

PM faces growing discontent in caucus

MPs frustrated by Liberals' slump as Tories gain in polls

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Some Liberals say the mood inside their parliamentary caucus has soured in recent weeks over concerns about the government's performance, as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau prepares to huddle with his newly overhauled cabinet in Charlottetown.



Members of the government's front bench will travel to the capital of Prince Edward Island next week for a three-day retreat, where they will strategize and discuss a range of issues linked to rising costs of living — particularly housing — and concerns about public safety and government services, said one senior adviser to the prime minister.

But other Liberals who spoke to the Star in recent days said spirits have dropped within the caucus as the governing party lags in support behind Pierre Poilievre's opposition Conservatives in national polls. Trudeau's major midsummer cabinet shuffle also rattled some Liberal MPs, who expressed disappointment and confusion about some of the moves.

Speaking to the Star this week, one Liberal MP compared the federal party's situation to the latter days of Ontario's previous Liberal government under Kathleen Wynne.

The party was soundly defeated in the 2018 election, when it not only lost government but was reduced to just seven seats at Queen's Park.

"People are starting to question ... 'Do I want to keep taking the beating I'm taking?'" said the MP, who agreed to speak frankly on the condition they not be named.

"I'm just sensing a lot of frustration."

Another Liberal source, who also spoke on condition of anonymity, said the mood in caucus is "worse" than before Trudeau's cabinet shuffle, which they likened to putting "lipstick on a pig." The source questioned whether Trudeau's office cares what the Liberal caucus thinks, and said the government needs to stop defining itself so much around the prime minister and focus on centrist economic policies.

This Liberal predicted Trudeau could lose support from some caucus members if the government enters the fall session of Parliament without signalling such changes.

“We don’t need to outflank the NDP on the left anymore,” the source said. “We need to embrace the fact that we are Liberals, not just the party of Justin Trudeau.”

Such concerns are coming up as MPs are wary of how the Liberals have consistently fallen behind in national polls, said another Liberal MP. This MP — who also agreed to speak openly on condition they not be named — said the mood in caucus has dampened recently, but the “vast majority” of members still support Trudeau’s leadership. The MP also said they feel caucus members are motivated to push through the difficulties out of a shared disdain for Poilievre and his brand of politics.

“Every single person agrees that Poilievre should not be prime minister,” the MP said. “A common enemy is a uniting force.”

Asked about concerns in caucus, the adviser to the prime minister welcomed Liberal MPs expressing their opinions about the government’s direction, but said the cabinet team around Trudeau is “energized” and prepared to focus on new policy ideas to tackle housing costs and other economic challenges. The adviser argued the Liberal government is on the right track overall, including with policies to fight climate change and position Canada to reap benefits from the global shift to lower greenhouse gas emissions.

“It’s good for us to be our harshest critics,” the adviser said, “but at the end of the day, it’s about delivering for Canadians.”

Polls suggest many Canadians don’t like how that’s going.

According to 338Canada, a site that aggregates federal polling data, the Tories would likely win between 135 and 201 seats in the House of Commons if an election were held now, well ahead of the Liberals, who could expect between 77 and 140. A party needs 170 seats to govern with a majority. The minority Liberals currently have 158 seats to the Conservatives’ 117.

That makes right now the “worst” situation for the Liberal government since it took office, said David Coletto, president and chief executive officer of the polling firm Abacus Data.

“People are actively looking for an alternative,” he said, “and right now, enough people are parking with the Conservatives that it really is putting the Liberals ... in the weakest position they’ve been in since 2015.”

Ahead of the upcoming cabinet retreat, the government signalled it wants to focus on economic challenges. With inflation still running high, it has faced criticism from opposition parties and policy advocates that it has not done enough to wrangle the high costs. A favourite target of Poilievre’s is housing. The Conservative leader routinely points out how the cost of an average home has ballooned since the Liberals took office eight years ago, and accuses the government of juicing inflation through reckless spending.

Former finance minister Bill Morneau, who resigned from Trudeau’s cabinet in 2020, recently gave credence to that line of attack. In an interview with the Harvard International Review, Morneau said the government — like many others around the world — put too much

money into pandemic emergency programs for too long, and that this contributed to inflation.

“Clearly, supply-chain problems were a big challenge. The rapid change in the situation was (another) big challenge. But, the support, which was larger than necessary, is at least one of the factors that needs to be considered,” Morneau said.

Earlier this week, Trudeau’s new Treasury Board president, Oakville MP Anita Anand, asked all government departments to outline how they can trim costs from travel and spending on outside consultants. The goal is to reduce spending in government and Crown corporations by \$15.4 billion over the next five years.

While this search for savings could end up slashing federal spending, the senior adviser to Trudeau said the goal is to identify areas where expenses might be unnecessary and potentially use some of that money on more pressing priorities, like housing.

For Kody Blois, a Liberal MP from Nova Scotia, the government must show Canadians it is “laser-focused” on challenges with the cost of living. That includes promoting the actions the government has taken to help people, he said. Examples include spending billions of dollars to reduce child-care fees and to provide dental care for low-income Canadians.

“We have a good story to tell on the programs that we have, but we can’t rest on our laurels,” Blois said. “We need to continue to push to try to drive these issues and try to be able to make a dent in what is not an easy time for Canadians, (and) make sure that we continue to work as hard as we can and show that we’re trying to deliver for them.”

Blois said the government also needs to “remind Canadians” that Poilievre is “not a moderate Conservative.”

He suggested the opposition leader is flirting with baseless conspiracy theories in his criticism of the World Economic Forum, and pointed to a Global News report last year that revealed Poilievre’s YouTube channel used hidden misogynistic tags to promote videos.

Julie Dzerowicz, the Liberal MP for Toronto’s Davenport riding, said she’s heard from many constituents this summer who feel the government can do more to help with the cost of living, like somehow ensuring grocery chains aren’t gouging customers. But rather than change their policies, Dzerowicz said, the Liberals need to stay focused on the big issues that have defined the Trudeau era — from climate change to Indigenous reconciliation — and will be “more clearly articulating our economic plan” in the coming weeks.

For the other MP who compared the Liberals’ situation to the waning era of Ontario’s Wynne government, improving communication about government accomplishments is key.

And even though some in caucus are concerned, the MP said they believe it would be a mistake to think the party would be better off without Trudeau.

“He is a fighter,” the MP said, “and I would never underestimate him.”