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House comes back



A look at cabinet, legislation,
lobbying, Liberals, Conservatives,
NDP, Greens, and more

**Back to
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Issue**

The Commons returns on Sept. 20, after a three-month summer break and it's expected to be a nasty, brutish fall session. More inside.

Bloc Québécois MPs Luc Desilets, left, Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe, centre, and Mario Simard, pictured arriving on the Hill on Sept. 15, 2022, for a special sitting day to commemorate Queen Elizabeth II who died on Sept. 8. BQ Leader Yves-François Blanchet offered his condolences to the Queen's family in the House, but said his MPs wouldn't take part in the tributes. Outside the House, he called the monarchy an anachronism. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

NEWS

Expect nasty, divisive political 'fist fight' between Poilievre Conservatives and Trudeau Liberals, say political insiders

BY ABBAS RANA & CHELSEA NASH

With Pierre Poilievre now the Conservative Party leader, the Liberals are expecting a divisive "air war" and nasty exchanges between the two in the daily Question Period and on social media in an effort to define each other in a negative light, say political insiders.

"It's going to be a fist fight," said one former senior Liberal who spoke to *The Hill Times* on a not-for-attribution basis to offer their candid views. "I mean, the Conservatives under Pierre Poilievre are going to be in a fist fight. They are going to punch Justin Trudeau and the Liberals in the head every day, every hour, every minute, every second, every week, and they're going to use their different platforms to do it."

The Liberals are making their own preparations to define Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.), who has been going after Trudeau (Papineau, Que.) for months, blaming the government for inflation, the high cost of living, affordability issues,

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Back to Parliament **News**

Expect nasty, divisive political ‘fist fight’ between Poilievre Conservatives and Trudeau Liberals, say political insiders

Liberals will take ‘whatever steps are necessary’ to protect the Liberal brand from Pierre Poilievre’s attacks, says Liberal MP Judy Sgro.

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and inefficiency of services to Canadians like passports. His populist videos on social media attacking the Liberal government have re-energized the Conservative Party base, and may have excited Canadians who typically do not vote in general elections. This was evident in Poilievre’s landslide leadership election win on Sept. 10, when he garnered 295,283 out of 417,635 votes nationally, or won 70.7 per cent of the overall votes cast, and carried 330 of the 338 ridings.

Even before he became the party leader, Poilievre sent out a fundraising appeal to party members, saying if he won, the Liberals would “punch him.”

“Here’s what’s going to happen if I win the Conservative leadership election tonight: I’m going to get punched,” said Poilievre, with the last sentence bolded, in a Sept. 10 email obtained by *The Hill Times* that was sent to party members before the leadership election result was announced. “Trudeau’s Liberals are going to unleash a wave of advertising attacking me, trying to scare Canadians before I can punch back. How do I know? Because the media have reported that the Liberals are ready to ‘define’ me. It’s coming and it’s coming fast.”



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, left, and new Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre. Political insiders are expecting hard-hitting exchanges between the Liberals and the Conservatives in the daily Question Period and on social media starting this week. *The Hill Times* photographs by Andrew Meade

He asked party members to donate money for his “fight-back fund” so that he could spread his message of “hope and freedom.”

“Get my message of hope and freedom to as many Canadians as possible, as fast as possible,” read the email. “I want my team to start booking ads on TV, radio, and online on Monday [Sept. 12] morning. And to do that we need to know how much money we have to spend on fighting back. ... The Liberals want to stop me from becoming prime minister because they know I will get rid of their gatekeepers, defund the CBC, abolish mandates, and make Canada the freest country on earth so you can take back control of your life.”

In a minority government, an election could happen at any time. The average age of a minority government in Canada is between 18-24 months. The Trudeau Liberals have been in power since 2015 and if the next election were to happen in 2024, they’d be in power for nine years, a long time to stay in power for any governing party. The Stephen Harper Conservatives lost the election after nine years of governing the coun-

try. The Poilievre Conservatives now believe that the next election will likely be a change election, and they’re doing everything they can to be prepared whenever the next election comes.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Trudeau’s Liberals are taking the threat posed by Poilievre seriously and have prepared themselves to deal with him when the House returns back this week.

“We’re not going to just, you know, lay down and get punched,” said one Liberal MP in an interview with *The Hill Times*. “There’s a serious belief [in the] caucus that this guy is a serious contender, probably the biggest challenge that we faced in the last several years, and he’s very skillful. So I think there’s no question that they [the Centre] take him as a serious threat.”

