, it was felt that the original date was right after the Aug. 7 Civic Holiday long weekend, and the attendance would not be as high. By deadline last week, the party had not officially announced the new date.

"Previously, it was the August long weekend, but it was felt that this would give more momentum, coming back to [the] parliamentary session," said one well-informed Conservative insider in an interview with *The Hill Times* last week, who spoke only on a not-for-attribution basis because the person is not authorized to speak on the subject.

A senior Conservative confirmed the change of date for the convention: "It's just a matter of scheduling to increase attendance," said a senior Conservative who declined to go on the record because the party had not officially announced the change of date.

Next year's fall sitting is scheduled to start Sept. 18.

Meanwhile, Poilievre is expected to announce his shadow cabinet this week. Considering the recent national polling numbers and that the Liberals have been in power since 2015, the Conservatives feel the next election is theirs to lose. They see the shadow cabinet as an early indication as to who the leader thinks are his best players in this caucus. More than half of the Conservative caucus endorsed Poilievre in the leadership election, and everyone will expect a role in the leader's inner circle, to be unveiled this week.

Poilievre won the leadership election on Sept. 10 on the first ballot, winning 70.7 per cent of the 417,635 votes cast, and carried 330 of the 338 ridings across the country. To most Conservatives, such a strong showing means Poilievre does not owe any favours to any one powerful stakeholder groups in the Conservative voting coalition, and can make independent decisions in forming his inner circle. Political insiders are, however, waiting to see how the new leader will handle questions of party unity, and whether he will give any senior critic positions to his former rival candidates and their supporters, including MPs Leslyn Lewis (Haldimand-Norfolk, Ont.) and Scott Aitchison (Parry Sound-Muskoka, Ont.), and caucus members who supported Jean Charest. Lewis was the social conservative candidate in the leadership election, winning 9.6 per cent of the votes; and Aitchison was a progressive conservative candidate who ended up with only one per cent of the votes.

Also, it remains to be seen if former party leaders—Erin O'Toole (Durham, Ont.), and Candice Bergen (Portage-Lisgar, Man.)— get any position in the shadow cabinet. Bergen, who served as interim party leader until the Sept. 10 leadership contest, has already announced she won't seek re-election next time around. Both Bergen and O'Toole did not endorse any candidate in the leadership election. The last leadership election was triggered after O'Toole was voted out by the caucus as party leader, early this year. He served as a cabinet minister in the Stephen Harper cabinet.

Poilievre, however, has already awarded the senior position of House leader to former party leader Andrew Scheer (Regina-Qu'Appelle, Sask.). Scheer endorsed Poilievre in leadership election. Other members of Poilievre's House leadership team include: Melissa Lantsman (Thornhill, Ont.) and Tim Uppal (Edmonton Mill Woods, Alta.) as deputy leaders; Kerry-Lynne Findlay (South Surrey-White Rock, B.C.) as the chief opposition whip; Chris Warkentin (Grande Prairie-Mackenzie, Alta.) as the deputy whip and QP co-ordinator; Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg-Haute-Saint-

Charles, Que.) as the Quebec lieutenant; Luc Berthold (Mégantic-L'Érable, Que.) as the deputy House leader; Erin Duncan (Stormont-Dundas-South Glengarry, Ont.) as caucus-party liaison; and Jake Stewart (Miramichi-Grand Lake, N.B.) as caucus committee coordinator. With the exception of Berthold, who was the deputy leader of the party under interim leader Bergen and stayed neutral during the leadership contest, all other MPs in this team endorsed Poilievre.

Hawks in the Poilievre camp say that the leader should pick the best competent team to hold the Liberals to account and not worry about other factors like giving critic positions to rival candidates or their supporters. After the party memberships' decision, the party's hawks say, it's the duty of all caucus members to support the new leader. But others say it's critical for Poilievre to keep his rivals in the tent to ensure that the disgruntled MPs do not undermine the leader. They pointed out that O'Toole made this mistake when he did not sufficiently accommodate Peter MacKay's supporters in the shadow cabinet, and suffered the consequences. So, Poilievre would be well-advised to accommodate his rivals and their supporters in his forthcoming shadow cabinet.

Conservative sources told *The Hill Times* that after winning the leadership, Poilievre met with any caucus member who requested a meeting with him. In the meetings, MPs provided input to the new leader about what role they would like to have under his leadership. At the same time, Poilievre also shared what roles he had in mind for these MPs.

Jenni Byrne, who played a key role in Poilievre's successful leadership campaign, and is now leading the transition team, is advising the new leader in putting together the shadow cabinet.

A Conservative insider speculated that they wouldn't be surprised if both Lewis and Aitchison were not included in the shadow cabinet.

"One way to prove that social conservatives don't have a hold over the party is to exclude Leslyn," said one former senior Conservative, adding that Aitchison received only one per cent of the vote, and if Poilievre does not include him in the shadow cabinet, the leader will not have to worry about any strong reaction from the party base.

Frank Graves, president of Ekos Research, told *The Hill Times* that this week's Conservative shadow cabinet announcement will indicate which direction Poilievre wants to take the party in.

"His selection of his shadow cabinet will be viewed with close attention to provide any signals about what direction he'll be going in," said Graves. "For example, what you're going to do with Lewis—and she's quite a significant force in the party, seems to share some outlook views with his, others not so much."

Graves said that going forward, Poilievre's biggest "asset is his liability," meaning party members who decided to sign up for him because of his anti-vaccine mandate stance and other right-of-centre positions are not enough to win the next election. To form government, Poilievre needs moderate conservatives or swing voters who are comfortable with the party's policy and political positions on issues.

Gary Keller, a former senior ministerial staffer in the Harper cabinet, said Poilievre would put his best team forward to hold the Trudeau government to account. For this, he said, the new leader will balance regional representation, gender, subject matter expertise, and political experience, among other factors, before he decides which caucus members to assign critic positions. But, Keller said, these positions could change in the coming months for a variety of reasons, including performance, or if MPs want to do something different going forward. He added that most reasonable caucus members know that a majority of MPs supported Poilievre in the leadership election and not everyone will get a shadow cabinet position. The ones who are not able to get these positions could get prized committee positions or other roles on specific policy or political positions in the party, or deputy critic positions.

"At the end of the day, is he building the best team who he thinks can take on the Liberals? That's the main thing," said Keller, who served as chief of staff to then-interim leader Rona Ambrose from 2015 to 2017.

As for how to accommodate former party leaders in the shadow cabinet, Keller said that Bergen has already announced she won't run in the next election, so she may not be interested for a "deeper role" going forward. And O'Toole would likely have had provided input to Poilievre about what he thinks should be his future role in the party, which the leader would likely accept. Keller declined to say if he expects Lewis or Aitchison to be included in the shadow cabinet, adding that no matter what decisions Poilievre takes, critics will always second-guess Poilievre.

"Poilievre won with 70 per cent of the vote," said Keller, now vice president at Strategy Corp. "And when you win a majority like that, people will give you leeway on your decision making."

The Hill Times

Alberta Sovereignty Act a ‘huge’ challenge for Poilievre if he wins federal leadership election, say political players

Pierre Poilievre and Danielle Smith’s supporters are ‘one and the same’ in Alberta, which will make it tricky for the Ottawa-area MP to oppose the Sovereignty Act, says political scientist Duane Bratt.

The issue of Alberta sovereignty will be the first “huge” political hot potato for Pierre Poilievre should he win the Conservative leadership this September, particularly if Danielle Smith also wins the leadership of the United Conservative Party in Alberta, say political players.

Smith, the UCP leadership contest front-runner, has proposed the “Alberta Sovereignty Act” that some see as “a direct assault on Canada’s constitution and rule of law.”

“It’d be a huge challenge because Conservatives and other parts of Canada will be wary of Pierre, if it looks like he’s pandering too much to a far-right-wing base, and also pandering too much to his Alberta base,” said Janet Brown, a prominent Calgary-based pollster who is the president of Opinion Research, in an interview with *The Hill Times*.

“A lot of people look at the last election and say the reason [Erin] O’Toole (Durham, Ont.) was not able to win because people in Central Canada, people in Ontario, and to a lesser extent, Quebec, just found the Conservatives to be too far-right, too extreme for them, and Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.) risks taking this party to an even more extreme position, making them even less electable in suburban Toronto and Quebec City and places like that.”

The centrepiece of Smith’s leadership campaign is a “Sovereignty Act” that would give Alberta—the bedrock of the Conservative party base—the power to ignore federal laws, court rulings and regulations considered counter to the province’s interests. If enacted, as an example, this legislation would permit gas stations in Alberta to stop collecting carbon tax. If Smith ends up winning the October leadership election, she will immediately take over from Jason Kenney and become premier. She has pledged this will be the number one priority legislation for her government.

The idea behind the Alberta Sovereignty Act was first put forth by former Wildrose MLA Rob Anderson, University of Calgary political science professor Barry Cooper, and lawyer Derek From. Deemed unconstitutional by several legal experts, this idea is premised on the controversial belief that some of the federal laws, policies and regulations are a serious impediment to Albertans’ prosperity.

“On Day 1, I’m introducing the Alberta Sovereignty Act, authorizing our provincial government to refuse to enforce any federal law or policy that attacks Alberta’s interest or our provincial rights,” Smith said in June.

Kenney, who will leave his position as Alberta premier after the UCP elects its new leader in October, has blasted the sovereignty act as “nutty” and a “de facto plan for separatism.” Some of the UCP caucus members have also publicly expressed their reservations about this idea.

Poilievre is a hands-down favourite in the ongoing federal Conservative leadership contest that will conclude on Sept. 10. One of the key reasons, according to political insiders, why Poilievre, a right-of-centre candidate has been able to sign up so many members is that he has run a populist campaign using slogans such as, “take back control of your life,” and “make Canada the freest nation on Earth.”

Smith is also running a populist campaign, and pollsters note she and Poilievre share a supporter base. If Poilievre wins the federal leadership and Smith wins the provincial leadership, it will be a serious challenge for the Ottawa-area MP to oppose the Sovereignty Act.

So far, Poilievre has not said publicly whether he supports or opposes the proposed act, and his campaign did not respond when asked this question by *The Hill Times* last week.

Political insiders said it remains to be seen how Poilievre will handle this issue.

“The Sovereignty Act [would be] a direct assault on the constitution and the rule of law of Canada, and I would think that anyone who wants to become prime minister of Canada would actually want to defend the constitution and the rule of law,” said Duane Bratt, a political science professor at Mount Royal University in Calgary. “The challenge is, the people who are supporting Smith are the same people who are supporting Poilievre, and that’s why he’s staying out of this, but at a certain point, he is going to have to speak up.”

At the same time, as the leader of the official opposition who wants to become the prime minister, supporting this idea will cause political headaches for Poilievre if he ends up winning the leadership election.

“It would become a make-or-break for any federal politician, or for any other provincial politician across the country,” said Bratt.

“It’s much more challenging for Poilievre, absolutely, because if he criticizes it, which he should, what does he say to his own supporters [who are spread] across the country?”

Bratt and others interviewed for this article said that, in addition to Poilievre, this proposed act will have far-reaching consequences for Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Que.) in his capacity as prime minister, as well as ramifications for the country’s unity. It could be more serious than the Quebec referendums, sources said, as in that case, separatists were clear they wanted to separate from Canada.

“What Smith is arguing is that provincial legislature chairs have the ability of nullifying—not just federal legislation—but court rulings and regulatory decisions. Poilievre, by saying, ‘we’ll get rid of the gatekeepers...’ well, maybe that’s what she’s doing. She’s getting rid of the regulatory body gatekeepers, and she’s getting rid of the judges gatekeepers, and she’s getting rid of federal Parliament gatekeepers.”

At the same time, from a strategic electoral point of view, insiders said Poilievre has higher electoral stakes than the Liberals or the NDP. Of the 34 Alberta seats in the House, the Conservatives hold 30, the Liberals and the NDP two each. They said that Trudeau’s Liberals could use this as a wedge against the Conservatives.

“It would be a clear point of distinction: The Liberals wanting to be the party of national unity and of equity and different regions getting along, and the conservatives will want to play to those regions who feel poorly served in the federation,” said Brown.

“It’s rarely this black and white.”

Frank Graves, president of Ekos Research, agreed that there’s a significant overlap between the Smith and Poilievre supporters, but said if the Ottawa-area MP becomes the party leader, he will have no option but to oppose this proposed idea. Even if Poilievre opposed this policy outright, Graves said his support base don’t have any other option but to vote for the Conservative party.

“I see it more of an expression of Albertan alienation, which is not universal, but there is a strong ingredient that Alberta is the most unhappy with the federal government right now, along with Saskatchewan,” said Graves. “And so, where else would they go, is my question.”

Greg Lyle, president of Innovative Research, said Smith is trying to rally her base during a leadership election. He said if she wins, it remains to be seen if she would actually put forward this legislation and get it passed in the provincial legislature. If Poilievre wins the leadership, he will be a candidate to become the next prime minister, and would need votes from all regions of the country. So, he cannot support everything that Smith is talking about, said Lyle.

“She’s running for leadership, she’s doing something that she thinks will give her the momentum she needs among the people that are willing to join the party for her,” said Lyle. “And we’ll see what she actually does as premier.”

The Hill Times

Profound concern with Conservative Party direction at Centre Ice event

The organizers of this conference are adamant they do not want to start a new party. The conservative movement has been down that path before, resulting in three easy Liberal majorities in a row.

There were a lot of topics discussed at the recent Centre Ice Conservatives conference in Edmonton, Alta.: economy, foreign policy, domestic, and global security, reconciliation, and inclusiveness. All, refreshingly, from an adult perspective on what is good policy for a conservative movement.

For instance, there was discussion of the pressing need for comprehensive reform of the tax code when discussing the economy. The need to simplify it, broaden the base and lower rates. You know, conservative.

There was a delightful lack of suggestions to invest in Bitcoin or fire the Bank of Canada governor. The only time the World Economic Forum (WEF) was mentioned was in jest at the inane suggestion this book club for rich people was somehow controlling and directing a new world order.

But what struck me the hardest were the discussions on our precarious security in a world with powerful aggressive nations in Russia and China, who have made clear they will not be constrained by a traditional view of rule of law or diplomatic convention. They both have designs on our Arctic, which we are woefully unprepared to defend as we operate under a dysfunctional military procurement process that seems more interested in stimulating economic development and keeping deep-pocketed industrialists happy than actually getting our military the hardware it needs to even signal we would put up a fight when the inevitable incursions on our sovereignty come.

As the magnificent former Senator Marjory LeBreton pointed out, a Conservative government announced a polar icebreaker in 2008. Since then, in the intervening 14 years, not a rivet has been driven. So while both Russia and China each have a sub in our Arctic waters, Canada still doesn't have one there. We don't even have an icebreaker announced 14 years ago.

Add to this, warned columnist Andrew Coyne, the possibility that someone like Donald Trump or a Trump acolyte could be back running the United States by 2025. If we think Trump or someone of his ilk is going to play the traditional U.S. role of defending Canada in the face of the strongmen he seems to love, we are delusional. I'm paraphrasing and perhaps editorializing somewhat on Trump, but that was the essence.

So, as Coyne said, we have infantilized our foreign policy, assuming everyone likes us and the U.S. will ultimately defend us, and that is not the reality today. And yet, in the midst of a leadership race for the only party that could replace the current Liberal government, there is no discussion of these issues. We are discussing how we should be free not to wear a mask during a pandemic, we are discussing how Bill Gates and the WEF are attempting to control our lives, we are watching crazy videos on YouTube late into the night to develop economic policy, but we are not discussing the most clear and present danger to our future as a country.

It is scary. LeBreton again: Hearing this discussion and its implications makes me glad I am in the autumn of my life.

(I want to also acknowledge the significant and thought-provoking contributions of former Conservative MP Leona Alleslev and New Brunswick cabinet minister Dominic Cardy to this conversation.)

Keynote speaker Christy Clark, British Columbia's former premier, pointed out that never before had she seen political leaders on all sides putting their effort into dividing Canadians. Up until now, all prime ministers and anyone who aspired to that office emphasized and celebrated what unites us. (Clark also had the line of the day when asked what she thinks of United Conservative Party leadership candidate Danielle Smith's call for an Alberta sovereignty act. "I think it's batshit crazy," she replied.)

In between claiming there was no one paying attention to the conference, a plethora of Conservative MP Pierre Poilievre bros tuned in long enough to decry Clark's history as a Liberal. An insult to Canadians' intelligence, it's

the same attack they use on Conservative leadership candidate Jean Charest. Clark led the BC Liberals, a coalition of Conservatives, Liberals, and free enterprisers who don't think the province is well run under NDP policy. Charest led the Quebec Liberals when they were the federalist coalition against the separatist Parti Québécois. Neither of those provincial parties has any affiliation with the federal Liberal Party of Canada.

As I said on Twitter the other day, if you aren't aware of this and just need a remedial course in Canadian civics, I can live with that. But if you are and you still promote this bullshit or make it an important part of a leadership campaign, say, then you're a liar and I can't accept that.

Clark, herself, while once a federal Liberal, is now a member of the Conservative Party of Canada and will be voting in the leadership race.

