

Politics

Spooked by polls, Liberal MPs hope Trudeau hears their concerns as caucus gathers

Caucus members want to settle on strategy to counter Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre's attacks

[Olivia Stefanovich](#) · CBC News · Posted: Sep 12, 2023 4:00 AM EDT | Last Updated: September 12



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will face the Liberal national caucus this week after getting the worst polling numbers of his eight years in government. (Ethan Cairns/Canadian Press)



Some Liberal members of Parliament heading into a national caucus retreat this week say they're facing blowback from voters at the doorsteps — and they hope the prime minister and his inner circle listen to their concerns before it's too late.

The Liberals are holding three days of meetings starting Tuesday in London, Ont., a key battleground region of southwestern Ontario, as their party faces its worst polling numbers since forming government in 2015.

The talks are set to focus on making housing more affordable and increasing supply, improving health care and fighting climate change, according to a senior government source.

Ahead of the gathering, several MPs told CBC News they don't feel the prime minister listens to their views or solicits their advice.

CBC News spoke to more than a dozen MPs and granted some confidentiality so that they could speak freely. They said they plan to use the next few days to urge the prime minister, his office and cabinet to offer a fresh plan to Canadians on the top issues of the day — because many don't believe the government's current communication strategy is working.

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Some said they also want a plan to respond to Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre, whose party held its policy convention in Quebec City over the weekend.

Some, including members of cabinet, were willing to speak openly about the choices facing the government.

Immigration Minister Marc Miller said the Liberals are torn over how to counter what he called Poilievre's "garbage" attacks.

"There's a tension as to how to engage ... whether you fight fire with fire and bring yourself down to a level of politics that you yourself have sworn to your electors you would never engage," Miller said.

"There is a struggle and attention generally as to how to deal with a person like that, that Canadian politics, in particular, hasn't seen much of."



Many Liberal MPs want their party to take a more aggressive stance against Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre. (Jacques Boissinot/The Canadian Press)

Sean Casey, Liberal MP for Charlottetown, said the Liberals need to respond to Poilievre in a measured, thoughtful way that shows humility, without engaging in rage-driven attacks.

"Pretty much anything that he [Poilievre] talks about in connection with the economy ignores global conditions, ignores the impact of geopolitics," he said.

"He would have you believe that emissions aren't going down when in fact they are, and would have you believe that a big part of the increase in cost of living is the price on pollution, which it isn't."

Casey and many other Liberals MPs said they don't know why their party allowed the Conservatives [to rebrand Poilievre](#) without offering a stronger counter-narrative.

"The strategy behind how aggressively to go after (Poilievre) is one that isn't made in rooms to which I'm invited," Casey said.

'Perfect storm of challenges' facing Liberals

A recent survey by Abacus Data put the Conservatives ahead of the Liberals by 14 points nationally, in clear majority government territory — the biggest gap yet between Trudeau's Liberals and the Conservatives.

Many MPs said they're spooked by the data. A presentation to the Ontario caucus over the summer by David Coletto, Abacus data's chair and CEO, made their anxiety worse, said one Liberal source.

Caucus members invited Coletto to give data presentations to every regional caucus except Quebec.

He spoke to the Liberal Atlantic caucus last week and is scheduled to meet the Pacific caucus in London on Wednesday morning.

Coletto said he's telling MPs that if an election were called today, the Liberals probably would lose.

"Their reaction to that isn't great," Coletto told CBC News.

Coletto said the main drivers of the polling trend are angst caused by the cost of living, record high inflation and rising interest rates.

His polling found young Canadians who helped give the Liberals their majority in 2015 are less likely to say they'd vote Liberal now.



Regional Liberal caucuses have asked David Coletto, chair and CEO of Abacus Data, to give independent presentations about how their party is polling. (Blair Gable/Abacus Data)

Coletto said the Liberals' messaging focuses too much on what they've done in the past and not enough on what's next.

He said the situation is creating what he called a "perfect storm of challenges" for Trudeau and his party.

"People have lost faith in him, and at no point since he's been elected prime minister [have] his personal numbers been as low as they are now," Coletto said.

The summer cabinet shuffle had no positive effect on Liberal support.

"I'm very worried for the country and I'm very worried for the party," Casey said.

