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# The Elephant in the Room: The Liberal Party's Fall and Potential Resurgence in Canada

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During Pierre Trudeau's 1969 visit with US President Nixon, Canada's then Prime Minister observed that

*Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping next to an elephant. No matter how friendly and even tempered is the beast... one is affected by every twitch and grunt.<sup>1</sup>*

The words and actions of new (re) elected US President Donald Trump are much more than mere grunts. On and off again threats of tariffs and repeated references to Canada becoming America's 51<sup>st</sup> state have turned a once solid friendship and economic partnership into a dangerously frayed relationship. Fears of an economic annexation of our country are real.

However, the aggressive US stance has provided Canada with an opportunity to ditch the polarized political atmosphere that has poisoned our discourse for too long. Canada had joined the long list of nations where ideology is more important than shared national identity. The threat of our sovereignty as a nation has driven us back to our core values, namely patriotism. At the same time, it has reinvigorated a Liberal Party that was seemingly on its last legs.

The current governing Liberal party has held federal office in Canada since 2015. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, son of Pierre Trudeau, had become a pariah and was subject to public scorn and attacks, both verbal and physical. At first a saviour during COVID, he was eventually derailed by vaccination deniers, frustrated Canadians, and vigorous opponents of the federal

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<sup>1</sup> The Sunday Magazine. *CBC News online*. 'Sleeping With a Very Cranky Elephant: The History of Canada-U.S. Tensions'. 15 June 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/sunday/the-sunday-edition-june-17-2018-1.4692469/sleeping-with-a-very-cranky-elephant-the-history-of-canada-u-s-tensions-1.4699017>

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carbon tax. Not even his January 2025 announcement to step down seemed enough to save his party.

Yet even before his successor was elected as the new Liberal Leader and sworn in as Prime Minister, The Liberal Party miraculously found itself neck and neck with the Opposition Conservative Party of Canada. How did this happen? The recent re-election of Donald Trump and his first few weeks in office have oddly revitalized the governing party that had seem destined to be reduced to third- or fourth-party status in the Commons. Trump's election has fundamentally altered the political landscape in Canada. What seemed like a landslide victory for the Conservative Party of Canada is no longer a certainty.<sup>2</sup>

The political machinations of the latter half of 2024 are in some ways unprecedented yet are also all too familiar. Many of them have happened before, just not at the same time. Two in particular deserve our attention, the internal revolt against the Prime Minister and Trudeau's decision to prorogue Parliament to avoid a motion of non-confidence.

In 2003 Prime Minister Jean Chretien was facing a revolt from his own party. After winning three majority governments in a row, the Prime Minister faced a formidable challenge from his Minister of Finance Paul Martin. Yet there were no internal mechanisms to force the Prime Minister to step down. Long gone are the days when a caucus chooses their leader. Being chosen by Liberal delegates in a leadership convention, the Prime Minister argued that only they could remove him as leader of the Liberal Party. The result was months of internal fighting and a divided party. Only after the threat of a leadership review in late 2003 did Jean Chretien cede to the writing on the wall and announced he was stepping down.<sup>3</sup>

The events of 2003 exposed a serious flaw in the ability to oust a sitting Prime Minister. Our Westminster parliamentary system of democracy requires a Prime Minister to hold the confidence of the House of Commons at all times. To not have the confidence of the House would handcuff the leader and their ability to see their policies through. The irony is that modern leadership candidates do not require the support of their caucus to become leader. Yet once they win the leadership of their party they require the confidence of their caucus and do not have to face the thousands of Canadians who helped them win their place at the head of their party.

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<sup>2</sup> The Canadian Press. *Leger Poll: Carney as Leader would have Liberals tied with Conservatives*. CTV News. 11 February 2025. Accessed at: <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/article/leger-poll-carney-as-leader-would-have-liberals-tied-with-conservatives/>.

<sup>3</sup> Docherty, David C. 'Could the Rebels find a cause? House of Commons reform in the Chretien era.' *Review of Constitutional Studies*, 2004, Vol 9, Nos 1&2.