There was much more to the day's discussion. There was no official support for one candidate or another in the current CPC leadership contest. But it was clear, Canada's Conservative Party in its various iterations had represented a prudent, solid take on its vision for the country domestically and internationally. That doesn't seem to be part of the current conversation and the people in that room were concerned about it.

Unstated, but shared by most people there, I would suggest, is a profound concern that the conversation prompted by Poilievre and the direction he wants to take the party has little to do with traditional Canadian conservatism—which has delivered on huge, ambitious visions for Canada in the past—and everything to do with a dumbing down of discourse, a cynical focus on made up issues like freedom, and a path to a very dangerous fate for Canada in the future.

The organizers of this conference were adamant they do not want to start a new party. The conservative movement has been down that path before, resulting in three easy Liberal majorities in a row.

But I suspect there were many people in that room who would be interested in a new party if the current party is led by Poilievre after the results are in on Sept. 10.

There will be another Centre Ice conference on Oct. 27 in Halifax. We will have a new leader of the party by then.

That conversation is going to be fascinating.

Chisholm Pothier worked with former finance minister Jim Flaherty in a variety of roles for seven years; was on the leadership campaigns of Michael Chong, Peter MacKay, and Patrick Brown; and has been involved in Conservative and Progressive Conservative politics federally and provincially for 20 years.

The Hill Times

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Poilievre tapped experienced MPs with diverse backgrounds in his House leadership team to showcase a ‘modern and dynamic face’ of the party, say political insiders

Pierre Poilievre is expected to announce his much-anticipated shadow cabinet after the Thanksgiving long weekend, says Yaroslav Baran, who until recently served as a spokesman for the Conservative Party.

Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre recently tapped experienced MPs with diverse backgrounds for his House leadership team to showcase a “modern, dynamic” new face of the party, say political insiders.

Only a few days after becoming party leader, Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.) announced his nine-member House leadership team, which is made up of MPs from all regions of the country, including one from British Columbia, two each from Alberta, Ontario and Quebec, one each from Saskatchewan and Atlantic Canada. Poilievre also has two MPs from the LGBTQ2S+ community and one visible minority MP.

The newly unveiled team includes: Melissa Lantsman (Thornhill, Ont.) and Tim Uppal (Edmonton Mill Woods, Alta.) as deputy leaders; Andrew Scheer (Regina-Qu’Appelle, Sask.) is the House leader; Kerry-Lynne Findlay (South Surrey-White Rock, B.C.) is the chief opposition whip; Chris Warkentin (Grande Prairie-Mackenzie, Alta.) is the deputy whip and QP coordinator; Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg-Haute-Sainte-Charles, Que.) is the Quebec lieutenant; Luc Berthold (Mégantic-L’Érable, Que.) is the deputy House leader; Erin Duncan (Stormont-Dundas-South Glengarry, Ont.) is caucus-party liaison; and Jake Stewart (Miramichi-Grand Lake, N.B.) is caucus committee coordinator. With the exception of Berthold, who was the deputy leader of the party under interim leader Candice Bergen (Portage-Lisgar, Man.) and stayed neutral during the leadership contest, all other MPs in this team endorsed Poilievre.

“It’s sort of like cabinet-making, you’ve got to weigh and balance different interests from geography to experience, communication ability, to demographics,” said Yaroslav Baran, principal at Earnscliffe Strategy Group, who, until recently, served as a spokesperson for the Conservative Party. “I think he’s [Poilievre] done a pretty smart job in the way he put this leadership team together.”

The two picks in this team that stand out among the rest for Tim Powers, vice-chairman of Summa Strategies, are Lantsman and Duncan. While Powers said it was significant that both were members of the LGBTQ2S+ community, more importantly, they represented the “dynamic, new face of the party.”

Powers noted that Duncan’s role as party-caucus liaison is a continuation, as he was initially appointed to the position under former Conservative Party leader Erin O’Toole (Durham, Ont.), and previously served as Question Period coordinator before the 2021 federal election.

“[Lantsman] is young, articulate, and from Ontario, and along with [Uppal] those are good choices,” Powers added.

He also said that he viewed Lantsman’s appointment as a slight nod to “progressives,” noting that the Thornhill MP had a “broader perspective” and was less “rigidly ideological” compared to Poilievre, while still being a “forceful conservative.”

Lantsman, who is Jewish, and Uppal, a Sikh who served as a cabinet minister under prime minister Stephen Harper, will play an important role in the party’s outreach to visible minority communities, insiders said.

As for Scheer’s appointment as House leader, Powers said he viewed that as a decision of loyalty. While it is yet

to be determined how effective he will be, Powers noted that Scheer's previous experience as House leader from December 2015 until September 2016, and as House Speaker from 2011 to 2015, will be an asset. As the House Speaker, Scheer also chaired the House Board of Internal Economy, which makes all the decisions about the management of the House of Commons.

"It's important to have somebody who knows the House, and [Scheer] certainly does," Powers added.

In a minority government, the House leadership team plays a very important role in the inner workings of the House of Commons. Unlike a majority government, where the governing party can do anything it likes in most cases, the governing party in a minority government has to negotiate with the opposition parties on a regular basis to get their legislative agenda through for a smooth functioning of the House. This gives the House leaders of opposition parties more leverage in managing the House business. Scheer held this position under then-interim leader Rona Ambrose in 2015. At the time, the Liberals were in a majority government, but the Conservatives and other opposition parties caused embarrassment for the government when they triggered a surprise vote on a piece of legislation while too many of the government caucus members were away. In the end, the vote was tied, thanks to the rare tie-breaking vote from then-Speaker Geoff Regan.

Three-term CPC MP Berthold, who served as the deputy opposition leader under interim leader Bergen, is now the deputy House leader. Berthold will be a strong francophone voice for Quebec in the House leadership team, a key demographic for any party's success in the House procedure.

"When you're in opposition, there are three officers who people look to on a day-to-day basis: the leader, House leader, and the whip. You cannot undervalue the role of an opposition House leader," said Baran.

"For an opposition party, Parliament is the main theatre of action, and the House leader is the senior most role. The House leader has a tremendous amount of decision making authority for the caucus."

Overall, Powers said it's a competent team, with Findlay as party whip and Warkentin as deputy whip and Question Period coordinator bringing a wealth of knowledge and experience to the team.

In the Harper government, Findlay served as a cabinet minister, and this will be her first stint as the opposition whip. Like any other parliamentarian who is doing the job of whip for the first time, there will be a steep learning curve for Findlay. In this role, she will assign MPs to committees, will have to ensure that MPs show up to vote on time, and hold the government's feet to the fire in committee. House committees are an important parliamentary tool for opposition parties to hold the government to account. At times, she will have to be a disciplinarian, and at other times she will have to be the confidante of MPs going through personal or professional rough patches in their lives.

"Findlay probably has the right demeanour and approach for the position, which is not an easy job," said Garry Keller, vice-president of Strategy Corp., who in the past served as a senior ministerial staffer in the Harper cabinet. "There will be days where she will certainly wonder about the job, because every opposition whip goes through that to some extent, but part of it is having the right demeanour and the right temperament. And certainly she fits the bill, definitely in that way."

Warkentin performed the role of Question Period co-ordinator under interim leader Rona Ambrose from 2015 to 2017 and was instrumental in holding the government to account. In this role, Warkentin will not only help Findlay in her duties as whip, but at the same time will determine the daily QP strategy.

Meanwhile, Paul-Hus, as Quebec lieutenant, will be the chief strategist and his party's most influential voice for the province that has 78 electoral seats, the second highest for any province in the country after Ontario.

Of the 10 Conservative MPs from Quebec, Paul-Hus is the only one who supported Poilievre in the leadership election. His counterpart on the government side is Canadian Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Que.).

In his new role, the three-term MP will advise the leader on political strategy in the province where they need to win more seats if they want to form government after the next election.

Also, he will have to keep a close eye on the Liberal strategy in the province so that they're not caught by surprise at election time.

Stewart, who is an MP from Atlantic Canada, will be the leader's eyes and ears on caucus committees where MPs will discuss different policy issues that are top of mind for their respective regions. He will be the go-between for the leader, shadow cabinet critics, and MPs on policy issues.

As caucus-party liaison, Duncan will be the caucus's voice at party headquarters and vice versa. Duncan will help co-ordinate the strategy between the caucus and the party.

"That's a position that I helped to create in 2015, partially, because there was a feeling after being in government going to opposition that there may have sometimes been a disconnect about where the caucus views may have been on what the party should be doing, or the party's communications approach or the party's approach on fundraising, whatever the case," said Keller who served as chief of staff to Ambrose as interim party leader from 2015 to 2017.

"And then on the other side, there's sometimes a feeling on the party headquarters' [side where they] didn't really know what the caucus was doing."

Meanwhile, Baran said that Poilievre is not expected to announce his shadow cabinet until the Thanksgiving long weekend. He said the leader is doing his best to ensure he makes the right choice for different shadow cabinet positions. According to a source, Poilievre is consulting all caucus members on what role they would like to have under his leadership and what role he had in mind. Putting together a shadow cabinet will be a challenge for the new leader, as more than half of the caucus supported him in the leadership contest and all will be expecting major roles in the party under Poilievre. Sources said that Jenni Byrne, who is heading the transition team for Poilievre, is helping out the new leader in finalizing the shadow cabinet and staffing the opposition leader's staff in the Opposition Leader's Office.

"It's important for internal caucus management," said Keller. "A lot of people want to be shadow shadow cabinet critics and to be part of the decision making process. Obviously, not everybody can be. There's 119 Members of Parliament [in the Conservative caucus]. And, so, for some people, they want to be at Shadow Cabinet because they want to help shape the policies, for some people, it's a feeling of being part of the insider team."

The Hill Times

Top 25 most influential Conservatives in federal politics

Pierre Poilievre and Jenni Byrne are at the current power structure's core, but there are other groups of people influencing them, insiders tell *The Hill Times*.

With the Conservatives having dominated public opinion polls for more than a year, the party has a serious shot at power in the next election.

That means some of its top players are poised to hold major influence following the next campaign. *The Hill Times* spoke on a not-for-attribution basis with multiple Conservative insiders, including former staffers and party officials, so they could candidly offer their views on who the real power players are in the party, and who would likely hold influence if the Conservatives were to form government.

Multiple insiders told *The Hill Times* there are two names that hold a degree of influence above all others on the list: Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.), and his key adviser Jenni Byrne. No surprise there.

However, insiders also made the point that while Poilievre and Byrne are at the core of the current Conservative power structure, there is an orbit of several surrounding groups of people influencing them.

This is *The Hill Times*' list of the Top 25 Most Influential Federal Conservatives in Canada today, and those who will hold sway if the party comes to power.

The core

Pierre Poilievre, Conservative leader

Having handily won a first-ballot victory in his party's 2022 leadership race, and now holding a commanding 15-to-20-point lead in most public opinion polls, Pierre Poilievre is the first Conservative leader since former prime minister Stephen Harper to have a solid grip on his party's leadership. With current public opinion trends indicating he has a strong chance of forming a government after the next election, that makes him solidly the most influential federal Conservative in Canada. During the 2022 leadership race, the Conservative Party gained more than 578,000 new members, the majority of whom were signed up by Poilievre's team. Poilievre also commands a sizeable following across multiple social media channels, and has shown a high degree of comfort in using this medium. The issues he has centred—such as housing and cost of living—regularly poll as top issues for Canadians in public opinion research.

Jenni Byrne, top adviser

Some sources consulted for this list told *The Hill Times* there are really only two names that belong on it: Poilievre, and his key adviser Jenni Byrne. While Byrne officially operates without a title, she is widely known to be the key architect of Poilievre's political strategy. It's a partnership that goes back to the days of the Harper government when Poilievre was an upcoming MP and Byrne was a political operative. The two also dated for several years during that time. While that relationship ended, their political alliance remains. Byrne is said to be involved in every key decision Poilievre makes, and she has extraordinary say in who else does—or does not—have influence in current Conservative circles.

Caucus clout

Melissa Lantsman, deputy leader

A former staffer who worked in the office of Peter Kent—whom she succeeded as the MP for Thornhill, Ont.—Melissa Lantsman has made her own mark since entering the House in 2021. She was a strong supporter of Poilievre in his leadership bid. Now, as deputy leader, Lantsman is involved in the morning meetings that set the message

of the day. She has been a trusted media spokesperson for Poilievre, most recently traveling to Halifax during the Liberal cabinet retreat to provide her party's reaction to reporters during the event. As a member of the Jewish community, she has been an outspoken voice on the Israel-Hamas conflict. The Jewish community represents an important bloc of voters for the Conservatives in several ridings, including Lantsman's. A bilingual daughter of immigrants, she is also able to draw on connections as a member of the LGBT community.

Tim Uppal, deputy leader

A four-term MP and former cabinet minister, Tim Uppal (Edmonton Mill Woods, Alta.) plays a pivotal role in the Conservative Party's outreach to Indo-Canadian and broader South Asian communities. An MP since 2008, Uppal has served as deputy leader since 2022 alongside Lantsman. Under Harper, Uppal held key positions, including minister of state for democratic reform, and later minister of state for multiculturalism. He also acted as the party's liaison with visible minority communities under then-leaders Andrew Scheer (Regina-Qu'Appelle, Sask.) and Erin O'Toole. In 2017, Uppal was instrumental in supporting Jason Kenney's successful bid for leader of Alberta's United Conservative Party.

Andrew Scheer, House leader

Andrew Scheer has resuscitated his political career following his rocky stint as Conservative leader from 2017-2020 by returning to one of the areas he knows best: House procedure. The former speaker of the House of Commons is a long-time friend of Poilievre. They both became MPs in the class of 2004, and have a relationship that goes back to their days in the Reform Party's youth wing. Scheer worked closely alongside Poilievre in the 2022 leadership race, and now plays a key role in setting strategy for the opposition's attacks on the government in the House. Scheer is closely aided in this role by Deputy Whip and Question Period Coordinator Chris Warkentin (Grande Prairie-Mackenzie, Alta.), who often implements the strategy set by Scheer within caucus.

Arpan Khanna, MP

A lawyer and former ministerial staffer, Arpan Khanna (Oxford, Ont.) is emerging as an up-and-coming figure within the Conservative Party. First elected in a June 2023 byelection, he works closely with Uppal on outreach to visible minority communities. Khanna served as Poilievre's Ontario campaign chair during the 2022 leadership contest, and was later appointed as the party's national outreach chair. To win a majority government, Conservatives need major support in multicultural communities. For this, Khanna and Uppal travel across the country to recruit candidates from these communities, and to build connections.

Pierre Paul-Hus, MP and Quebec lieutenant

Quebec is the only region of the country where the Conservatives are not presently leading in national opinion polls, and they have a path to victory without winning a majority of its 78 seats. However, to be seen as a national government, it is still key for the Tories to win at least a handful of seats in Quebec, as Harper did in the elections when he formed government. That's where Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg-Haute-Saint-Charles, Que.) comes into the picture as Poilievre's Quebec lieutenant. Insiders say Paul-Hus' role involves advising Poilievre on Quebec issues, and being a trusted media spokesperson in the province, while Leo Housakos, a Conservative Senator from Quebec, has the lead role on organizing the party's ground game in the province.

Adam Chambers, MP and caucus policy lead

When it comes to the policy agenda that a Poilievre government might pursue if elected, Conservative MP Adam Chambers (Simcoe North, Ont.) is playing a key role that goes beyond his assignment as national revenue critic. He's the caucus lead on policy development, working closely with Poilievre, Byrne, and OLO policy director Aaron Wudrick. Chambers is a first-term MP, but no stranger to the Hill having served as a senior advisor to the late Jim Flaherty when he was finance minister. He also brings business experience, having served as an assistant vice-president for a large insurance firm, and as an entrepreneur starting his own businesses.

Upcoming candidates

Aaron Gunn, candidate

Poilievre's team has been actively recruiting candidates across the country that it wants at the caucus table after the next election. One of those candidates who's said to have the trust of the inner circle is Aaron Gunn, the nominated Conservative candidate for North Island—Powell River, B.C., where three-term NDP MP Rachel Blaney

is not seeking re-election. Gunn is trusted by the OLO when it comes to decisions about tour planning and local issues in that province where the Conservatives presently look poised to make big gains. Other candidates to watch include former B.C. MLA Ellis Ross, and former chief of the Enoch Cree Nation Billy Morin who have their party's nomination in the ridings of Skeena—Bulkley Valley, B.C., and Edmonton Northwest, Alta., respectively.

Senate strength

Leo Housakos, Senator

The Senate is expected to be a key issue that a future Conservative government as Poilievre would inherit an Upper Chamber where a large majority of the Senators have been appointed by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. While they are nominally independent, many of them have progressive policy leanings, and there has been talk of whether they would try to tie up Tory legislation. That's where Senators like Leo Housakos (Wellington) from Quebec will come in to work on political strategy in the Senate, as well as to potentially mount public pressure against any serious delays of legislation. Housakos is also playing a key role in preparing his party's ground game in Quebec for the next election.