An election call isn't expected soon and could be as far off as two years. Casey said he thinks that the more the spotlight shines on Trudeau's adversary, the less excited the electorate will

be about Poilievre.

But Casey said the Liberals can't count on that or assume that falling interest rates and inflation will turn their fortunes around.

Caucus members who spoke to CBC News said they are discussing Trudeau's leadership — but they highly doubt anyone will raise the issue at the national caucus in a formal way.

Improving communication key priority for Liberal MPs

Many MPs say they still believe Trudeau is their best asset, even if he's one voters have grown tired with.

"The worst thing that we can do is have a divided caucus or one that's talking about a lack of confidence in the leader," Casey said.

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Poilievre tells Conservative party faithful he's ready for the next election

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Pierre Poilievre delivered the keynote address at the Conservative party's first policy convention since he was elected leader. He used the opportunity to hammer the Liberal government on affordability and lay out what he expects to do if he wins the next election.

Several caucus members said they believe Poilievre has an advantage in the way he promotes his policies.

The Conservative pitch to "axe the tax," can be easily understood in seconds, while the Liberals' carbon tax rebate can take several minutes to explain, one MP said.

Fredericton MP Jenica Atwin said many people in Atlantic Canada still aren't clear on how the rebate works.

"It's a bit frustrating to think that it hasn't been landing the way we want it to," Atwin said.

"It's a bit perplexing ... because this is a policy that we ran on."



Fredericton Liberal MP Jenica Atwin said the federal government needs to do a better job of communicating policies like the carbon tax rebate. (Guy LeBlanc/Radio-Canada)

Toronto-area MP Julie Dzerowicz said she's particularly alarmed when she sees a poll that says the Liberal government doesn't have an economic or environmental plan.

"That literally makes my heart fall," said Dzerowicz, who represents the riding of Davenport. She's put her name forward to address the caucus on housing policy.

"What I would love coming out of our national caucus is that there's a message that goes to Canadians that indicates that we are seized with this issue," she said.

B.C. MP Ken Hardie said he wants a candid discussion on how to improve the mechanisms that support Trudeau and his communication strategy.

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- [Marc Miller touts progress on reconciliation, has harsh words for Poilievre](#)

"We would want to see positive, thoughtful and considerate recognition of the things that we bring up and a willingness to engage with us," said Hardie, who represents the riding of Fleetwood—Port Kells.

The Liberals' polling numbers could shift, said Coletto — either gradually, in response to changes in government policy, or suddenly, in reply to some seismic event like Trudeau's resignation.

"That would cause Canadians to reset their own thinking, and to look at the government and the future in a very different light," he said.

Still, he added, changing leaders wouldn't guarantee success since most of the potential Liberal candidates are not household names.

"There's no easy answer," Coletto said.

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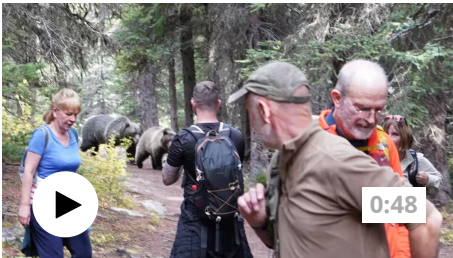
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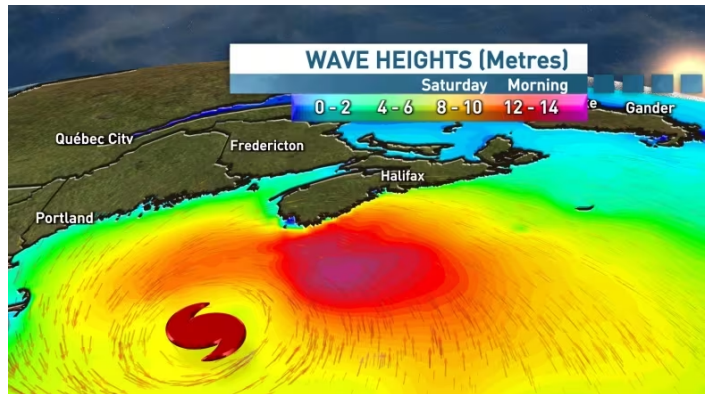
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