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A decade earlier Conservative Member of Parliament (MP) Michael Chong introduced Bill C-586 or the *Reform Act* that looked to amend the *Canada Elections Act and the Parliament of Canada Act*.<sup>4</sup> The goal of the bill was to limit the powers of party leaders, and more importantly the Prime Minister. Chong's Bill addressed the frustrations of the MP's inability to represent their constituents when they conflicted with the party leadership. Within Bill C-586, there was specific focus on replacing a leader from caucus, and mechanisms within the Bill outlined a process for doing so. This included a secret ballot process for caucus to demonstrate confidence (or non-confidence) in their leader. Unfortunately, the Bill was watered down to get enough support to become an Act. This included allowing parties to 'opt out', which the Liberal Party has done. Thus, Justin Trudeau avoided the palace coup.

There was also precedence to prorogue Parliament to avoid a certain vote of non-confidence in a government as Justin Trudeau did earlier this year. In 2008, the Conservative Party of Canada, led by Stephen Harper won re-election with another minority government. The government's Speech from the Throne focused more on punishing the opposition parties than dealing with a major international economic collapse. The three opposition parties threatened not just a vote of non-confidence but also a coalition government of the Liberal and New Democratic parties with support from the sovereigntist Bloc Quebecois. The Prime Minister responded by asking Governor General Michaëlle Jean to prorogue Parliament.<sup>5</sup>

This placed the Governor General in a no-win situation. No Governor General had ever refused a request to prorogue Parliament. Likewise, no Governor General had allowed a prorogation that would let a Prime Minister avoid a vote of non-confidence in the House of Commons. Any decision of the Governor General would set a far-reaching precedent.<sup>6</sup> When the Governor General acquiesced to the Prime Minister, it allowed him to both re-fashion a more appropriate Throne Speech and play on many Canadians fears of a coalition government supported by a separatist party. Harper's government held power and subsequently won a majority government in 2011.

As a result, Justin Trudeau had precedent on his side when he asked for a prorogation. Opposition parties cried foul, and two citizens challenged the decision via the courts, but the outrage that greeted Stephen Harper did not emerge to the same degree despite anger from

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<sup>4</sup>*Reform Act*. Bill C-559, 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Heard, Andrew. 'The Governor General's Decision to Prorogue Parliament: Parliamentary Democracy Defended or Endangered?' Centre for Constitutional Studies; Discussion Paper #7, January 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Russell, Peter H., and Lorne Sossin. *Parliamentary Democracy in Crisis*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2009.

the right.<sup>7</sup> No doubt Trudeau's announced resignation has defused some of the controversy surrounding his survival tactic.<sup>8</sup>

In many ways, the Liberal fall from grace is not unusual in Canadian politics. Modern governments in Canada often have best before dates. Typically, the shelf life of a government is at best around ten years. Table One below illustrates the tenure of governments since Pierre Trudeau's first term in 1968.

**Table 1: Tenure of Canadian Prime Ministers 1968-2025<sup>9</sup>**

Prime Minister	Party	Elections won	Term as Prime Minister
<b>Pierre Trudeau</b>	Liberal	4	15 yrs, 5 months
<b>Joe Clark</b>	Progressive Conservative	1	273 days
<b>John Turner</b>	Liberal	0	79 days
<b>Brian Mulroney</b>	Progressive Conservative	2	8 yrs, 9 months
<b>Kim Campbell</b>	Progressive Conservative	0	132 days
<b>Jean Chretien</b>	Liberal	3	10 yrs, 1 month
<b>Paul Martin</b>	Liberal	1	2 yrs, 2 months
<b>Stephan Harper</b>	Conservative Party	3	9 yrs, 9 months
<b>Justin Trudeau</b>	Liberal Party	3	9 yrs, 4 months

We note that two of Canada's shortest serving Prime Ministers, Turner and Campbell, served during this time and can be regarded as interim Prime Ministers. Of the nine Prime Ministers listed, one won two elections, three won three times, and Pierre Trudeau won four elections, returning to office after being defeated by Joe Clark. Thus, when we examine the data, it is not surprising that Justin Trudeau's tenure is about as long as one could expect. We should not be surprised that his prospects to repeat his father's record would be challenging.

<sup>7</sup> Hamm, Amy. February 19, 2025. 'Courts Must Not Allow Trudeau to get away with his Self-Serving Prorogation'. *National Post*. Accessed from: <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/courts-must-not-allow-trudeau-to-get-away-with-his-self-serving-prorogation>.

<sup>8</sup> \*In March 2025 the Courts rejected the Citizen challenge.

<sup>9</sup> Library of Parliament. *Prime Ministers of Canada*. Parliament of Canada. Accessed at: [https://lop.parl.ca/sites/ParlInfo/default/en\\_CA/People/primeMinisters](https://lop.parl.ca/sites/ParlInfo/default/en_CA/People/primeMinisters).