Denise Batters, Senator

Another Senator who is likely to play a key role if the Upper Chamber balks at Tory bills is Denise Batters (Saskatchewan). Insiders say that while Housakos could mount public pressure in Quebec, Batters—who represents Saskatchewan—would be well positioned to be that voice in English-language media, particularly in Western Canada. Batters is also seen as close to the leader's inner circle, having played a key role in the ouster of Poilievre's predecessor, O'Toole.

Stalwart staffers

Ian Todd, OLO chief of staff

A seasoned insider with roots going back to the Reform Party days, Ian Todd manages access to the leader. He determines who meets with the leader and for how long, and when specific issues are brought to the leader's attention. Additionally, Todd oversees hiring, firing, and overall staff management in the OLO, as well as the office's budget.

Aaron Wudrick, OLO director of policy

A recent recruit to the OLO, newly minted policy director Aaron Wudrick is exactly who the core wanted to have in this job, replacing former policy director David Murray, say insiders. Wudrick brings serious policy chops having served as director of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute's domestic policy program up until his recent recruitment. He also previously worked with the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. Wudrick is said to be working closely with Poilievre, Byrne, and caucus policy lead Chambers on setting the platform—which the Tories have said they will not roll out until the election is underway. Wudrick's work could form the blueprint for what a Poilievre government would do with power, if elected.

Craig Hilimoniuk, OLO Director of Parliamentary Affairs

OLO Director of Parliamentary Affairs Craig Hilimoniuk is trusted with a significant role due to his background having worked in Poilievre's MP office. This history has built a strong trust, and has given Hilimoniuk direct access to Poilievre. In a minority government, a federal election can be triggered by a defeat on a single confidence vote in the House. With the NDP ripping up its supply-and-confidence agreement with the Liberals, Hilimoniuk's role becomes even more crucial. As the House returns for the fall sitting, Poilievre will put forward a non-confidence vote against the prime minister at the earliest chance. Although this vote is unlikely to succeed, it will put pressure on the Liberals' parliamentary agenda, and on the other opposition parties. With Poilievre aiming to challenge Trudeau in the House at every opportunity, Hilimoniuk's role is vital.

Party Officials

Mike Crase, CPC executive director

Mike Crase is the highest-ranking official at Conservative Party headquarters, overseeing all major aspects of

party operations, including organization, fundraising, data management, polling, and election readiness. Before assuming this role, he was the executive director of the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party. There, he overhauled the provincial party's voter data system—a key skillset to bring to the federal Tories at a time when their old voter data management system had atrophied, which gave the Liberals a leg up in this area in the most recent federal campaigns. The Ontario PCs won two back-to-back majority governments under Doug Ford's leadership while Crase was in his employ.

Jeremy Liedtke, CPC director of political operations

In the roughly 25-year history of the federal Conservative Party, only three individuals have held the prestigious position of director of political operations: the late former Senator Doug Finley, frequent media commentator Fred DeLorey, and now Jeremy Liedtke. In this role, Liedtke collaborates closely with Crase and other members of the party's top brass to secure victory in the next election. During the forthcoming campaign, he will also oversee the party's get-out-the-vote efforts, a critical operation to winning. A long-time staffer for Poilievre in his MP office, Liedtke managed Poilievre's re-election campaign in 2019, and served as campaign director during his successful 2022 leadership bid.

Robert Staley, Conservative Fund Canada chair

As the chair of the Conservative Fund Canada—one of the most prestigious and influential positions within the Conservative Party—lawyer Robert Staley oversees the party's finances. Under Poilievre's leadership, the fund has been raising record-breaking amounts of money. At every convention, the chair's speech is an anticipated event, where members get updates about the party's financial health. Presently, the Conservatives are out-fundraising the Liberals by a ratio of three to one. Since Poilievre became leader in 2022, the Conservative Fund has invested millions of dollars in building his public image. Each year, the fund decides how to allocate tens of millions of dollars under Staley's direction.

Rob Batherson, Conservative Fund Canada member

A former party president, three-term national councillor, and former Hill staffer, Rob Batherson is now a director on the board of the influential Conservative Fund Canada. The party also relies on him for guidance on fundraising, candidate nominations, and his expertise on Atlantic Canada—a region where Conservatives are looking to make big gains in the next election. Senior Conservatives describe Batherson as someone who is “in the deal flow,” meaning he's consulted and involved in core decisions.

Stephen Barber, CPC president

A former senior federal and provincial public servant, Stephen Barber is the Conservative Party's current president. He's also the national councillor from Manitoba. The 20-member National Council is the party's highest elected governing body. To be a successful leader, Poilievre needs to maintain the support of the national council, caucus, and the Conservative Fund. As party president, Barber is an ex-officio member of all national council committees.

Key vendors

Brooke Pigott, pollster

Longtime Tory operative Brooke Pigott is the party's primary vendor for public opinion research. She has a long resume, having worked on conservative campaigns both federally and provincially, including having served as director of public opinion research in the Harper PMO. As the party's pollster, she plays a key role in providing vital public opinion research that informs the party's political strategy and policy positions. She also has a long-standing, close relationship with Byrne, and is trusted by the inner circle.

Chad Bowie, direct mail vendor

Founder and principal of The Bowie Group, Chad Bowie is the primary vendor working on the Conservatives' direct mail campaigns—a vital role in the party's fundraising efforts. The Tories' success in this area has been key in establishing the strength they presently hold over their political rivals. Bowie has also worked with federal and provincial conservatives campaigns across the country, and is well-known and trusted by many party operatives.

Outside influencers

Anaida Poilievre, spouse and adviser

Anaida Poilievre, a former Senate and House staffer, is not only Pierre Poilievre's wife, she's also a key part of his inner circle. As a former staffer, she understands political strategy. She has input on strategy across the country, particularly in Quebec where her family settled after immigrating from Venezuela in 1995. Political insiders who've worked with her describe her as very "assertive," and not a pushover. Growing up in Quebec, Anaida has established herself as an impressive bilingual speaker, earning standing ovations at Conservative Party events. She is instrumental in portraying Poilievre as a family man and a pan-Canadian figure: hailing from Alberta, representing an Ontario riding, fluent in French, and married to an immigrant from Montreal.

Ian Brodie, former Harper staffer

Ian Brodie, who previously served as chief of staff to Harper and as executive director of the Conservative Party, is seen as an elder statesman. Byrne worked under Brodie in both the party office and the PMO. Brodie chaired the Leadership Election Organizing Committee in the 2022 Conservative Party leadership race that saw Poilievre become leader. Known for guiding the party's "intellectual side," he frequently gives interviews to traditional and new media outlets, such as podcasts, to articulate the Conservative viewpoint.

John Baird, former minister

A former Harper-era senior cabinet minister, John Baird is known as an elder statesman of the party and mentor to Poilievre, having first taken Poilievre under his wing when he was a newly elected MP. Baird also chaired Poilievre's 2022 successful leadership campaign. If the Conservatives win the next federal election, Baird may take on a meaningful role for the new government, even if it means taking a pay cut from his current position in the private sector.

Stephen Harper, former prime minister

Stephen Harper, the founding leader of the modern Conservative Party, formed government less than three years after the merger of the Progressive Conservatives and Canadian Alliance, and went on to win three consecutive elections. Poilievre was first elected as an MP under Harper's leadership, and served under him until 2015—including a stint as parliamentary secretary to the prime minister. Byrne also served under Harper in the party office and in his PMO. The former prime minister is known as a "true-blue" Conservative, and took the rare step of endorsing Poilievre for leadership during the 2022 campaign—something he didn't do in the other two leadership races since he stepped down from the party's top job. Even though he left office a almost decade ago, his advice remains influential among senior Conservatives, including Poilievre, Byrne, and others.

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The Hill Times

Who's who in Conservative whip, House leader shops

Kenzie Potter remains chief of staff to House Leader Andrew Scheer, while Nathan Ellis is in charge of Whip Kerry-Lynne Findlay's team.

It's been a while since Hill Climbers last checked in on the offices of Conservative House Leader Andrew Scheer and Whip Kerry-Lynne Findlay, and there are some fresh names on both rosters.

Between the two, Scheer's office is the least changed, with only one staff addition since Climbers' last update.

Scheer's longtime aide, Kenzie Potter, remains chief of staff in the House leader's office, as she's been since he was named to the role in September 2022. Potter has been working for Scheer through his various roles since 2011, starting as chief of staff for his office as then-House Speaker. She's since worked for Scheer during his turn as House leader under then-interim Conservative leader Rona Ambrose after the 2015 election; as the MP for Regina-Qu'Appelle, Sask., both on the Hill and in the riding; and as principal secretary in Scheer's office as leader of the official opposition (OLO).

Potter's time on the Hill overall dates back to 2005. Between 2005 and 2011, she worked for then-Conservative senator Anne Cools, Jay Hill as both then-Conservative government whip and then-government House leader, and for then-transport minister Chuck Strahl.

Longtime staffer David Prest—who's been working for Tory House leaders since 2003 and on the Hill since the 1980s—remains director of parliamentary affairs. Prest's record also includes time spent working for Bill Kempling and Jim Hawkes during their respective turns as then-Progressive Conservative whip.

Working under Prest are seasoned parliamentary affairs staffers Adam Church and Colin Thackeray, as well as Leah Young, who was first hired to the office under then-House leader John Brassard in the spring of 2022.

Church has been working on the Hill since 2009, starting as a senior adviser to then-public safety minister Peter Van Loan. He went on to work in Van Loan's office as then-trade minister, and from 2011-2015, was chief of staff to Van Loan as then-government House leader. After the 2015 election, he stayed on board as a senior parliamentary affairs adviser.

Thackeray has been working in the Conservative House leader's office since 2004. Originally hired as assistant to the parliamentary secretary, he's been a senior adviser since 2016.

For her part, Young is also a former assistant to British Columbia Conservative MP Brad Vis, and briefly worked as a junior writer in then-party leader Erin O'Toole's OLO.

Bethany Livingstone is the newest member of Scheer's House leader's team, having been hired as a communications assistant last year. According to her LinkedIn profile, Livingstone is a former MP's assistant and also works as a freelance photographer. Between 2019 and 2022, she was a sales and brand co-ordinator for UTracks, a travel tour company, in Ottawa.

Over in Findlay's office as Conservative whip, there are two additions and three departures to catch up on.

Starting with the new: Colin Munro is now director of communications to Findlay, whose office he joined last July.

Munro has previously worked for four different Conservative MPs, most recently Stormont-Dundas-South Glengarry, Ont., MP Eric Duncan, who's also the Conservative caucus-party liaison. Munro has also previously worked for B.C. MP Todd Doherty, then-Manitoba MP Candice Bergen, and then-Ontario MP Guy Lauzon. He's also a former enforcement officer with the Competition Bureau.

Kiel Meausette has joined the whip's team as a committee co-ordinator, as has Virginie Bonneau.

Meausette is a former assistant to Alberta Conservative MP Blake Richards, whom he worked for as recently as last year.

Bonneau's name is a familiar one to these pages. A former aide to then-chief government whip Gordon O'Connor, Bonneau worked as a Quebec regional affairs adviser in then-prime minister Stephen Harper's office between 2011 and 2014. She went on to be a senior policy adviser for official languages and the Quebec region to then-heritage minister Shelly Glover. Prior to joining the whip's team, she'd worked in the OLO since 2016, starting under then-interim leader Ambrose.

Current leader Pierre Poilievre's OLO ignores requests to confirm who is being paid public dollars to work for the leader, but—based purely on more than a decade of experience navigating the unreliable beast that is the government's electronic directory service (GEDS)—Bonneau does not appear to have stayed on after Poilievre took over the party's helm in 2022. The OLO's staff roster on GEDS seems to get updated more reliably than those of other offices (to be clear, this is a low bar), and Bonneau's name has been absent from it since then. Her last known role was as associate director of parliamentary affairs to then-leader O'Toole.

Bonneau and Meausette work alongside Nick Drain and Wade Myall who continue as committee co-ordinators.

Drain joined the office in October 2022, and has previously worked for Conservative MPs Dan Albas and Gerald Soroka. Myall was hired in November 2022; he's an ex-aide to Alberta Conservative MP Chris Warkentin, then-MP Rob Anders, and then-Conservative senator Lynn Beyak, and a former committee co-ordinator for the Senate Conservatives.

Nathan Ellis remains chief of staff to the Tory whip as he's been since shortly after Findlay was named to the role in September 2022. He's a former chief to Brassard as then-House leader, and was also previously a senior adviser to Bergen as then-House leader, and an assistant to then-Conservative MP David Sweet during Sweet's time as caucus chair.

Sébastien Togneri continues as lobby co-ordinator. Togneri has been with the whip's office since 2018. A former assistant to then-Alberta Conservative MP James Rajotte, he was a lobby co-ordinator to then-whip Hill, and was director of parliamentary affairs to then-minister Christian Paradis from 2007-2010, through Paradis' time as then-public works minister and as then-minister for natural resources.

Togneri worked off the Hill between 2010 and 2018, including in the office of then-Alberta Wildrose official opposition leader Danielle Smith (who is now premier of the province as leader of the United Conservative Party), and for former premier Christy Clark's B.C. Liberal government (the provincial party, now named B.C. United, has historically included a mix of federal Liberals and Conservatives), among other things.

Also still in place in the whip's office are senior administrative assistant Francesca Desaulniers, and administrative assistant Saica Pierre-Louis.

Desaulniers is a former assistant to Findlay as the MP for South Surrey–White Rock, B.C., and has been in the whip's office since September 2022. Pierre-Louis worked for the Conservative Party prior to joining the office in 2020.

As has been noted, Matthew Senft, who was previously a senior committees co-ordinator in the whip's office, is now a senior opposition researcher in the Conservative research bureau, which also falls under Poilievre's oversight and operates in tandem with the OLO.

Also having left the whip's office are Kelly Williams, who was last a senior administrative assistant, and Emily Thibert, who was a committee co-ordinator.

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The Hill Times

A rundown of Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre's team

Director of media relations Sebastian Skamski is among the new additions to the leader's office, and recent promotions include Alyssa Doig's elevation to the title of director of caucus services.

Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre has a mixture of new and familiar faces in his office as official opposition leader, also known as the OLO.

Staffing news from Poilievre's OLO was slow at first, with only a few staff decisions publicly known by October. As previously reported, that list includes chief of staff Ian Todd, director of policy David Murray, director of tour and operations Stephanie Dunlop, and director of communications Ben Woodfinden.

Poilievre's office declined to confirm staffing (it's worth noting that, aside from being paid by public dollars through Parliament-allocated funding, OLO staff are considered designated public office holders under the federal Lobbying Act). The government's electronic directory service (GEDS)—meant as a public source of information on who works for federal elected officials, departments, and other Parliament offices—is an unfortunately unreliable resource. While it appears to have been updated since Poilievre took over the Conservative Party helm in August, the list is imperfect, with Murray, for one, not listed in the directory.

Using the information suggested on GEDS, Hill Climbers worked to confirm the current OLO team via other resources, including LinkedIn.

That in mind, let's dive in.

Craig Hilimoniuk, who previously worked in Poilievre's office as the MP for Carleton, Ont., is now director of parliamentary affairs in the OLO. Hilimoniuk graduated from Carleton University with a bachelor's degree in 2013 and later studied for a master's degree at Brock University, for which his research project focused on "Communicating Brand Politics: The Harper Government in Comparative Perspective."

Andrew Swidzinski is back in the OLO as a senior policy and Quebec adviser. A notary from Pointe-Claire, Que., he previously tackled policy in the office under then-leader Erin O'Toole, and worked on both O'Toole and Poilievre's leadership campaigns.

Josh Eisses is a policy co-ordinator. A former staffer to Conservative MP Chris D'Entremont, he was working in the 2019 Conservative war room before being tapped to put his name on the ballot in Long Range Mountains, N.L., where he ultimately came second to now-Rural Economic Development Minister Gudie Hutchings.

While she's unmentioned on GEDS, Alyssa Doig is now director of Conservative caucus services.

Doig first landed on the Hill as an intern in the summer of 2019 and went on to work for a Conservative Member of Parliament. She became a national caucus co-ordinator in the OLO under O'Toole, and has since also been an Alberta and British Columbia regional affairs adviser and caucus liaison in the central Conservative office. Doig was made a manager of caucus services earlier this fall and was promoted to director in December. She has a bachelor's degree in business administration from Brigham Young University and according to her LinkedIn profile began studying for a master's degree in the subject at the University of Alberta earlier this year.

Matthew Senft, who until recently was a senior committees adviser in Conservative Whip Kerry-Lyne Findlay's office, has joined the central team. Hill Climbers understands he's heading research and reports to Murray as policy director. A former Harper-era cabinet staffer, Senft started working full time on the Hill in 2016 as an assistant to then-Conservative MP Ron Cannan. He's since worked for then-government whip Jay Hill, then-heritage minister Josée Verner, then-immigration minister Jason Kenney, then-labour minister Lisa Raitt, then-human resources minister Diane Finley, then-trade minister Ed Fast, and as an assistant to Alberta Conservative MPs Rachael Thomas and Shannon Stubbs.