The MP predicted that Question Period would be a lot more entertaining than before, expecting Poilievre will try to get under the skin of Trudeau and the prime minister will respond with his own zingers.

“You just get your popcorn, make sure your popcorn is ready, you’re sitting in front of your table, and it’s going to be entertaining,” said the MP.

Without getting into specifics of the Liberal strategy, Liberal MP Judy Sgro (Humber River-Black Creek, Ont.) agreed: “We’ll take whatever steps are necessary to protect our brand, but, more importantly, to refute the kind of negative atmosphere that [Poilievre] wants to create,” said Sgro in an interview with *The Hill Times*. “That’s not my Canada. It’s not the one that I hear him talking about with his negative approach. I want optimism and encouragement, and I think that’s what people want.”

Liberal MP Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds-Dollard, Que.) said that with a new official opposition leader in place, it would not be unusual for the Liberals to distinguish themselves from the brand of Poilievre. He said that with the new leader’s populist style and tone and tenor of his rhetoric, they will make their case to Canadians how they’re different from Poilievre’s Conservatives. Zuberi said that the Liberals are “seasoned campaigners” and are not worried about the new challenge.

“We know what we’re doing,” said Zuberi. “Yes, he is different from the others [former Conservative leaders Erin O’Toole (Durham, Ont.) and Andrew Scheer (Regina-Qu’Appelle, Sask.)], but that doesn’t mean that we cannot meet the moments.”

Liberals taking a risk by attacking Poilievre’s tone: experts

Political scientists noted there were two ways for the Liberals to tackle Poilievre: his message and his tone.

Carleton University political scientist Jonathan Malloy said the question for him was whether the Liberals would be able to be successful using the old refrain they used against Harper: sunny ways.

“The only question for me is whether the Liberals—with their allegedly still-sunny ways—are able to outshine Poilievre because he does have a more abrasive tone than Harper,” he said. “But politics is more abrasive than it was 10 years ago. So all Poilievre’s doing is just moving with the times.”

Conrad Winn, a professor of political science at Carleton University, said Poilievre’s style of politics makes him come across as a strong politician.

“If you’re an opposition leader, and you want to earn credibility, and you want to earn the people’s trust, you have to look strong,” he said in an interview.

Having a strong personality as an opposition leader doesn’t necessarily translate into being a strong prime minister, he noted, “but having a strong personality is a plus.”

As for whether the Liberals should focus on attacking Poilievre’s tone over his policy ideas, Winn said it could make the Liberals look weak to begrudge Poilievre for his abrasive style.

“To the extent that the Liberals complain that his personality is too strong, it actually makes the Liberal Party and its leader seem weak by comparison. So they’re taking real risks attacking him for being too strong-willed,” Winn said.

Duane Bratt, political scientist at Mount Royal University in Calgary, said the Liberals have two potential strategies to oppose Poilievre. One would be to engage in a back-and-forth with Poilievre, which could mean allowing the level of discourse within and outside the House of Commons to devolve into nasty politics.

But, he said he does think the Liberals ought to be reminding people about the rallies and stump speeches Poilievre held during his leadership campaign, and his focus on supporting the Freedom Convoy, defunding the CBC, firing the governor of the Bank of Canada, and his affection for Bitcoin and cryptocurrency. Those—and not the focus on inflation that Poilievre has more recently been swinging with—are Poilievre’s weak points with the general population, he said.

“Another strategy is simply almost to ignore him,” Bratt said in an interview.

That would mean saying to themselves, “we’re focusing on government, you know, he can squat from the sidelines, but we’ve got a [supply-and-confidence] agreement here for another three years, and we have to get dental care done, and we have to take care of Canadians,” he said.

In fact, that’s the strategy it seems NDP MPs are most intent on taking. When asked how they might approach the threat of a new Conservative leader—one that is posturing as a friend to the working class—three senior NDP MPs said they’re not worried about Poilievre.

“We will stay focused on people,” said NDP MP and House leader Peter Julian (New Westminster-Burnaby, B.C.).

“I think one of the things that I’ve seen over my many years in Parliament is the Liberals and Conservatives love culture wars. And they love to paint each other as diabolical and outrageous, and I think people are really tired. People are frustrated. There is a level of anger up there. But I think what people want is someone to actually deliver,” he added, pointing towards the NDP’s role in pushing the government to act on committing to the creation of a national dental-care plan, and other key policy points in their joint supply-and-confidence deal.

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Liberal MP Judy Sgro says her party is ready for any aggressive political attack from the Poilievre Conservatives in the coming weeks and months. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade