Strident far-right “Freedom” Convoy advocate Pierre Poilievre wins leadership of Canada’s Conservatives

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11 September 2022

Pierre Poilievre, a strident advocate of the far-right “Freedom” Convoy, has won a decisive first-ballot victory in the race to become leader of the Conservative Party, Canada’s official opposition.

A veteran Conservative MP, Poilievre made the Convoy, which menacingly occupied the nation’s capital for more than three weeks last winter, and its call for a permanent end to all anti-COVID public health measures the defining issue of his campaign.

This was part of a calculated appeal to the far right, including supporters of the People’s Party of Canada (PPC). Since its founding in 2018, the fascistic PPC has been led by Maxime Bernier, Poilievre’s former Conservative Party cabinet colleague.

Throughout the leadership campaign, Poilievre combined far-right dog whistles and populist denunciations of the “elites” with appeals—invariably tied to calls for tax cuts and austerity budgets—to popular anger and anxiety over soaring inflation and interest rates. His anti-elite posturing was facilitated by the fact that the official “left,” consisting of the New Democrats and trade unions, has suppressed workers’ struggles for decades and is in a governmental alliance with the pro-austerity, pro-war Trudeau Liberals.

Poilievre’s victory was widely anticipated, especially after his campaign submitted more than 300,000 new party memberships (greater than the party’s total membership at the time of the last leadership race in 2020). Nevertheless, its scale and the extent of his support within the party leadership underscore that Canada’s Conservatives are increasingly morphing into a far-right political formation. Their trajectory thus aligns with the US Republican Party and the British Conservative Party, the two foreign parties with which Canada’s Conservatives have traditionally enjoyed the closest ideological affinity and organizational ties.

In a mail-in membership vote, Poilievre finished first in all but eight of Canada’s 338 electoral districts. He captured 68 percent of the available points in an electoral system designed to give somewhat greater representation to parts of the country where the Conservatives have less support. This system should have favoured former Quebec Premier and one-time Progressive Conservative leader Jean Charest, but in the end he won just 16 percent of the first-ballot points. Two other outspoken supporters of the far-right Convoy, social conservative Leslyn Lewis and anti-communist Russia émigré Roman Baber, won 9.6 and 5 percent respectively. Self-proclaimed “unity” candidate MP Scott Aitchison polled just 1 percent.

Poilievre was publicly endorsed by 62 MPs, more than half of the Conservative caucus, including one-time party leader and prominent social conservative Andrew Scheer. Charest garnered endorsements from just 16 MPs and Lewis 9.

In a conspicuous break with Canadian political tradition, former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper also urged the party to make Poilievre its next leader.

Poilievre launched his leadership bid last February, just days after Erin O’Toole was felled by a revolt of Conservative MPs for failing to give the Convoy full-throated support. In doing so, he demonstratively associated his candidacy with the Convoy, whose initiators publicly advocated the replacement of Canada’s elected government with a junta. He then proclaimed that as prime minister he would make Canada “the freest country” on earth. By this Poilievre, an ardent admirer of Margaret Thatcher and Friedrich Hayek, means that he plans to “free” big business of all regulatory restraints on profit-making and the rich of any obligation to help fund public services and minimal social welfare measures for the old, sick and destitute.

Poilievre’s campaign was long on sloganeering and very short on policy specifics. He denounced COVID-19-vaccine and mask mandates as intolerable infringements on personal liberty; pledged to defund the state broadcaster, the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), and abolish the federal “carbon tax”; vowed to fire the head of the Bank of Canada; and indulged the far right’s nonsensical claims that the World Economic Forum is aiming to impose a “socialistic” global government.

Before its precipitous fall on the world’s money markets, Poilievre was counselling Canadians to buy bit-coins as a way to “take control of money from bankers and politicians” and “opt out of inflation.” Eager to keep his association with the Convoy and its supporters front and centre, Poilievre marched in Ottawa on the eve of Canada Day alongside 28-year army veteran Warrant Officer James Topp, who has been disciplined for denouncing vaccine mandates.

At the beginning of his Saturday evening victory speech, Poilievre gave shout-outs to the social conservative Lewis for having championed “faith” and “family” and to Baber for his opposition to all pandemic lockdowns, which resulted in his being removed from the legislative caucus of Doug Ford’s hard-right Ontario Progressive Conservative government in January 2021.

Signaling that a Poilievre Conservative government would institute savage austerity, the newly-elected Conservative leader went on to denounce Liberal government spending for “driving up the cost of living.” He ignored the inflationary impact of the trillions of dollars the world’s major central banks have poured into the markets to prop up the investments of the rich and super-rich, the disruption of global production chains due to the ruling elite’s ruinous profits-before-lives pandemic policy and the US-NATO instigated war with Russia over Ukraine.

Poilievre’s claims to be a spokesperson for the aggrieved and ignored “working Joes” mimic those of Trump, defrocked British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and other vicious, far-right opponents of the working class, and are just as fraudulent.

Poilievre rails against “gatekeepers,” but he has long been a tool of the

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most right-wing faction of Canada's corporate elite. He was first elected as a Conservative MP in 2004 at the age of 25 and has been active in right-wing politics since he was a teenager. He came increasingly to the fore as the Harper Conservative government shifted politics sharply right, including by dramatically expanding Canada's role in the Afghan war, implementing massive austerity, raising the age of eligibility for Old Age Security, criminalizing one strike after another and vastly expanding the powers and reach of the national security apparatus.

Prior to being named to the Conservative cabinet in 2013, he served as Harper's parliamentary secretary and attack-dog. This included shrilly defending Harper's December 2008 constitutional coup, wherein the government undemocratically shut down Parliament to prevent the opposition from voting it out of office, and repeated violations of Parliament's rights to prevent the exposure of Canadian complicity in torture in Afghanistan.

The corporate media cast the Conservative leadership race as a clash over the party's future direction, with Charest purportedly representing a more moderate Conservative, if not "Red Tory" tradition. Cheered on by the likes of the *National Post* and the *Toronto Sun*, Poilievre, for his part, pilloried Charest as a quasi-liberal, denouncing him for leading a right-wing, pro-federalist Quebec Liberal Party government that placed a price on carbon emissions and raised taxes as part of a package of austerity measures.

That the media could present Charest as some sort of progressive and Poilievre so successfully tar him as too moderate is emblematic of just how far the axis of Canadian establishment politics has shifted rightward during the past two decades.

Charest has an uncheckered right-wing political record going back to his days as a cabinet minister in the Mulroney Progressive Conservative government—one far too long to document here. His readiness to slash social spending and use state violence in doing so is exemplified by his government's response to the 2012 Quebec student strike. Charest centered his Conservative leadership bid on calls for massive increases in military spending, health care privatization, the building of new oil and natural gas pipelines and the gutting of environmental regulations.

He repeatedly attacked Poilievre for his "dangerous" and "irresponsible" championing of the far-right Convoy. But he did so from an entirely right-wing standpoint, rooted in fears that Poilievre's courting and promotion of far-right and outright fascist forces are destabilizing establishment politics, undermining the institutions of the Canadian capitalist state and will provoke mounting opposition from the working class.

Charest never made the obvious point that Poilievre is drawing from the playbook of Donald Trump and courting the same far-right forces—forces that Trump mobilized on January 6, 2021 as shock troops in his failed attempt to nullify the outcome of the 2020 election and establish a presidential dictatorship. Rather he insisted that the Conservatives must be "the party of law and order." The former Quebec premier stressed that if the Tories are going to use the full repressive powers of the state against anti-pipeline and other protests, they cannot be seen to be supporting anti-vaxx truckers when they defy the police to occupy downtown Ottawa for weeks on end and block Canada-US border crossings.

Similarly, Charest denounced Poilievre for calling for the firing of Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Macklem, saying such comments would spook foreign investors.

The "Freedom" Convoy represented a nodal point in the breakdown of Canadian democracy.

A significant section of the ruling class, led by the Conservative Party, whipped up and instrumentalized a far-right movement with the aim of overcoming popular opposition to the removal of all remaining anti-COVID public health restrictions, destabilizing the minority Trudeau government, and potentially forcing it from office. Poilievre's virtual coronation as leader of the Conservatives, Canadian capital's "government in waiting," is a further warning that the ruling class is increasingly breaking with democratic-constitutional forms of rule.

The vast majority of working people were and remain hostile to the far right, its social Darwinist "survival of the fittest" attitude toward the pandemic and its other anti-democratic aims. Yet for more than three weeks the Convoy was able to take centre stage in Ottawa, flouting all public health measures and terrorizing local residents, and dominate national political life.

The support of the Conservatives and much of the corporate media played no small part in this. But even more important was the role of the trade unions and NDP. They kept the working class muzzled and on the political sidelines, then supported the Trudeau government when it invoked the never-before-used Emergencies Act to end the occupation of Ottawa—setting a precedent for the suspension of basic democratic rights that can and will be used against the working class. The unions and NDP continued to support the Trudeau Liberals as they presided over the scrapping of virtually all remaining COVID-19 public health measures by the provincial governments, thereby implementing the "Freedom" Convoy's pandemic program in practice.

A month later, the anti-working class Liberal-NDP-union alliance was institutionalized in the form of a "confidence and supply" agreement. With enthusiastic union support and in the name of "political stability"—otherwise known as the suppression of the class struggle—the NDP has pledged to keep the minority Liberal government in power until June 2025. The Liberal government will use the "stability" provided by the NDP and unions to wage imperialist war against Russia, dramatically hike military spending, pivot to "post-pandemic" austerity and impose a massive inflation-driven real wage cut on working people.

There is mounting working class opposition, as attested by a wave of strikes embracing virtually every economic sector. But insofar as the working class does not break free of the stranglehold of the trade unions, repudiate the union-NDP-Liberal alliance and develop as an independent political force, uniting all the struggles of working people in the fight for workers' power, the door will be open for Poilievre and other far-right forces to exploit the growing social crisis in their bid to bring to power a government of unbridled reaction.

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