Sebastian Skamski joined the OLO as director of media relations in December. He's a former communications director to Ontario Public and Business Service Delivery Minister Kaleed Rasheed, having started in that office under then-minister Lisa Thompson (when the portfolio was called government and consumer services). Skamski interned in Harper's PMO over the summer of 2015, just before the federal election that saw the Conservatives lose government, and began working at Queen's Park in 2017. Among other past roles at the provincial legislature, he spent time as press secretary to then-Ontario Treasury Board president Peter Bethlenfalvy.

Philippe Refghi and Sam Lilly are press secretaries. Refghi joined the OLO in his current role in late 2020, while Lilly, a former 2019 Conservative candidate in Edmonton Strathcona, Alta., has been on board since the spring of 2021. Lilly is also a former assistant to MP Stubbs.

Priyank D'Sa continues as manager of digital media, a role he's filled since the spring of 2022, having first joined the office under O'Toole roughly one year prior as a digital media officer. Sebastian Gutierrez is a digital media officer. According to his LinkedIn profile, he joined the OLO team as a special projects officer in October 2021 and took on his current title in March 2022. Both Gutierrez and D'Sa were part of the 2021 national Conservative campaign's digital content team.

Haley Love is manager of the leader's digital services. She's a former consultant with Wellington Advocacy and joined the OLO in November. Love has also previously been a digital media consultant with Act Digital, a special media co-ordinator with the Mobilize Media Group, and a community relations assistant with the Canada Strong & Free Network.

Kyle Simpson and Eric Brouwer are media monitors in the office. Simpson has been in the office since the beginning of 2020, starting under then-leader Scheer, while Brouwer has been on board since the spring of 2021, having been hired during O'Toole's tenure.

Daria Fesenko is the OLO's manager of video production. She's been a videographer in the office since April 2021, and was promoted to manager in October. Fesenko was also a videographer for the Conservative national campaign during the 2021 federal election.

She works closely with senior video specialist and photographer Anthony Cinerari, who's been working for Conservative leaders since the end of 2019, starting under Andrew Scheer.

Holly Duggan remains on board as director of stakeholder relations and outreach. A former assistant to Alberta Conservative MP Jag Sahota, she joined the leader's office under O'Toole as a stakeholder relations adviser in September 2020. Duggan is a former Harper-era cabinet staffer, and has since also worked for then-Conservative Senate leader Claude Carignan and as a strategic adviser for the Canadian Medical Association.

Joe George is a cultural outreach officer who first joined the OLO under then-interim leader Candice Bergen.

Shawn Driscoll continues as a stakeholder relations adviser, a role he's filled in the OLO since early 2021. A former Harper-era cabinet staffer—including to Gail Shea as both then-national revenue minister and then-minister of state for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency—Driscoll has also worked for the Progressive Conservatives in both P.E.I. and Nova Scotia.

Kate Harper is working under Dunlop as manager of tour and event planning in the leader's office. She joined the OLO under O'Toole as a tour and event planner in September 2020. Harper was an event planner for the leader's tour during the 2021 federal election, and previously tackled ground logistics for Scheer's leader's tour during the 2019 race. She's also a former aide to then-Alberta minister for culture, multiculturalism, and status of women Leela Aheer.

Elia Lopez is a tour and events planner, while Zachary Halsall has joined the OLO as a tour and advance assistant. Lopez was hired to the leader's office as a tour co-ordinator under O'Toole.

Matthew Antonitti is Poilievre's executive assistant, while Rachel Loif is the leader's scheduler. Antonitti joined the leader's office in September, after doing the same for Poilievre during the 2022 leadership race, and is a former aide to Ontario Conservative MP Eric Duncan. Loif is also a former aide to Duncan.

Kim Baker is listed as executive assistant to Todd as chief of staff. Baker is a former assistant to Bergen as a Conservative MP, and, according to Bergen, worked in the OLO during Bergen's time as interim party leader.

Liam Walsh joined the leader's office as a special assistant in September, according to his LinkedIn profile. He's a former aide to Ontario Conservative MP Melissa Lantsman, who was made deputy leader in September, and has previously worked as an operations assistant at Crestview Strategies.

Christine Wylupski continues as director of finance, administration, and the official residence under Poilievre. She's been in the role since the fall of 2019, and was previously manager of finance, HR, events, and the official residence since 2015. Wylupski is also a former executive assistant to Scheer during his time as Speaker of the House of Commons.

Heather Egan is office manager and finance administrator. Egan started out as an administrative assistant in the OLO and was promoted to office manager in early 2020.

Salpie Stepanian continues in her long-running post as director of correspondence to the Conservative leader. Stepanian was manager of correspondence in Stephen Harper's office as prime minister from 2006 through to 2015, and tackled correspondence on the Hill since as far back as the '90s, including as a correspondence supervisor in then-Reform Party leader Preston Manning's OLO. After the Harper Conservatives lost government, Stepanian joined the OLO under then-interim leader Rona Ambrose and was made a director in 2020 under then-leader O'Toole.

Craig Maguire is listed on GEDS as a senior correspondence adviser. Maguire is another longtime Conservative correspondence aide, having worked under Stepanian in Harper's PMO and in the OLO since 2015.

Leslie Virgin is a correspondence adviser. Also a longtime staffer, she was an English writer in Harper's PMO and has been working in the OLO since 2015.

Sabrina Kooistra joined the OLO as a correspondence adviser in October after roughly a year working in Poilievre's MP office. She played a similar role on Poilievre's 2022 leadership campaign, and was a campaign co-ordinator for Alberta Conservative MP Martin Shields during the 2021 election. She graduated from the University of Calgary with a bachelor's degree in history, communications and media studies (a double major) earlier this year.

Walter Mangubat is an administrative officer with the correspondence unit.

Patrice Charette continues to be listed as a translator in the OLO, working alongside fellow translator Emma Lévesque, who joined the office in the spring of 2022. Scott Bandy, a former assistant to Ontario Conservative MP Karen Vecchio, is a writer and joined the leader's office in January 2022.

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The Hill Times

Poilievre voted best public speaker, most quotable, hardest-working, and biggest self-promoter in *The Hill Times*' 29th Annual Politically Savvy Survey

And Housing Minister Sean Fraser, who was already picked as the Most Valuable Politician in 2023 in *The Hill Times*' All Politics Poll in December, was voted best cabinet minister in 2024 in this survey.

While Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre courts voters across the country this summer to rail against decisions made in the capital, denizens of the Ottawa bubble have given him top marks across a range of categories in *The Hill Times*' 29th Annual Politically Savvy Survey.

A fan of three-word slogans—axe the tax, build the homes, and so on—Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.) would doubtless be chuffed to know he's seen as the "best public speaker," "most quotable MP," and the "hardest-working MP," though might be less pleased as the "biggest self-promoter."

Poilievre also topped the list of "best fundraisers," with the Conservative Party's war chest since his 2022 election as leader providing empirical evidence for the assertion. He's also seen as the most effective Question Period MP for his party, surprising no one who has tuned in on afternoons when the House sits.

"His name does come up more than is warranted by the fact that he's the leader of the Tories," said Lorne Bozinoff, president and CEO of Forum Research, which conducted this year's survey between June 10 and July 5 on behalf of *The Hill Times*. "He is a good speaker, a good public speaker. Even if he wasn't leader, he'd be showing up in some of these things."

On his speaking ability, one respondent said Poilievre "has good timing, and always keeps a calm composure." Another said his "ability to speak off the cuff without notes and tell a story is unmatched by any other member." The survey was also probably home to the highest use of the word "zinger" outside KFC.

For those fearing this survey was a Tory love-in, rest assured that those self-identified as Conservatives made up only 16.7 per cent of the 126 respondents, behind 33.3 per cent who affiliated with the Liberals, 6.3 per cent NDP, four per cent Green, and 1.6 per cent Bloc Québécois. It's possible that some quiet Tories found themselves in the 38.1 per cent who did not list an affiliation.

For all his attacks on the "Laurentian elite," the official opposition leader—who marked two decades representing an Ottawa-area riding late last month—has been a fixture in the survey of political insiders since long before he took the top Conservative job. Long-time readers may recall his impressive showing in 2021, for example.

Looking back at those previous survey results, Bozinoff said the votes helped to "tell you who the leaders of the future are."

"There's people there because of their longevity, because of their positions in the party" he said. "Then there's the people who, I think, are the up and comers, they're the next generation."

If that's the case, politicians had best watch Conservative MPs Melissa Lantsman (Thornhill, Ont.) and Michael Barrett (Leeds–Grenville–Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, Ont.).

First-term Lantsman, who was named one of Poilievre's two deputies in 2022, outshone her leader as the best opposition MP in scrums, and was seen as the Conservatives' second-best performer in Question Period.

“Everytime she scrums she makes the government hurt. She has a unique reach as an MP so her message is always heard,” said one respondent. Another said she was “quick on her feet, [has] strong political sense and knows how to spin.”

Barrett, his party’s ethics critic, has had plenty on his plate amid numerous government scandals. He appears to have put that role to good use in the eyes of insiders, receiving a string of third-place finishes in the categories of best public speaker, most effective Conservative Question Period MP, and best opposition MP in scrums.

Beyond the realm of political theatre, Barrett also rated highly among his staff, named as the best MP to work for, and also the third-hardest working MP. “The man does not stop,” one person said.

But enough about the Conservatives. After 600 words, it’s about time to note members of the other four parties in Parliament.

Turning to the cabinet, Housing Minister Sean Fraser (Central Nova, N.S.) returned from a strong 2023 showing to be named the government’s best weapon in Question Period, ahead of Innovation Minister François-Philippe Champagne (Saint-Maurice–Champlain, Que.) and Public Safety Minister Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, N.B.).

“The best education you can get in Question Period performance is found at Tim Hortons in a small town in my community rather than in an office on Parliament Hill,” Fraser told *The Hill Times* when asked about his approach to Question Period.

“It’s important that you’re able to talk to people in the House of Commons as though you’re talking to them in real life. People don’t want to listen to politicians read off the lines that come in from a department devoid of context of the question,” he said. “They want to hear real answers to real questions, and they want to know that the people who represent their communities think like they do and talk like they do.”

Fraser was also perceived to be the second-best public speaker, and the second-best MP to work for, the latter position being shared with Citizens’ Services Minister Terry Beech (Burnaby North–Seymour, B.C.) and—yes, we’re finally mentioning him—Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Que.).

Fraser said he had been “blessed with the most extraordinary team in politics,” led by chief of staff Savannah De-Wolfe. “My sense is people are hungry for that opportunity to make a difference and serve Canada, and if you can find a group of people who have that dedication to country, but at the same time are genuine and kind people who enjoy working alongside one another, you’re going to develop an office culture that is second to none.”

As for interactions with the fourth estate, Fraser was pipped at the post, coming third behind LeBlanc and Immigration Minister Marc Miller (Ville-Marie–Le Sud-Ouest–Île-des-Soeurs, Que.) as the best member of cabinet in scrums.

“He speaks like regular people do, he’s extremely intelligent, and he’s competent,” one respondent said of Miller. “He doesn’t need to hide behind the Centre’s message.”

Others noted Miller’s earnestness, “no B.S.” and “Tim Hortons language” approach. Another person said his “off the cuff” approach was similar to Poilievre’s, something that was probably intended as a compliment, but may not be read as such by the minister.

After all, there is no love lost between the two figures. In a memorable exchange earlier this year, when asked by reporters whether Poilievre’s removal from the House was an attempt to “silence” him, Miller quipped: “That guy’s never shut his mouth in his life. Who silences him? He keeps saying dumb things. I think it would be good if he shut up once in a while.”

Sadly, for Miller, that remark was not enough to put him ahead of Poilievre in the “best sense of humour” category. Both, however, were left in the dust of LeBlanc, who was described as “always cracking jokes—and many that are just on the line of being politically incorrect.”

For those not privy to the minister’s “definitely not PG, not even really PG-13” humour, many respondents took the opportunity at this question to try their own material for the survey. One wag, nominating Trudeau, offered the reason of “look at his front bench.”

Speaking of the prime minister, he did manage one win in the survey. While he's struggling to control rumblings within the Liberal Party, he is having no such trouble on the social front as the first-placeholder in the "throwing the best parties" category.

"What other MP would stand out in 30-plus degree weather to take over 1,000 pictures with parliamentary staff to give them an opportunity to have a great experience with the nation's leader?" offered one person.

Elsewhere within the Liberal fold, Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland (University–Rosedale, Ont.) was seen as the most influential cabinet minister, followed by LeBlanc and Treasury Board President Anita Anand (Oakville, Ont.).

Liberal MPs Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Ont.), Anthony Housefather (Mount Royal, Que.), and Kody Blois (King–Hants, N.S.) were all nominated as among the most effective government backbenchers during the thankless slog of Question Period.

Fragiskatos, who is Fraser's parliamentary secretary, was praised for responding "directly with confidence and accuracy," knowing the housing and infrastructure file well, and being able to "answer questions without reading, and by calling out inconsistencies in the questioner."

Housefather and Blois, meanwhile, were nominated primarily for something a government does not normally seek from its backbenchers: a willingness to speak their mind.

Blois, who was one of three Liberals to vote for Conservative private member's bill C-234, which would exempt some on-farm activities from the carbon tax, was praised for speaking up for his riding, and winning "concessions from government specific to Atlantic Canada."

Housefather, meanwhile, has been steadfast in his support for Israel and even publicly considered leaving the party after being one of three Liberals to vote against an NDP motion regarding Palestinian statehood that criticized Israel's conduct in the war against Hamas. One person who disagreed with Housefather's stance admired his "constant success in getting headlines and shifting the focus of debates."

Staying with Quebec MPs, Bloc Québécois Leader Yves-François Blanchet (Beloeil–Chambly, Que.) remained his party's most effective MP in Question Period.

He was followed by public safety and climate change critic Kristina Michaud (Avignon–La Mitis–Matane–Matapédia, Que.), who was described as direct, charming, and passionate. "She will be leader one day," offered two respondents.

The NDP, meanwhile, will need to brace for a massive hole in their Question Period arsenal when long-time MP Charlie Angus (Timmins–James Bay, Ont.) departs the House at the end of this session.

"Tells it like it is," was one of many such comments about the northern Ontario MP, while another suggested that "he knows why he's in Ottawa and what he's there to do."

The NDP need not fret too much, however, with two-term MP Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, Alta.) not far behind as the party's second-most effective performer in Question Period.

"The Liberals shake when she starts asking questions. They know she will come with something embarrassing, and they have no defence," said one respondent of the party's foreign affairs critic.

The aforementioned motion that Housefather voted against belonged to McPherson, and according to one comment, it "was more effective than anything [NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh] has led in the House this year. She's very good at setting a contrasting message on her critic files."

If you've read this far, you're probably giddy with anticipation about the answer to the most important question in the entire survey. That is, of course, which MP is the most hip?

The definition of "hip" is a fluid one, though this author might suggest it immediately exempts anyone who uses the word "hip." Nearly a quarter of respondents provided no name, presumably overwhelmed by the challenge of finding but one winner in the capital of cool.

In the end, though, it was Liberal MP Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Ont.) who edged out the competition. The Olympic gold medallist's supporters praised his "style, swagger, confidence," relaxed vibe, while another simply asked: "Have you seen his outfits?"

For those aspiring to take the hip crown next year, one person offered some advice: van Koeverden "showed up to the garden party wearing a backpack." Take note, fashionistas.

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The Hill Times

Results of The Hill Times' 29th Annual Politically Savvy Survey

A total of 126 people responded to *The Hill Times'* Politically Savvy Survey this year, conducted by Forum Research between June 10-July 5.

