

What are the odds Poilievre stays as Tory leader?

By **PETER BLACK**

OPINION

There are so many betting platforms out there surely one of them must be giving odds on how long Pierre Poilievre will survive as leader of the Conservative Party of Canada.

A realistic reading of the political landscape leads to the conclusion Poilievre is more than likely done as leader; the question is when and how.

The 'when' could be January, according to various media reports, with the staging of a post-election party convention, at which time, as per party policy, Poilievre will face a leadership review vote. The date next year might disappoint hard-core Poilievre loyalists wishing to limit the time potential enemies would have to organize a coup.

With a vote of confidence in Poilievre on the horizon, Canadians will soon enough be treated to yet another Shakespearian epic of Conservative plotting and back-stabbing resulting in the choice of the fifth Tory leader since Stephen Harper's ignoble departure in 2015.

Folks will recall that Harper resigned almost immediately after losing to Justin Trudeau, Andrew Scheer resigned almost as quickly after losing to Trudeau in 2019, and Eric O'Toole was swiftly forced out by the Tory caucus 'a purge Poilievre organized' after losing to Trudeau in 2021.

Now it's up to Poilievre to decide whether he can win a fight to retain his leadership and earn another shot at the Liberal leader who just beat him and who is very pointedly not Justin Trudeau.

Fighting to keep the leadership he has so long coveted, incidentally, begins with Poilievre winning a byelection in a safe Alberta riding which Prime Minister Mark Carney could call for as early as August.

Being back in the House of Commons when it resumes in September certainly would enhance his standing with a caucus troubled by a leader who didn't win his seat in Ontario, a place where the party otherwise made significant gains.

And, most importantly, Conservatives 'and Canadians as a whole' will be able to judge what lessons Poilievre has learned from the last election by his performance in the House.

Suffice it to say the 'Ripper' - the title of a recent bio of the Conservative leader - had it easy when Trudeau was his punching bag in Question Period.

Can he bring his inner attack dog to heel and refrain from using 'woke' or 'whacko' on an opponent who is decidedly neither? Can he find effective lines of attack on a stack of policies essentially pilfered from his party?

The last time the Conservatives put a leader to a test was in March 2005 when Harper faced a vote following the 2004 election in which he held a predicted Liberal majority under Paul Martin to a minority.

Harper won that leadership vote by 84 per cent and forthwith won a Conservative minority government in the election the next year.

Prior to that, there was the startling experience of Progressive Conservative leader Joe Clark, the guy who beat Pierre Trudeau in May 1979 and then coughed up government to him less than a year later.

Naturally, the PCs were somewhat peeved that Clark had thrown away power over a botched Parliamentary confidence vote, so the knives were out, including a rather lethal blade wielded by Brian Mulroney.

At the first leadership review in February 1981, Clark considered a 66 per cent vote a strong enough endorsement to carry on. At a second convention in January 1983, however, Clark decided essentially the same percentage was inadequate.

He called a leadership convention for June of the same year, and lost to Mulroney by 259 votes on the fourth ballot. A little more than a year later Mulroney led the PCs back to the promised land of power and all was forgiven.

Whether Poilievre is or should be 'one and done' will be the question consuming Conservatives for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, Carney, busily seizing the moment with a dizzying agenda of action, could be contemplating a trick employed by another Tory leader, John Diefenbaker.

The Prairie renegade won a slim minority in the 1957 election, then nine months later called a snap election that delivered the largest majority in Canadian history.

That's the kind of majority Poilievre was poised to win until Carney came along. Polls now show Carney is about 25 points ahead of Poilievre in popularity; the same gap the Tory leader had over Trudeau a mere few months ago.

Place your bets.