Best Public Speaker

- 1 Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre: 16.7%
- 2 Housing Minister Sean Fraser: 12.7%
- 3 Conservative MP Michael Barrett: 4.8%

Best Cabinet Minister

- 1 Housing Minister Sean Fraser: 30.2%
- 2 Innovation Minister François-Philippe Champagne: 16.7%
- 3 Public Safety Minister Dominic LeBlanc: 9.5%

Most Effective Government Question Period Backbencher

- 1 Liberal MP Peter Fragiskatos: 5.6%
- 2 Liberal MP Anthony Housefather: 4.8%
- 3 Liberal MP Kody Blois: 4%

Most Effective Conservative Question Period MP

- 1 Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre: 26.2%
- 2 Conservative Deputy Leader Melissa Lantsman: 11.9%
- 3 Conservative MP Michael Barrett: 8.7%

Most Effective Bloc Québécois Question Period MP

- 1 Bloc Québécois Leader Yves-François Blanchet: 26.2%
- 2 Bloc Québécois MP Kristina Michaud: 14.3%
- 3 Bloc Québécois MP Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: 7.1%

Most Effective NDP Question Period MP

- NDP MP Charlie Angus: 14.3%
- NDP MP Heather McPherson: 12.7%
- NDP House Leader Peter Julian: 10.3%

Most Effective Cabinet Minister in Scrums

- 1 Immigration Minister Marc Miller: 18.3%
- 2 Public Safety Minister Dominic LeBlanc: 12.7%
- 3 Housing Minister Sean Fraser: 9.5%

Best Opposition MP in Scrums

- 1 Conservative Deputy Leader Melissa Lantsman: 11.9%
- 2 Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre: 10.3%
- 3 Conservative MP Michael Barrett: 8.7%

Most Quotable MP

- 1 Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre: 26.2%
- 2 Prime Minister Justin Trudeau: 11.1%
- 3 Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland: 8.7%

Best Constituency MP

- 1 Citizens' Services Minister Terry Beech: 6.3%
- 2 Conservative MP Michael Barrett: 4%
- 3 NDP MP Lori Idlout: 3.2%

Most Influential Cabinet Minister

- 1 Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland: 46%
- 2 Public Safety Minister Dominic LeBlanc: 15.9%
- 3 Treasury Board President Anita Anand: 4.8%

MP With Best Sense of Humour

- 1 Public Safety Minister Dominic LeBlanc: 10.3%
- 2 Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre: 8.7%
- 3 Housing Minister Sean Fraser: 6.3%

Best MP to Work For

- 1 Conservative MP Michael Barrett: 4%
- 2 Citizens' Services Minister Terry Beech, Housing Minister Sean Fraser, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau: 3.2%
- 3 NDP MP Laurel Collins, Liberal MP Peter Fragiskatos, Liberal MP Terry Sheehan, Natural Resources Minister Jonathan Wilkinson: 2.4%

Most Discreet MP

- 1 NDP MP Niki Ashton, Conservative MP Michael Chong: 4%
- 2 Conservative MP Michael Barrett, Conservative MP Michael Cooper: 3.2%
- 3 Liberal MP Brendan Hanley, Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan: 2.4%

Hardest-Working MP

- 1 Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre: 11.9%
- 2 Liberal MP Kevin Lamoureux, Green Leader Elizabeth May: 5.6%
- 3 Conservative MP Michael Barrett: 4.8%

Throws the Best Parties

- 1 Prime Minister Justin Trudeau: 8.7%
- 2 Quebec Assistants: 5.6%
- 3 Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre: 4%

Best Fundraiser

- 1 Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre: 22.2%
- 2 Conservative Party of Canada: 8.7%
- 3 Conservative MP Michael Barrett, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau: 3.2%

Hippest MP

- 1 Liberal MP Adam van Koeverden: 4.8%
- 2 NDP MP Charlie Angus, Minister for Women Marci Ien: 4%
- 3 Conservative MP Michael Barrett, NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau: 3.2%

Biggest Self-Promoter

- 1 Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre: 32.5%
- 2 Prime Minister Justin Trudeau: 16.7%
- 3 NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh: 4%

Poilievre ‘putting his stamp’ on party by shaking up top echelons of Conservative ranks, say politicians

Pierre Poilievre’s appointments to the Conservative Fund, party office, and shadow cabinet will play a key role in his success or failure as party leader, says Innovative Research president Greg Lyle.

After winning a landslide victory to become leader of the Conservative Party of Canada, Pierre Poilievre is now putting his stamp on the party by shaking up its senior ranks, surrounding himself with a team that will play a key role in his success as party leader and in the next election.

“There’s a big machine to be able to win an election,” said Greg Lyle, president of Innovative Research, in an interview with *The Hill Times*. “It takes a lot of people to drive that machine, and so these decisions are really important.”

Poilievre won the leadership election on the first ballot on Sept. 10 garnering a whopping 295,283 out of 417,635 votes nationally, or 70.7 per cent of the overall votes cast, and carried 330 of the 338 ridings.

Since winning the party’s top job, Poilievre has been making important appointments in the most senior ranks of the party office, the Office of the Leader of the Opposition, the House leadership team, and the shadow cabinet.

In this effort, Poilievre is relying heavily on Jenni Byrne, a veteran Conservative strategist, who is overseeing the transition process for the new leader. Byrne served as a senior adviser to Poilievre during the leadership election and is one of the key architects of the Ottawa-area MP’s successful leadership election campaign. In the Stephen Harper government, Byrne served as deputy chief of staff to the then-prime minister, and ran the 2011 and 2015 election campaigns for her party.

As part of this transition process, Poilievre started last week with the appointment of the new chair and directors of the Conservative Fund Canada, the powerful fundraising arm of the Conservative Party, which makes important decision about raising and spending of millions of dollars every year. For this position, he chose Toronto lawyer Robert Staley, who works for the high-profile law firm Bennett Jones, and was also a lawyer for Poilievre’s leadership campaign. He’s also been a lawyer for Harper.

Staley has succeeded outgoing chair James Dodds, vice-chairman of the TD Bank Group. In the lead-up to Sept. 10, Dodds had informed the party that he would step down from his position. The four other directors of the fund—Claude Thibault, Don Nightingale, James Carpenter, and Timothy McCormick—also stepped down to let the new leader choose his team. In addition to the four appointed directors, the party president and a member of the national council all serve as non-voting members of the fund. Currently, Rob Batherson, party president, and Steve Dollansky, a national councillor from Alberta, are also members of the fund. They will stay in their positions as non-voting members of the fund.

In addition to Staley, Poilievre appointed former Conservative MP Tony Clement, and lawyer Sander Grieve as directors of the Conservative Party Fund last week. Grieve works for Bennett Jones, and Clement served as an MP from 2006 to 2019. The former Parry Sound-Muskoka MP also served as a senior cabinet minister in the Harper cabinet from 2006 to 2015. In 2018, as an opposition MP, Clement landed in hot water after it was made public that he sent sexually explicit images and a video to a person who he said was a consenting adult, and someone who was trying to extort him. Later, then-Conservative leader Andrew Scheer (Regina-Qu’Appelle, Sask.) found there were “numerous reports that were serious in nature,” and therefore asked Clement to leave the caucus. Clement served the remainder of the term as an Independent MP, and did not seek re-election in the 2019 general election.

Last week, Clement did not respond to interview requests from *The Hill Times*.

Some of the most powerful party figures who have the confidence of the leader serve on the prestigious and exclusive board as directors of the Conservative Fund. Prior to Dodds, former Sen. Irving Gerstein held this position for 17 years.

The chair of the board is a critical appointment, as after winning the leadership this is one of the first appointments that both Erin O'Toole (Durham, Ont.) and Poilievre made.

According to the party's constitution, the chair of the fund is responsible for "ensuring effectiveness of the budgeting reporting process commitments, integrity of the contract process and any agreements made, fundraising, effectiveness of expenditures and compliance with all aspects of Canadian law." The constitution requires all director appointments be ratified by the national council, the 20-member elected governing body of the party. Poilievre will make two more appointments to the fund in the coming days.

Wayne Benson, the interim executive director of the party, told *The Hill Times* Sept. 15 that he's leaving his job as soon as the leader appoints his successor. A veteran Conservative insider, Benson has served as a secretary of the party, chair of the national policy committee, and as a national council member representing Manitoba. He took over as party director in February, succeeding Janet Fryday Dorey after O'Toole stepped down as party leader. The party executive director's position is the most senior position in party headquarters. On Sept. 16, the national council of the Conservative Party approved Poilievre nominee Mike Crase as the new executive director of the party. Crase is currently is the executive director of the Ontario PC Party.

"Those are his [Pierre Poilievre] appointments," said Conservative MP Michael Cooper (St. Albert-Edmonton, Alta.), in an interview with *The Hill Times*. "So in that sense, you could say he's putting his stamp on the party. He has a mandate to do so, like any leader, to appoint people to various roles, and he's doing that."

The new leader already announced his House leadership team, and Cooper, who was the co-caucus liaison for the Poilievre campaign, said Poilievre was still in the process of putting together his full shadow cabinet, adding that it will be unveiled in the coming days.

To the House leadership team, Poilievre has appointed Tim Uppal (Edmonton-Mill Woods, Alta.), and Melissa Lantsman (Thornhill, Ont.) as deputy leaders; Scheer as House leader; Luc Berthold (Mégantic-L'Érable, Que.) as deputy House leader; Kerry Lynne Findlay (South Surrey-White Rock, B.C.) as the chief whip; and Chris Warkentin (Grande Prairie-Mackenzie, Alta.) as the deputy whip and Question Period coordinator. Also, Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg-Haute-Saint-Charles, Que.) has been appointed as Quebec lieutenant, Eric Duncan (Storont-Dundas-South Glengarry, Ont.) as caucus-party liaison, and Jake Stewart (Miramichi-Grand Lake, N.B.) as caucus committee coordinator.

Gary Keller, a former senior ministerial staffer and chief of staff to Rona Ambrose in her position as interim Conservative party leader, told *The Hill Times* that choosing the front bench is one of the most important decisions for any new leader. In putting together this team, he said, the leader has to strike the right balance between an MP's capabilities, parliamentary skills, demographics, and geography. Keller said this decision also plays a key role in internal caucus management and morale.

"A lot of people want to be shadow cabinet critics and to be part of the decision-making process," said Keller. "Obviously, not everybody can, there's 119 members of the Conservative caucus. For some people, they want to be [part of the] shadow cabinet because they want to shape the policies, [and] for some people, it's a feeling of being part of the insider team."

Meanwhile, Lyle said that Poilievre's decisive victory on Sept. 10 makes him a serious challenger to the Trudeau Liberals in the next election. He said that the new leader has proven himself to be an effective communicator who is very skilful in the use of social media, which also played a key role in his success. At the same time, Lyle said, Poilievre is not beholden to any major voting block in the Conservative Party, which will give the new leader independence to make important political and policy decisions.

"Because he was so successful in the leadership, you have to take him as a serious threat to the Liberals," said Lyle. "He's clearly demonstrated an ability to communicate in new media, which you can't really point to a Conservative that had the sort of success with young people and with social media, that for instance, Justin Trudeau had in 2015. So, he has the appearance of potentially being a Conservative answer to Justin Trudeau."

At the same time, Lyle said, it remains to be seen how big of a challenge it will be for Poilievre to justify his support for the Freedom Convoy protesters, which the Liberals will use against him.

"He'll become identified with the more extreme elements of the [Freedom] Convoy protest, that will be used to

define him,” he said. “If that happens, then this may have turned out not to be such a great choice.”

A former senior Conservative described top players in the new establishment of the party as the younger generation of Harper-ites. As an example, they said both Poilievre and Byrne, right-of-centre conservatives, were in their 20s when Harper became the leader of the Conservative Party in 2002. Both gradually attained senior positions in the Harper cabinet, and now one is the leader of the party and the other is his most trusted political aide (and also his former long-time romantic partner). The source said that most party observers are waiting to see how many moderate Conservatives get senior positions under the new leader.

The Hill Times

‘Who’s who’ on the Conservative leadership campaign teams

Heading into the final stretch of the campaign, *The Hill Times* takes a look at the teams that will be taking the Conservative leadership hopefuls across the finish line on Sept. 10.

Team Pierre Poilievre

Veteran Conservative strategist Jenni Byrne is a senior adviser on Poilievre’s campaign team. Byrne, who previously served as an adviser to former Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper, also founded her own public affairs consultancy firm, Jenni Byrne + Associates, which has been active since February 2020.

Jeremy Liedtke serves as Poilievre’s campaign director, according to his LinkedIn profile. He previously managed Ontario PC candidate Goldie Ghamari’s successful campaign in Carleton, Ont., in the province’s June 2018 election. The Carleton riding is also the riding that Poilievre holds federally. Liedtke also served in a 2017 internship in the Office of the Leader of the Opposition while Andrew Scheer was Conservative leader.

Anthony Koch is Poilievre’s press secretary and a campaign spokesperson, according to his LinkedIn profile. He is a managing principal with AK Strategies and is a former Conservative staffer.

Ginny Roth, a vice-president and national practice lead for government relations at Crestview Strategy, is serving as Poilievre’s director of communications, according to a March 11 report published by media company Politico. *The Hill Times* reached out to Roth to confirm her role in the campaign but did not receive a response. Roth previously worked at Queen’s Park and was a party organizer for the Ontario Progressive Conservatives.

The report in Politico also said that Ryan Guptill, vice-president of strategic communications at Loyalist Public Affairs, is handling scripting for the Poilievre team. Guptill told *The Hill Times* on Aug. 3 that he is “helping out” on the Poilievre campaign, but did not confirm his specific role. He previously served as the principal secretary to former minister of Labour and Status of Women Kellie Leitch during the Harper administration.

Stephanie Dunlop is responsible for Poilievre’s campaign tour, according to the Politico report. She previously served as a senior account director of public affairs for Hill+Knowlton Strategies, and was also the tour director for the Conservative MP Erin O’Toole’s (Durham, Ont.) leadership campaign between January and August 2020.

The Politico report listed field organizers for the Poilievre campaign, including Mike Wilson (Ontario), Ben Levitt (Ontario), John Sinclair (Ontario), Katy Merrifield (B.C.), Jamie Mozeson (Alberta) and Shane Saskiw (Alberta).

According to Poilievre’s campaign website, his national campaign co-chairs are Conservative MP Tim Uppal (Edmonton Mill Woods, Alta.); John Baird, former minister of foreign affairs; Conservative Party of Canada Senator Leo Housakos (Quebec); and Gail Shea, former minister of Fisheries and Oceans.

Team Jean Charest

Co-chairing the Jean Charest campaign is close friend of former prime minister Stephen Harper and corporate director and executive chairman of Rubicon Strategy, Michael Coates, as well as conservative commentator and principal at Navigator Ltd., Tasha Kheiriddin.

Chris Rougier, partner and director with MPH Agency and longtime federal and provincial party operative, serves as Charest’s campaign manager. Rougier has worked on 42 elections in the past 13 years, most recently managing the leadership campaign of Kevin “Mr. Wonderful” O’Leary alongside Coates as campaign chair in 2017.

Handling communications for Charest is founder and principal of Presence+Influence consulting Michelle Coates Mather, who serves as the campaign’s director of communications, and Laurence Tôth as the campaign’s press secretary.

Team Leslyn Lewis

Steve Outhouse is the campaign manager for Lewis' team. He is the president and founder of Intercede Communication and is a former Harper-era cabinet staffer. He previously served as director of communications to then-health minister Leona Aglukkaq, chief of staff to then-fisheries minister Gail Shea, and chief of staff to Poilievre when he was employment minister.

Michael Hettrick is the press secretary for the Lewis campaign team. He previously served as a parliamentary assistant to Conservative MP Kelly Block (Carlton Trail-Eagle Creek, Sask.) between Aug. 2017 and March 2021. He currently works as an information technology consultant with PA Software/KCL Computers in Saskatchewan, according to his LinkedIn profile.

The Hill Times reached out to Hettrick to inquire about other campaign team members but did not receive a response.

Team Roman Baber

Entering into her fourth leadership campaign is deputy campaign manager Nita Kang. In 2020, Nita worked on the Peter MacKay campaign and two Ontario leadership campaigns prior to that. At the outset of the COVID pandemic, Nita was instrumental in pivoting the MacKay campaign to online candidate engagement events. Previously in Ontario, Nita worked at Queen's Park.

Serving as director of tour and administration is Bathusa Baskararajah. A decade ago, Bathusa walked in to interview Baber at his former law firm and was hired on the spot. She worked as Baber's legal assistant until she accompanied him to Queen's Park, to become the executive assistant to Baber when he was the MPP for York Centre.

Baber's director of fundraising is Michael Silver, a retired lawyer and entrepreneur. A long-time resident of Baber's former Riding of York Centre, he reached out to Baber after Baber's removal from the Ontario PC Caucus and has since become a friend, supporter, and adviser.

Scott Aitchison's campaign did not respond to request from *The Hill Times* by publication deadline.

The Hill Times

New faces in the OLO: an update on Pierre Poilievre's leader's office

Changes in the official opposition leader's office include Matthew Antonitti's promotion to principal secretary to Poilievre, and Kate Harper's elevation to tour director.

There's plenty to catch up on in Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre's office as official opposition leader since Hill Climbers' last check in at the start of the year, with at least 18 new faces on the OLO team and a handful of promotions and departures.

Poilievre's office did not respond to requests to confirm the staff information listed online on the government electronic directory service (GEDS), which has a known history of having less than up-to-date information. That said, the OLO staff list on GEDS does appear to get updated more regularly than other offices. But it's not perfect.

Angela Tu Weissenberger, for example, who is the chief economic adviser to the Conservative leader, is not listed on GEDS, but her work in the OLO is confirmed by the federal lobbyists registry. Communication reports since the start of the year note she's connected with representatives from Sun Life Financial, Questrade Financial Group, FP Canada, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, and Rio Tinto Canada Management.

Hill Climbers sought to confirm the OLO team through other means, including the lobbyists registry, LinkedIn, and with sources. The following is a rundown of staff in both the leader's office and in the Conservative Caucus Services (CCS) office, the party's parliamentary research bureau, which—as with other opposition parties on the Hill—work hand in hand.

First, the departures: director of outreach and stakeholder relations Holly Duggan's name no longer appears on GEDS, but Hill Climbers understands she is currently on parental leave.

Stephanie Dunlop, who was director of tour in the OLO before stepping in for Duggan as director of stakeholder relations and outreach in February, is no longer working in Poilievre's office. A former cabinet staffer under Doug Ford's Progressive Conservative government in Ontario and ex-senior account director with Hill and Knowlton Strategies, Dunlop had been tour director for Poilievre's 2022 leadership campaign, having previously done the same for Erin O'Toole during his successful 2020 leadership bid.

Rachel Loif, who had been a special assistant and scheduler to the leader since his September 2022 election, left Poilievre's office in June, and tour and advance assistant Zachary Halsall left the OLO in May. As noted by Heard on the Hill in February, tour and events planner Elia Lopez, who had been working in the OLO since O'Toole's time in the leader's chair, left the office to become a public affairs consultant with the Sandstone Group.

Perhaps the biggest addition to Poilievre's team since the start of the year is that of deputy chief of staff John Sinclair.

Sinclair is a former deputy chief of staff to then-Ontario Progressive Conservative leader Patrick Brown and a former chief of staff to Toronto city councillor Jennifer McKelvie. Most recently before joining the OLO, Sinclair was vice-president of government relations with Sutherland, a communications, public affairs, and government relations firm based in the Greater Toronto Area.

He will of course be working closely alongside Ian Todd, who continues as Poilievre's chief of staff. Alyssa Doig remains as director of the CCS.

Bryce McRae was hired as stakeholder relations manager in June. McRae spent the first half of 2023 as director of operations to Ontario Finance Minister Peter Bethlenfalvy, and worked as a strategy and stakeholder relations adviser to Ontario Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Steve Clark for a little more than a year before that. He's also a former aide to a Senator on the Hill and an ex-legislative assistant to Conservative MP Colin Carrie, who represents Oshawa, Ont.

Newly working under McRae is stakeholder relations adviser Anton LoRi, a former political operations intern with the federal Conservative Party who joined the OLO earlier this month. LoRi's LinkedIn profile notes he worked as a field organizer for Poilievre's 2022 leadership campaign, and was canvass chair for the party in Mississauga-Lakeshore, Ont., ahead of the riding's December 2022 byelection.

Shawn Driscoll continues as a stakeholder relations adviser.

Micah Green, who first joined the OLO as a communications co-ordinator at the end of 2022, was promoted to manager of communications in June. A former intern and digital assistant with the Conservative Party in 2019, Green worked on Peter MacKay's 2020 leadership campaign. He's also an ex-aide to an MP, and before joining Poilievre's office, spent almost two years working for Switch Health—a company founded in 2020 and focused on COVID-19 testing services (it has since started expanding into other health tests, including for HPV)—starting as a communications adviser in early 2021 and ending as manager of public affairs.

Carson Bradley was added to the OLO communications team in April as a press secretary for ethnic and regional media. A former assistant to Ontario Conservative MP Anna Roberts, before joining Poilievre's team Bradley had most recently been working part time as an associate with Solstice Public Affairs in Toronto, while also being a junior fellow with the Canadian Jewish Political Affairs Committee (CJPAC). He's also a former constituency assistant to then-B.C. MLA John Yap, who represented what was then called the B.C. Liberal Party (now known as B.C. United, the provincial party has a more conservative tint than their previously federal namesakes), and a former assistant to then-B.C. Conservative MP Kenny Chiu.

Bradley joins fellow OLO press secretaries Sam Lilly and Philippe Refghi.

Joe Adam George, who is listed as a cultural outreach officer in the OLO on GEDS, is also a press secretary, according to his LinkedIn and Facebook profiles. A June 2022 New Pathway Ukrainian News article identifies him as a press secretary for cultural communities outreach and media relations.

Ben Woodfinden is director of communications to Poilievre, and also oversees communications researcher Nico Johnson, who joined the office in January. Johnson is a former executive assistant to Ontario Environment Minister David Piccini as the Progressive Conservative MPP for Northumberland–Peterborough South, and most recently worked in Piccini's ministerial office as a communications adviser.

Scott Bandy remains a writer, now working alongside writer and written products co-ordinator Panagiota Koroneos.

Sebastian Skamski continues as director of media relations to Poilievre.

In May, Haley Love, who'd been manager of the leader's digital services since the fall of 2022, was promoted to associate director of digital. She's a former community relations assistant with the Canada Strong & Free Network and has since been a social media co-ordinator with the Mobilize Media group, a digital media consultant with Act Digital, and a consultant with Wellington Advocacy in Ottawa.

Priyank D'Sa remains manager of digital media, while Sebastian Gutierrez Bello is a digital media officer, and Eric Brouwer and Kyle Simpson are media monitors.

No doubt working closely with them is Anthony Cinerari, who remains a senior video specialist and photographer. Listed on the CCS side of things is Daria Fesenko, who continues as manager of video production, and videographers Dan Adams and Nicholas Howe (a former freelancer, Howe was hired in March). Stephanie Ratté is still on board as senior graphic designer and animator, working alongside graphic designers Cameron Presseault and Karen Crase (a newer addition to the team).

Mohammed Aboudafir continues as a senior IT planner and integrator.

Matthew Antonitti, who joined the OLO as executive assistant to Poilievre in September 2022 (having done the same on his leadership campaign), was promoted to principal secretary to the leader in May. Antonitti is also a former assistant to Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry, Ont., Conservative MP Eric Duncan; a former national youth co-ordinator for the Conservative Party; an ex-CJPAC fellow; and a former intern in Poilievre's office as the MP for Carleton, Ont.

Hayley Quipp was hired to the leader's office as executive assistant in June. She's a former aide to Northumberland–Peterborough South, Ont., Conservative MP Philip Lawrence.

Kate Harper, who's been working in the OLO since 2020 and O'Toole's time as leader, was promoted to replace Dunlop as director of tour in February. She'd most recently been manager of tour and event planning and has also previously worked for the United Conservative Party in Alberta, including as an advance to then-premier Jason Kenney. Harper was also an event planner for O'Toole's leader's tour during the 2021 federal election.

Luis Lopez was hired as tour advance lead in March. A former president of the Toronto Centre Progressive Conservative riding association, Lopez is a former acting tour director to Ontario Premier Doug Ford, and preceded McRae as operations director to Bethlenfalvy as provincial finance minister, amongst other past roles.

Also now part of the OLO tour team are: Nicolas Slind, tour advance; Mason Radies, tour adviser; and Samantha Beaudoin, who was hired in May as a junior translator and Quebec tour support. Liam Walsh continues as a special assistant and tour advance.

On the event planning side, there's Alex Cattran, a former MP's assistant who was hired in April; Jesse Muller; Luke Zandberg, a former community outreach co-ordinator for the federal Conservative Party in B.C., who was hired to Poilievre's office in January; and Jwane Izzetpanah, an ex-assistant to Senators Tony Dean and Patricia Bovey who joined the OLO in January after almost a year as a proposal manager with Relay Platform in Ottawa.

Former correspondence writer Sabrina Kooistra was promoted to manager of outreach in April. She previously worked in Poilievre's MP office and was a correspondence writer on his 2022 leadership campaign. During the 2021 federal election, she was campaign co-ordinator to Alberta Conservative MP Martin Shields.

Longtime director of correspondence Salpie Stepanian remains in place, overseeing senior correspondence adviser Craig Maguire, correspondence adviser Leslie Virgin, and the correspondence unit's administrative aide, Walter Mangubat.

Michelle Gorner, a former assistant to Alberta Conservative MP Glen Motz, returned to the OLO as a correspondence adviser in May, having previously done the same under then-leader O'Toole. Charis Liu, a former assistant to Alberta Conservative MP Garnett Genuis, was hired as a correspondence assistant in March.

Along with Beaudoin, translator Emma Lévesque remains on board. Patrice Charette is no longer listed as a translator in the OLO.

There are a couple of additions to the policy team under director David Murray.

Connor MacDonald was hired as a policy adviser in April. He's a former parliamentary staffer at the United Kingdom's House of Commons and was last head of economics and social policy with Policy Exchange, a British conservative think tank.

Ryan Ouderkirk, a former assistant to Ontario Conservative MP Adam Chambers, joined the OLO as a policy assistant in May. His past experience also includes a turn as executive assistant to then-Ontario PC MPP Christina Mitás and as an assistant to then-Alberta Conservative MP David Yurdiga.

Darren Hall is now listed as a policy adviser. Also still covering policy for the central Conservative office are Sean Phelan, senior policy adviser; Andrew Swidzinski, senior policy and Quebec adviser; and Josh Eisses, policy co-ordinator.

Matthew Senft remains senior opposition researcher, working with researchers James Constable, an ex-assistant to former Ontario Conservative MP David Sweet; and Phil Hattin, a former assistant to then-Ontario MPP Roman Baber and current MPP Michael Parsa. Both Constable and Hattin were hired in January.

Craig Hilimoniuk continues as director of parliamentary affairs in the OLO.

Brian Bateson has been added to the list as director of issues management. Someone by the same name was previously an issues manager to Kenney during his time as Alberta premier, but Hill Climbers was unable to confirm whether they were one and the same by filing deadline. Matt de Jong is also now an issues manager for the Conservative team.

Grace Gallien is CCS co-ordinator. A former assistant to MP Duncan, she joined the office in January. She's also a former assistant to Candice Bergen during her time as both deputy Conservative leader and as interim leader, and an ex-constituency assistant to former Markham–Unionville, Ont., Conservative MP Bob Saroya.

Kim Baker continues as executive assistant to the leader's chief of staff, and former administrative assistant Shanna Boutilier was made executive assistant to the deputy chief of staff in June.

Christine Wylupski continues as director of finance, operations, and the official residence to Poilievre, while Heather Egan remains office manager and finance administrator.

The OLO staff list on GEDS has also added driver Derin Akkaya and two housekeepers, Ana Ramirez and Juan Tobon, since Hill Climbers' last check in. Beilei Huang and Xiao Qiu Huang are also still listed as housekeepers for Poilievre's Stornoway residence as official opposition leader. Justin Scott is chef and house manager at Stornoway.

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The Hill Times

03 | LEADERSHIP RACE

Riding-level results show Poilievre campaign's 'capacity to organize and fundraise right across the country,' say observers

Poilievre won majorities in every province and territory, surpassing Stephen Harper's performance in the 2004 leadership race.

New Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre's ability to sign up new party members in key regions right across the country could make a difference in the next federal election, say political observers.

Poilievre's (Carleton, Ont.) riding-by-riding results show he won substantial majorities in every province and territory. The leadership results released by the Conservative Leadership Election Organizing Committee show that Poilievre won a total of 295,283 out of 417,635 votes across the country, or 70.7 per cent of the overall votes cast, and 330 of the 338 ridings.

He won more than 75 per cent of the votes cast in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Yukon, fell just shy of that in British Columbia, and won two-thirds of the votes cast in Ontario. The only places where he dropped below two-thirds support were Prince Edward Island, Quebec, and Nunavut. He won 60.9 per cent of the vote in Quebec, or 22,168 out of a total 36,363 votes.

Garry Keller, a former senior Conservative staffer, told *The Hill Times* the overall message that emerges from the leadership results is the Poilievre campaign team's "capacity to organize and fundraise right across the country."

"This is, of course, the biggest membership vote in Canadian political history, by a country mile," said Keller, now a vice-president with StrategyCorp. He added that Poilievre's skill as an organizer will transfer over to a general election, especially given his understanding of the need for the Conservatives to catch up to the Liberals on the use of data and technology to identify and microtarget supporters.

Andrea Sarkic, a public affairs counsellor for Compass Rose, told *The Hill Times* that selling a large number of memberships, and then converting those into leadership votes several months later, is a show of strength in key ridings, where the margins of victory in a general election might be in the hundreds.

Sarkic said she is cautious about extrapolating too much from a leadership campaign to a general election, especially with a possible three-year window until the next vote. But she added the Conservative leadership race might be an exception because of the sheer number of people who got involved with the process, and with Poilievre's campaign in particular.

Sarkic has been involved with Conservative campaigns across Canada and her first job on Parliament Hill was in Poilievre's office 15 years ago. She was not involved in this year's leadership campaign.

"The party's membership swelled by around 600,000 this time around. Which is by far the largest political organization we've seen in the country's history," said Sarkic. "[Voters] took the time and effort to pay the \$15 to buy the membership, they took the time to understand and fill out a ballot for leader. That's enough effort to then argue that these may not be one-time show ponies. These voters may end up becoming involved in the community."

Jonathan Malloy, a political science professor at Carleton University, told *The Hill Times* it was difficult to predict whether a surge of supporters in a leadership race will carry over to a general election, even though the sheer number of supporters Poilievre was able to mobilize across the country is a significant factor.

Malloy said that it's plausible that the leadership voters who helped Poilievre win 330 out of 338 electoral districts across the country could form a core of volunteers that might bolster the Conservative ground game in the next general election, especially in parts of Quebec where the party typically has smaller electoral district associations.

“That’s all certainly a good sign that people might be willing to commit to the party further and work for its election candidates. It’s a good hypothesis, but we can’t test the hypothesis until an election. And past experience suggests that it’s very mixed,” said Malloy, adding that historically speaking, many people who join a party during a leadership race don’t renew their memberships the following year.

Malloy said Poilievre would probably show the same focus now that the leadership race is over and the goalposts have moved.

“You have to give credit to Mr. Poilievre. He ran a very focused campaign that was really centred on selling memberships and building up databases and meeting people. Mr. Poilievre did not spend a lot of time playing to the mainstream media, or even really trying to gather earned media. He had a campaign which was always focused on signing up members and getting them to vote,” Malloy said.

Province/Territory	Votes for Poilievre	Total Votes Cast	Percentage for Poilievre
Alberta	49,673	87,917	80.09%
Saskatchewan	11,943	22,361	79.79%
Yukon	159	711	75.81%
British Columbia	48,417	62,895	71.91%
Newfoundland and Labrador	2,831	3,822	71.04%
Northwest Territories	225	313	71.43%
Manitoba	11,479	16,378	71.40%
Canada	286,183	417,831	70.70%
New Brunswick	1,491	7,346	65.98%
Nova Scotia	1,831	8,650	67.17%
Ontario	112,428	170,349	66.04%
Prince Edward Island	1,319	1,890	61.85%
Quebec	22,148	36,363	60.90%
Nunavut	22	38	57.89%

Poilievre’s votes across Canada

Sarkic said that by showing dominance in almost every region of the country, Poilievre surpassed even Stephen Harper, who won the leadership of the newly formed Conservative Party of Canada in 2004 with 56 per cent of the votes, but finished second in both Atlantic Canada and Quebec.

Keller said the new members Poilievre signed up in key regions could make a difference in a general election, if the party is able to keep them engaged. “Pick a riding in Atlantic Canada or Ontario that was a close-hold riding, where the difference in the vote was less than 1,000 votes. If he signed up another 1,000 or 1,500 people in a riding, that makes a huge difference in a tight race.”

Poilievre will have the opportunity to beef up the Conservatives’ data and technological operation, says Keller

Keller said he would be watching to see how Poilievre makes use of the voter database his team built up when signing more than 300,000 new members. Although the Conservatives under Harper had “a huge head start” on the other political parties in terms of data collection and the use of technology to target voters, said Keller, the Liberals under Trudeau have since far surpassed the Conservatives.

“The Liberals have been excellent at using microtargeting to win minority governments,” he said, referring to the vote splits in the last general election that saw the Liberals squeeze more seats out of British Columbia than their overall percentage of the vote would suggest. “That’s not an accident. That’s the effective use of microtargeting to eke out wins.”

“Part of the challenge for the Conservatives has been, when you have a new leader who only has a little bit of time before a general election, they’re so focused on the nuts and bolts of campaigning and organizing and getting ready for an election, they don’t have time to focus on the more structural side of things,” said Keller, referring to the challenges that past leaders Andrew Scheer (Regina–Qu’Appelle, Sask.) and Erin O’Toole (Durham, Ont.) faced.

Keller said Poilievre, as “a leader who is serious about using these tools,” will now have a chance to beef up the party’s technological operations.

Keller said he would also be looking to see if, over the next six or nine months, the Conservatives are able to “double down” on small individual donations by convincing new donors who signed up to support Poilievre’s leadership campaign to begin donating to the party. He said he would be paying attention to the number of donors who contribute \$10 or \$15 every month, more so than the overall amount raised.

Leadership Race

One of the key questions for the Conservatives is whether the party is able to maintain the momentum Poilievre's team built up during the leadership race. Malloy said one thing that would help Poilievre maintain his momentum with the party base is that he is not trying to "take the party anywhere that it doesn't want to go," unlike O'Toole and runner-up Jean Charest.

"His overwhelming dominance of the party suggests that Mr. Poilievre is located where the party is now. And the party likes that, and he likes that."

If the supply-and-confidence agreement between the Liberals and NDP lasts for the full three years, Poilievre will need to find ways to maintain the momentum from this year's victory. But Sarkic pointed out that if the next election doesn't happen until 2025, Poilievre will also benefit from running against a 10-year-old government.

"Modern history has taught us that [10 years] is a ceiling, if you look at [Brian] Mulroney, [Jean] Chrétien, and Harper," said Sarkic. "Pierre is in a unique spot. He has an inherent advantage that Scheer and O'Toole did not have."

Poilievre's top ten ridings by percentage of votes cast

Riding	Province	Votes for Poilievre	Total Votes Cast	Percentage for Poilievre
Labrador	Newfoundland and Labrador	118	133	88.72%
Grande Prairie-Mackenzie	Alberta	2,690	3,053	88.10%
Fort McMurray-Cold Lake	Alberta	1,743	1,981	87.98%
South-Moose Mountain	Saskatchewan	1,896	2,167	87.49%
Prince George-Peace River-Northern Rockies	British Columbia	2,043	2,414	84.63%
Chandler-Keweenaw-Aoki	Manitoba	237	279	84.95%
Calgary Skyview	Alberta	747	885	84.30%
Red River	Alberta	2,671	3,148	84.85%
Calgary Shepard	Alberta	2,710	3,217	84.24%
Foot Hills	Alberta	4,230	5,042	83.70%

Poilievre's top ten ridings by percentage of votes cast

Riding	Province	Votes for Poilievre	Total Votes Cast	Percentage for Poilievre
Notre-Dame-de-Grâce-Westmount	Quebec	818	955	84.61%
Ville-Marie-Le Sud-Ouest-Bon-des-Secours	Quebec	264	811	32.55%
Ottawa Centre	Ontario	711	1,924	36.96%
Louis-Hébert	Quebec	283	722	39.20%
University-Rosedale	Ontario	522	1,272	41.04%
Toronto-St. Paul's	Ontario	605	1,397	43.31%
Shelburne	Quebec	260	595	43.70%
Don Valley West	Ontario	516	1,160	44.48%
Dorval-Saint-Lambert	Quebec	264	580	45.52%
Ottawa-Vanier	Ontario	632	1,373	46.03%

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The Hill Times

The new Conservative king takes his throne

Pierre Poilievre has latitude that previous Tory sovereigns Andrew Scheer and Erin O'Toole never had, so how will he use it?

OTTAWA—Canada got two new kings last week. Of course, with the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on Sept. 8, we now have a new head of state in King Charles III. In a coronation that Charles might envy, Pierre Poilievre donned the crown of the Conservative Party of Canada.

In these early moments of King Pierre's reign, there are no cries of the need to secede or calls for the end of that monarchy. This king rules over a party, which at this moment, he now owns. This king has latitude that previous sovereigns Andrew Scheer and Erin O'Toole never had. How will he use it? How will he rule?

The early hours of Poilievre's tenure have been instructive to watch. The two public speeches he has given since winning the leadership on Sept. 10 have been smartly cultivated efforts to show Poilievre in a manner most ardent political watchers have not seen of him before. Rather than the pugilistic parliamentary punk that he is assumed to be, he has come forward as a warm, loving partner and dad.

His dynamic wife, Anaida Poilievre, has appeared by his side on both occasions and told a story of two people with a shared history of challenge, struggle, and values who can relate to the average person. She has been highly effective in her storytelling and exudes a warmth not previously associated with her husband. In his first speech to his caucus, they brought their just-turned-one-year-old son Cruz and cut a birthday cake in his honour. It came across as human, even if it was a photo op.

The imagery of all of this was powerful because it cut into previous or created montages of Poilievre. The ambitious, snarky, lone wolf bully, ruthlessly going after political opponents. The political lifer incapable of emotional growth, whose only mission in life is to be king of the political club. For those who have not been previously exposed to the new Conservative leader, or who only had partial glimpses and are in the early days of forming an opinion, they got a distinct perspective from those who have watched him grow in the House of Commons. One of our recent Abacus polls found 51 per cent have no real opinion yet of Poilievre. Opportunity exists for him, and his team is seizing it.

The new Conservative leader's early remarks have also been heavily weighted on maintaining the connection he made with many Conservative voters on people's worries about affordability and their personal economic angst. Gone was the crypto speculation and pushed was the notion that the current government is lost at sea on Canadians' economic needs. The time is coming when Poilievre will have to spell out his solutions for people's plight, but right now, he sees enduring benefit in saying he gets it and were he prime minister, he'd move heaven and earth to end their struggle.

While Poilievre can be accused of offering a lot of empty rhetoric, as the Liberals have countered, it would be a fool's errand to discount the connection he has made with different swaths of Canadians. If reports are to be believed, many of them are Gen Zers and millennials who haven't—in large numbers—looked to Conservatives as their first political choice. Theirs is a more than passing curiosity with Poilievre. His canoodling with convoy supporters might get the attention, but the political connection he is building with younger voters has the potential to be a real problem for the Liberals and NDP.

Of the two kings crowned last week, Poilievre begins his reign fuelled with legitimate chants from his loyal Conservative subjects of “long live the king.”

Tim Powers is vice-chairman of Summa Strategies and managing director of Abacus Data. He is a former adviser to Conservative political leaders.

The Hill Times

Finding his voice: Poilievre's refined tone paves way for transition to broader audience, say politicians

Despite a tonal shift towards party unity and outreach to a wider Canadian audience, one MP has already left the Conservative caucus under Pierre Poilievre's new leadership.

After a landslide victory, missing from new Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre's celebratory speech were some of his more controversial proposals and incendiary political slogans, as insiders and experts say his tone is transitioning for a general election audience.

Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.) became the Tory leader on Sept. 10 after winning 68.15 per cent of the points on the first ballot and garnering more than 70 per cent of the popular vote, as he won 330 of 338 ridings across Canada.

While firing the Bank of Canada governor and anti-World Economic Forum messages were frequent rallying pitches on the campaign trail, they were absent from his victory speech, as were any references to "JustinFlation"—a favourite slogan he has used to needle Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Que.) and the Liberal government amid the rising cost of living.

At times, Poilievre abandoned his usual attack-dog approach and painted a message to "restore hope" for Canadians. His speech focused on the need to cut taxes and reduce "gatekeepers," as well as the need to address affordability.

The change of tone doesn't represent a pivot away from his ideological roots, observers say, but a transition towards a different audience.

"I don't see that as a pivot, but I see it as smoothing off some of the rougher, more extreme edges of his campaign," said Mount Royal political science professor Duane Bratt.

"The question now is: is that just a one-off, or is he going to come back to some of those themes?"

However, there was at least one person who wasn't waiting to see the outcome. On Sept. 13, Alain Rayes (Richmond-Arthabaska, Que.) announced his departure from Conservative caucus to sit as an Independent MP. He previously served as the party's Quebec lieutenant under past leaders Erin O'Toole (Durham, Ont.) and Andrew Scheer (Regina-Qu'Appelle, Sask.).

"I respect the choice made by members of the Conservative Party of Canada. However, some of my political ideals, values, and convictions are not compatible with the new path undertaken by our political formation," he said in a statement. Rayes supported former Quebec premier Jean Charest in the leadership race and said he remains a "proud Progressive Conservative."

Rayes said he's leaving "without bitterness" and remains "driven by the deep desire to continue to serve" politically "with the same rigour, passion, and dedication as usual."

Bratt said that the speech was important for Poilievre, as it was an opportunity to showcase himself to non-Conservatives tuning in.

At the same time, Bratt said there was enough "red meat" in his speech for his base, such as increasing liquefied natural gas production, scrapping the carbon tax, and protecting gun rights for law-abiding citizens.

Bratt said the challenge will be to maintain the support of his base while trying to grow it, which O'Toole and Scheer struggled to do.

"So that's one danger [for Poilievre]—by not raising those more extreme issues that he did capitalize on in the campaign, is he going to fall in the same trap? I don't think he is," Bratt said, remarking that Poilievre's authenticity remains

one of his strengths.

While expecting “JustinFlation” references to resume, Bratt said he anticipates other, more controversial ideas from the campaign trail to be muted, including promoting the use of cryptocurrency.

Poilievre used the “JustinFlation” buzzword on Twitter when he announced his “inflation busting” leadership team on Sept. 13. Among the 10-person crew are deputy leaders Melissa Lantsman (Thornhill, Ont.) and Tim Uppal (Edmonton Mill Woods, Alta.), House leader Scheer, whip Kerry-Lynne Findlay (South Surrey–White Rock, B.C.), Quebec lieutenant Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg–Haute-Saint Charles, Que.), and Eric Duncan (Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry, Ont.) as caucus-party liaison.

On the campaign trail, Poilievre was criticized for cozying up to some with far-right links and catering to conspiracy theorists by declaring that cabinet ministers in his potential government wouldn’t travel to World Economic Forum events.

Following Poilievre’s victory, Trudeau said that “buzzwords, dog-whistles, and careless attacks don’t add up to a plan for Canadians,” and “attacking the institutions that make our society fair, safe, and free is not responsible leadership.”

Tasha Kheiriddin, the co-chair for Jean Charest’s leadership campaign and author of *The Right Path: How Conservatives Can Unite, Inspire and Take Canada Forward*, told *The Hill Times* she also didn’t view Poilievre’s speech as a pivot, but more a focusing and refining of his message.

“He focused on the common points that people were concerned about in all the leadership camps, and that’s smart,” Kheiriddin said, adding that he had excluded all of the “lightning rod” issues that had made the rest of the campaigns and their supporters nervous.

“I think the goal of the speech was to be prime ministerial,” Kheiriddin added. “The fact he left those other issues out, I thought, was an indication that he wants to build a common footing, which is excellent and very encouraging.”

Kheiriddin said she found the speech very positive, focusing on economic issues and the importance of a Conservative approach to immigration and critical mineral development.

“I thought it was well delivered, and I personally liked it very much,” Kheiriddin said, joking that many of the lines in Poilievre’s speech could have been cribbed directly from her book.

“Maybe he read it,” she added.

Going forward, Kheiriddin said if the Conservative Party is to be successful, it has to focus on issues that can expand the party to the centre-right, and Poilievre would need to reach out to ensure that Conservatives who didn’t vote for him feel included in the conversation.

“You don’t want to lose people, and he can’t afford to do that,” Kheiriddin said. “You don’t want to make the tent smaller, you want to make it bigger, and that is certainly what [Poilievre] did in his speech.”

Conservative strategist Geoff Norquay, who supported Charest in the leadership race, said there is a transition from the language used by Poilievre to communicate with Tory membership to the “more accessible” language he will need to use when communicating with a broader audience.

“He has incredible communication skills in making complex issues instantly understandable to millions of people,” said Norquay, a principal at Enterprise Strategies, remarking that the new Conservative leader’s goal is to simplify “horribly complex issues” with understandable messaging.

He said every potential leader needs a set of policies to win party leadership.

“He’s done that, and it’s time to transition the language he uses to talk about the issues,” he said.

While questions of party unity have been raised throughout the campaign, Norquay, speaking to *The Hill Times* prior to Rayes’ departure, said those will be diminished due to the strength of Poilievre’s win.

“I don’t think there are any factions of doubters that are going to appear. I think he commands the party from a great height now, given the size of his factory,” he said. “He is the leader of the party with an overwhelming mandate to lead.”

Conservative MP Joël Godin (Portneuf–Jacques-Cartier, Que.) told *The Hill Times* in August that if Poilievre failed to pivot from a populist path, he would consider leaving the party.

Godin declined an interview request, but said in an email: “I rally with the new leader Pierre Poilievre; the game is over. Now we will work for the future.” He didn’t respond to a subsequent email asking if that meant he would be staying in caucus.

Conservative MP Michael Cooper (St. Albert–Edmonton, Alta.), who served as co-caucus liaison for Poilievre’s campaign, told *The Hill Times* the message Poilievre presented in his speech was the same one which he used to steer his campaign.

“Pierre has been clear in terms of his vision, and it was a result of his policies that he achieved such a resounding victory,” he said.

Asked if there will be any change in messaging after the leadership campaign, Cooper said Poilievre has been consistent, citing affordability as the biggest issue.

He said the policies and vision for Canada that were set out in the campaign will be taken “forward.”

While Conservatives have applauded Poilievre for his attempts to bring his rhetoric in line with the rest of the party, there may also be signs that the rest of the party is beginning to fall in line behind him.

In a post-caucus scrum on Sept. 12, Conservative Senator Leo Housakos (Wellington, Que.) was asked whether he expected MPs Ed Fast (Abbotsford, B.C.) or Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary–Nose Hill, Alta.) to begin talking about firing the governor of the Bank of Canada or banning ministers from the World Economic Forum.

Housakos responded by saying that Conservatives “all agree” that there had been a major failure by Trudeau and the Bank of Canada in dealing with inflation, but did not answer the question directly.

“The governor and this government will be judged by the people of Canada because, clearly, this prime minister has approved what this Bank of Canada has done, which is print money, increase taxes on Canadians, and create runaway inflation,” Housakos responded to reporters after they noted the difference between calling on the BoC governor to be fired and saying that he failed.

Tim Powers, vice-chairman of Summa Strategies and managing director of Abacus Data, also said he doesn’t see a “pivot” from Poilievre either, as his “more outlandish messaging” on the Freedom Convoy or cryptocurrency hasn’t changed; Poilievre just stopped saying them.

“What he does seem to be doing is focusing on what has worked for him before, and that is the message on affordability,” Powers said. “If anything, he seems to be pushing that message with even greater vigour.”

Powers said “at this juncture,” only a few days into Poilievre’s tenure as leader, he seemed “content enough” with connecting with Canadians in economic pain and showing them that he understands that pain.

“I think he feels he can connect with Canadians who want to at least feel like somebody understands them,” Powers said, adding that sooner or later, Poilievre would need to offer actual solutions alongside that empathy.

While Poilievre is focused on the issues that worked for him in the campaign, Powers also noted that the party and his caucus would be able to help him “course correct” on the issues that got Poilievre into trouble.

“He didn’t run a flawless campaign, and there were some errors,” Powers said, adding even though Poilievre’s mistakes didn’t affect him substantially during the leadership election, they still had the potential to be “significantly problematic” if he continues in those directions.

As for party unity, Powers said that the strength of Poilievre’s “comprehensive win” made the potential for any mutinies, like the one that ousted O’Toole, less likely.

“There’s no win at the moment for people who may not be fully ready to kiss the ring,” Powers said. “They may be dis-comforted by some of his more out-there pronouncements, but he’s shown he can raise money, sign people up, and win comprehensively. So people are going to give him the benefit of the doubt, for now.”

Poilievre wins Conservative leadership with commanding 68.1 per cent of the points on first ballot, pledges focus on pocketbook issues; party promises unity, downplays division

In a substantive and clearly communicated speech focused on reducing the cost of living and inflation, axing new taxes and removing ‘gatekeepers,’ new Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre promised a Conservative government that would run the post office, not their lives.

Seeking to rebuild a Conservative Party that has been relegated to the opposition benches in three straight federal elections, Pierre Poilievre convincingly won the Tory leadership race on Saturday night with a commanding 68.15 per cent of the points on the first ballot.

A member of the Conservative caucus since 2004, Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.) was the front-runner since he entered the field of five. He defeated fellow MPs Scott Aitchison (Parry Sound-Muskoka, Ont.) and Leslyn Lewis (Haldimand-Norfolk, Ont.), former Quebec premier Jean Charest, and former Ontario MPP Roman Baber. Charest finished second in the race with 16.07 per cent of the points. Lewis won 9.7 per cent, Baber won five per cent and Scott Aitchison won 1.1 per cent. Poilievre won 70.7 per cent of the total votes cast, Charest won 11.6 per cent, Lewis won 11.1 per cent, Baber won 5.4 per cent, and Aitchison won 1.2 per cent.

Poilievre won the endorsement of former prime minister Stephen Harper, as well as most of the Conservative caucus. According to the leadership vote results, Poilievre also won the leadership in 330 of the 338 ridings across the country, a landslide victory.

In his victory speech, Poilievre offered a hopeful message, focusing on affordability and promised to cut high taxes and get rid of “gatekeepers.”

“Tonight begins the journey of replacing an old government that costs you more and delivers you less with a new government that puts you first,” he told a packed crowd after being introduced by his wife, Anaida Poilievre, at Ottawa’s Shaw Centre in downtown.

During the leadership campaign, the former Harper-era cabinet minister put forward a social-media-savvy populist message attacking the federal government’s COVID restrictions and criticized the Bank of Canada’s monetary plans. The brash politician emerged as the favourite of the party’s right flank, but has also been criticized for supporting the Freedom Convoy.

Building on a campaign message attacking “identity politics,” he said Canadians need “hope” and not a government that “sneers at them” and “calls them names.”

“They don’t need a government to run their lives. They need a government to run a passport office,” he said in his victory speech, pitching himself as a prime minister who will “restore hope” for Canadians.

The loudest cheer of the night came when Poilievre called for ending the ArriveCAN and vaccine mandates.

“We must remove unequal barriers by axing the disastrous ArriveCAN app,” he said to roaring applause.

Poilievre also promised the Conservatives would make “government affordable so that life is affordable,” by capping spending, finding ways to reverse inflationary deficits, and “axing” new taxes on Canadians “paycheques, gas, heat and other essentials.” “We’ll fight climate change with new tech, not new taxes,” Poilievre said, adding that instead of printing more money, the government should be creating more things that cash can buy.

“Instead of doubling the money, we need to double the bread,” Poilievre added. “Let’s get rid of the government gatekeepers to build more homes, produce more food, and produce more energy right here in Canada.”

Since the defeat of then-prime minister Stephen Harper in 2015, the Conservatives have gone through two leaders and two interim leaders, which have resulted in electoral defeats of the party led by Andrew Scheer in 2019 (Regina-Qu’Appelle, Sask.) and Erin O’Toole (Durham, Ont.) in 2021.

In the caucus, he only received the backing of a single Quebec MP—Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg-Haute-Saint-Charles, Que.)—while seven of the province’s MPs backed Charest.

Uniting the party will be one of Poilievre’s most important tasks in his early days as the fourth leader of the Conservative Party.

Conservative MP Joël Godin (Portneuf-Jacques-Cartier, Que.), who endorsed Charest, told *The Hill Times* in August that if Poilievre couldn’t pivot to the centre, he would think about leaving the Tory benches.

While Poilievre thanked all the candidates, he gave a special acknowledgement for Charest’s efforts during the 1995 Quebec referendum.

Conservative House Leader MP John Brassard (Barrie-Innisfil, Ont.), meanwhile, told *The Hill Times* before Poilievre was elected on Saturday night, that he isn’t concerned about party unity and said it wasn’t as major of a problem as some may believe.

“When the parliamentary session ended in June, our caucus was united and we were singularly focused,” Brassard said.

Brassard said that any time the country has faced issues of “great magnitude” like inflation and affordability, or “any of the other issues we’re facing domestically and internationally,” an expression of differing ideas to find solutions to those problems was important, and that the leadership campaign was no different.

Brassard said that the party and the new leader would begin to work on those issues and their solutions almost immediately.

“I think we’ll hear a message of unity, but not just within our caucus, but the need to unify the nation as well,” Brassard said. “The nation right now is so divided and we need to provide an alternative to the Liberals. A message of hope and opportunity.”

In a video message, O’Toole joined the call for unity.

“To my Conservative friends, remember, where there is unity, there is always victory. So let’s show Canadians a united, strong, and compassionate Conservative party,” he said.

Conservative MP Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia-Lambton, Ont.) told *The Hill Times* before Poilievre was elected on Saturday night that, despite the divisiveness of the leadership campaign and some of the rhetoric between each party’s camp, she didn’t believe it was any more contentious than any other leadership race and that once a new leader was chosen, the party would begin to come together.

“We’ve always had a big-tent party and it’s time to get back to that,” Gladu said. “Trudeau is certainly pre-positioning that he may call one early and Jagmeet Singh has indicated that if he doesn’t get his Christmas wish list, there could be a problem.”

Gladu also praised now former-interim leader Candice Bergen for the “amazing job” she did keeping the party “unified and positive.”

The mood inside the main hall of the Shaw Centre remained relatively sombre prior to the announcement—the room was bathed under Tory blue mood lighting while a saxophone and violin duo played God Save The Queen and Amazing Grace from the stage as attendants began to take their seats, but the atmosphere in the reception just outside the hall remained quite high. With the sun still high over the Parliament Buildings and shining through the Shaw Centre’s glass dome structure, Conservative party members, MPs, Senators’ staff, and political strategists mingled by the cash-bar.

Back inside the main hall, tributes to Queen Elizabeth II, who died on Sept. 8 at the age of 96 and after reigning for 70 years, continued throughout the night, including by the new leader and former interim leader.

“Two tiny words: the Queen. Yet on every continent those two words conjure more than a picture. They also express an idea—the idea of decency and duty,” Poilievre said. “She exhibited the virtues we most cherish: dignity, civility, humility, candour, and above all else, service. That’s why her death—though not expected—is nonetheless shocking.”

Bergen said that she was saddened by the death of “our Queen,” who she said served with honour and whose place in the story of Canada would be one as great as that of Queen Victoria.

“We should all strive to emulate the dignity and grace that she personified throughout her reign,” Bergen added.

Bergen continued by thanking the “literally hundreds of thousands” of Canadians who had joined the party and whose optimism and excitement confirmed to her and the Conservative caucus that they were on the “right track.”

“My heart is truly filled with gratitude,” Bergen said.

In a final message to her party’s caucus as interim leader, Bergen also called on party members to not allow themselves “whatever kind of Conservative you are, to be broken into groups and labelled.”

“Do not descend into the culture of identity politics and division in our party,” Bergen urged. “Even when you disagree with each other, actually, especially when you disagree with each other.”

“I have no doubt we will support our new leader, buttress the new team, advise them, and give our new leader the chance to flourish and pave the way for a new federal Conservative government,” she said.

Despite a contentious campaign that created speculation the party may fracture, the Conservative party has quadrupled in memberships since the end of 2021, with 678,702 members eligible to vote as of June 3, 2022, and more than membership totals of the previous two leadership elections—in 2020 and 2017—combined.

At the end of last year, the party membership stood at 169,705. And in the 2020 leadership election, the party had 261,984 members, up from 250,958 members in 2017.

The Conservatives saw the largest growth in their membership, by percentage, in Newfoundland and Labrador, British Columbia, New Brunswick, and Quebec which saw the greatest proportional growth of over 750 per cent.

Of those new members, the Poilievre campaign claimed to have signed up more than 311,000. While the remaining candidates had not released exact numbers, Charest said he had signed up tens of thousands and the since-disqualified campaign of former mayor of Brampton, Ont., Patrick Brown, said it signed up more than 150,000.

Eligible party members had until 5 p.m. on Sept. 6, to return their completed ballot packages to the election campaign’s official vote receiver and auditor Deloitte, either by mail-in ballot or in person drop-off.

According to a press release from the Conservative Party on Sept. 8, 437,854 ballots had been returned by the deadline and that 417,987 votes had been accepted. The validated ballots would remain sealed and tagged by riding association and fed into the vote counting machine to be tabulated on election night.

The remaining 19,867 votes that had been rejected, according to the party press release, were most commonly found to be invalid due to missing voter identification, followed by missing signed attestations.

Editor’s note: This story has been corrected to clarify that Pierre Poilievre won 68.15 per cent of the total points, not of the total vote. He won 70.7 per cent of the total votes cast (417,987). He also won 330 of the 338 ridings.

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The Hill Times

A user's guide for what comes after the Tory leadership race

The new leader will want to step smartly and not make early mistakes or fall into the traps of their political opponents.

OTTAWA—The six-month-long Conservative leadership race, barring some unforeseen circumstance, ends this weekend. This time next week, they will have their third “permanent” leader in three years. Losing professional hockey coaches have had longer tenures than recent CPC leaders. Will the new leader break the streak of short-termism and hang on for a while? The clock starts ticking once the final ballot results are known.

There are a few things to watch for as the new leader comes out of the gate. They will want to step smartly and not make early mistakes or fall into the traps of their political opponents. Step 1 comes with the victor's first remarks as leader. While a broad national audience is not likely to be taking them in on a late Saturday night or early Sunday morning, party members and many of those who voted in the leadership from all camps probably will be. What the new leader says and how he or she recognizes those they battled with over the last half year will matter to that audience. Building momentum or making a mess starts there.

The new Conservative leader will hope that unlike their predecessor Erin O'Toole, it is not so early in the morning that only immediate family, captured media, and staff fill the spectator seats. They will want to project energy, enthusiasm, and mission certainty to a full room of enraptured fans.

After those remarks comes the immediate arduous work of dealing with defeated candidates and their supporters. Party members, particularly those on the losing side of a campaign, will watch carefully to see how their candidate and his or her team gets treated. Regardless of the winner's margin of victory, there is always an expectation of an attempt at decency towards fellow combatants. Some might view that as antiquated, but it still matters—particularly in the Conservative Party, which, when it has been successful, has never been one homogenous unit.

Also important is early caucus outreach and management. Both Andrew Scheer and O'Toole will tell you the first knives that puncture your skin come from your peers in the Commons or Senate who are pissed at you for some reason or another. Find ways to keep them in the tent or you can find yourself disemboweled in the blink of an eye. If Pierre Poilievre wins, as many expect is the inevitable conclusion, this might be less of a worry for him, given his strong establishment support. Nonetheless he should not take that for granted.

And watch out a little further down the road when you hand out critic roles and House leadership positions. People who don't believe their magnificent talents have been recognized can become enormous pains in the ass.

Two other things to watch for in early moments of the new leader's life are: the first media news conference, and who the leader appoints as his senior staff leadership team. Many a leader has stumbled in that first press conference by being unprepared or caught off guard by an out-of-left-field question. In the case of both Poilievre and Jean Charest, they are both experienced with tough media settings. Nonetheless, no matter your experience, you still want to limit your errors.

While the broader world couldn't care less about who works in a leader's office, caucus, activists, and party staff—your key internal audiences—pay disproportionate attention to these roles. They often correlate work comfort and ambitions fulfilled or denied by individuals in those cohorts. Leader's office staffing is both symbolically important and operationally essential. Getting that wrong can lead to early headaches and problems.

That is your user's guide to disassembling the early hours and days of the next the Conservative leader. While not the definitive list, it will get you started.

Tim Powers is vice-chairman of Summa Strategies and managing director of Abacus Data. He is a former adviser to Conservative political leaders.

If Poilievre wins leadership, but fails to pivot to the centre, Quebec Tory MP Godin says he will ‘reflect’ on his own ‘future political life’

After the Conservative leadership election concludes on Sept. 10, party unity will depend on the direction the new leader decides to go, whether that's leaning into populism or pivoting to the centre, says Tasha Kheiriddin, author and co-chair of the Jean Charest campaign.

The Conservative Party will elect a new leader on Sept. 10, but already one Quebec Conservative MP is warning that the results could cause him to re-evaluate his future with the party.

The unity of the Conservative Party after the leadership election will depend largely on the direction the new leader decides to take, says Tasha Kheiriddin, co-chair of Jean Charest's Conservative leadership campaign. It will also impact whether three-term Conservative MP Joël Godin, who won his Portneuf-Jacques-Cartier, Que., riding with 51 per cent of the vote in the 2021 election, remains with the party.

“I don't like what I see about Pierre in this race,” said Godin, who is uncomfortable with front-runner Pierre Poilievre's (Carleton, Ont.) populist style of campaigning, and the potential future direction of the party he represents, in an interview with *The Hill Times*. If Poilievre does take the reins and lead the party down a populist path, Godin said he might consider crossing the floor or sitting as an Independent. “I'm moderate. I'm not a populist.”

Godin, who is supporting former Quebec premier Jean Charest's candidacy in the leadership election and who describes himself as a progressive conservative, said he wants to stay in the party, and he won't automatically leave the caucus if Poilievre wins. The only reason for his potential departure, he said, would be if Poilievre wins and refuses to pivot to the centre. Godin argued that when a new party leader is elected whose ideological views and style of leadership are different from some caucus members, it's the right of an individual caucus member to reconsider if they want to remain in caucus. Poilievre won his Carleton, Ont., riding with 50 per cent of the vote in the 2021 election.

Godin said if he decides to leave the Conservative caucus, he would have several options to choose from, including crossing the floor, sitting as an Independent MP, resigning from his seat, or starting a more progressive conservative party, perhaps with a few other Conservative members.

Poilievre, who is running a populist campaign with slogans such as, “take back control of your life,” and “make Canada the freest nation on earth,” is seen as the front-runner in the contest and has the majority of caucus endorsements.

In addition to Poilievre and Charest, the other three leadership candidates are Conservative MPs Scott Aitchison (Parry Sound-Muskoka, Ont.) and Leslyn Lewis (Haldimand-Norfolk, Ont.), and former Ontario Independent MPP Roman Baber.

Poilievre is a right-of-centre candidate, while Charest and Aitchison are progressive conservatives. Lewis is a social conservative and Baber is a libertarian candidate.

Poilievre's campaign focus of “freedom from gatekeepers”—who, in his view, control people's lives, as well as his support of the controversial “Freedom Convoy”—is alienating some moderate Conservatives.

Some high-profile moderate Conservatives have gone as far as to suggest that party unity is in jeopardy and could fracture if Poilievre is elected as leader and if he does not realign his ideological positions.

Two Conservative MPs who are supporting Poilievre recently told *The Hill Times* that they are not sure if the Ottawa-area MP would pivot to the centre.

“Pierre is someone who doubles down, this is who he is,” a Conservative MP, who has officially endorsed Poilievre, told *The Hill Times* two weeks ago. “That’s the reality of it, and he can’t help himself. I don’t think he knows another way.”

Poilievre could be more like Mike Harris than Donald Trump

A former senior Conservative, who is not supporting Poilievre but knows him well and who did not want to be identified in order to be candid for this article, said that if Poilievre wins the leadership, he would be more like former Ontario premier Mike Harris than former populist U.S. president Donald Trump. The source referred to the fact that former Stephen Harper-era cabinet minister John Baird is one of the co-chairs of the Poilievre campaign, who, before entering federal politics, was a caucus member and cabinet minister in the provincial Harris government. Before becoming a cabinet minister, Poilievre served as parliamentary secretary to Baird in the Harper cabinet. The other co-chairs of Poilievre’s leadership campaign are former Harper-era cabinet minister Gail Shea, Conservative Senator Leo Housakos (Quebec), and Conservative MP Tim Uppal (Edmonton Mill Woods, Alta.)

The source said that when media stories mention that the Conservative Party was formed by the merger of the Progressive Conservative and Alliance parties in 2003, they overlook the Harris Progressive Conservatives in Ontario, who were not part of the negotiation team for the merger but had a significant presence in the federal Conservative caucus and its senior staff when the party came to power in 2006. This includes Baird, Jim Flaherty, Tony Clement, Paul Calandra, and a significant number of cabinet ministerial and MPs’ staffers who numbered the same, if not more, than federal PC MPs and staffers. These cabinet ministers and Queen’s Park staffers held senior positions in the Harper government and played important roles in shaping the direction of the government.

The source said that for years, Poilievre’s chief focus has been on fiscal issues and on winning, and will remain the same going forward. They said that, strategically speaking, Poilievre wants to eliminate Maxime Bernier’s People’s Party of Canada, which was one of the key reasons why he has publicly supported the ‘Truckers’ Protest.’ According to one estimate, the PPC denied the Conservatives winning in 20 ridings across the country.

“Something that could hurt him [Poilievre] in the general [election], he won’t embrace something like that,” said the source. “He’ll go and he’ll find something else to reach out to the People’s Party voters. So in that sense, there may be some mild pivoting.”

Meanwhile, according to a poll by Nanos Research for Bloomberg released last week, Poilievre was the choice of 17 per cent of Canadians for prime minister, while 24 per cent said they would prefer Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Que.), and 13 per cent would choose Charest. The poll also suggested that Poilievre is ahead of Trudeau among men, non-college graduates, and Canadians who can’t work remotely from home. To win the next election, according to the poll, Poilievre will have to broaden his support base by winning over the moderate Conservatives who are currently supporting Charest. According to this poll, the Charest and Poilievre combined total vote would beat Trudeau in every demographic except for women. The phone and online poll of 1,038 Canadians was conducted between July 29 and Aug. 2 and had a margin of error of 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Tasha Kheiriddin, co-chair of the Charest campaign, said that the unity of the party depends on who becomes the new leader and how they engage with caucus members, rival leadership candidates, party members, and which direction they choose for the party. If the new leader fails to bring the party together, it would become an uphill battle for the Conservatives to win the next election. She argued that rather than engaging in populist politics, the new leader should talk about Conservative principles like equality of opportunity, personal responsibility, and community engagement.

“I don’t believe that populism is going to be the direction the party should take and put in the window for the next election,” said Kheiriddin, who recently authored a new book called *The Right Path: How Conservatives can Unite, Inspire and Take Canada Forward*. “I believe we have to address the concerns of populists, which are valid, things like being denied opportunities, feeling that you can’t get ahead. Populism takes root when people feel blocked, and cannot advance even though they do all the right things.”

Conservative MP Michael Cooper (St. Albert-Edmonton, Alta.), who is a co-caucus liaison for Poilievre’s leadership campaign, said the Poilievre campaign is not taking anything for granted, and is focused on getting out the vote. Cooper declined to discuss specifically what direction Poilievre would take the party in as the contest is still on-going. He argued that all party members should get behind whoever wins the leadership election.

“It’s the leader’s prerogative to put together a team that he or she can work with and believes is best suited to fulfill the important role that we as a parliamentary caucus have as the official opposition,” said Cooper in an

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interview with *The Hill Times* two weeks ago. “When a leadership race is over, the leadership race is over. And the leader assembles a team, then we move forward.”

But Kheiriddin said that it will be a mistake if Poilievre fails to make a sincere effort to bring the party together by accommodating rival candidates and their supporters in the shadow cabinet, or including rival campaign staffers in the Official Opposition Leader’s Office. She said that Erin O’Toole (Whitby, Ont.) made this mistake, and he did not last long as party leader. O’Toole was elected as the party leader in the 2020 leadership election and was voted out by the party after the 2021 election.

“There would have to be a lot of bridge-building done to repair a lot of the feelings and sentiments that are out there that are negative towards him, such as expressed by Mr. Godin,” said Kheiriddin. “So it would really be at that point, incumbent on him [Poilievre] if he were leader, to reach out to people, and I think to an extent to change the focus of his message, because some of that message turns off centre right voters.”

More than 675,000 eligible Conservative Party members are currently in the process of voting for their favourite candidates.

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