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Justin Trudeau was elected Prime Minister in 2015. He appointed the first cabinet that featured gender equality.<sup>10</sup> He announced the end of partisan appointments to the Canadian Senate and appointed only 'independent' Senators, which also more closely matched the demographic profile of Canada.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Trudeau's pre-election commitment that the 2015 election would be the last one held using the single-member plurality vote was not kept. His re-election in 2019 (a minority government) was in part due to weak leadership in the Conservative Party of Canada.

As with many western leaders, the early months of COVID provided the opportunity for the Prime Minister to be seen as compassionate, decisive leader. Emergency relief was provided for those who lost their jobs, and university and college students benefitted from a student relief program.

As the pandemic continued, views of such measures as isolation, masking and eventually vaccines divided the country. A mass rally of truckers that originated in the west drove to Ottawa and for one month effectively shut down the city centre, impeding businesses and residents from functioning as normal. As the national debt mounted, the Liberal government was seen as unable to handle the national crisis and much of the blame fell on Trudeau, particularly in the west.<sup>12</sup>

Justin Trudeau's introduction of a carbon tax was almost reminiscent of his father's National Energy Program, though designed to tackle climate change and not dependence on importing oil. The introduction of both policies have seen the key involvement of ministers from Quebec. Pierre Trudeau looked to nationalize the energy sector with Quebec-based energy minister, Marc Lalonde, and Justin Trudeau's environment minister of climate change, Steven Guilbeault who also hails from Quebec, was critical in helping carry out the carbon tax policy.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, the disproportionate effect that both of these policies have had on the western provinces has left voters within the region with similar feelings of frustration.<sup>14</sup> These two approaches can be linked to the fuelling of sentiments of western alienation and are a potential reason why

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<sup>10</sup> The Canadian Press. 'Trudeau's 'Because it's 2015' retort Draws International Attention'. *The Globe and Mail*. . 5 November 2015. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/trudeaus-because-its-2015-retort-draws-international-cheers/article27119856/>.

<sup>11</sup>Independent Senators Group, *Independent Senators Group*. Accessed at: <https://www.isgsenate.ca/>.

<sup>12</sup> Robyn Urback, 'Infection Point'. *Globe and Mail*, Opinion, 8 March 2025 p. 1 & 5.

<sup>13</sup> Lydia Miljan, 'Trudeau's Emissions Cap Reminds Oil-Producing Provinces of his Father's Hated National Energy Program'. *The Globe and Mail*, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> See Miljan, 'Trudeau's Emissions Cap'.

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Conservatives have had a strong voting base within the western provinces due to the backlash received from the National Energy Board crisis, and the current ongoing Carbon Tax policy.

Pressure for Trudeau to step down was present since early 2023. The centre left New Democratic Party supported the Liberals in exchange for the introduction of a national dental and drug plans but made it clear that they were ready to join the Conservatives and bring the government down at any time.

Trudeau resisted attempts to oust him, for much of the year. Perhaps he was cognizant that the success rate of leaders replacing unpopular Prime Ministers was not great. Indeed, Kim Campbell and John Turner lasted only briefly, and Paul Martin won one minority government prior to being defeated. He announced his plans to step down following the conclusion of a 9 March 2025 leadership contest to select his successor.

The 2025 election will soon follow the leadership vote. It will see newly elected Liberal Leader Mark Carney (former Head of the Bank of Canada) face off against Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre, a twenty-year veteran of the House of Commons. Until Donald Trumps threatened tariffs and annexation, Poilievre had been running an effective campaign. But the election focus has shifted from an election on the carbon tax to the who can best stand up to Donald Trump. The altered focus has changed the tune of many of the political parties campaigning agendas, particularly the Conservatives, shifting the focus from 'axing the tax' to 'Canada First'. This change in strategy can be seen across all party platforms, with the carbon tax election campaign seeming to be pushed into the background.

Given their weak prospects prior to the Trump election, it is not surprising that Liberal Party is attempting to position and equate Poilievre with Trump. The Liberal Party's campaign ads are already using Poilievre's 'Canada is broken' rhetoric against him to draw comparisons to Trumps divisive rhetoric framing Poilievre as a 'MAGA guy' who won't stand up for Canadians.<sup>15</sup> Whether this works or not, remains to be seen. The new Prime Minister may join the ranks of John Turner and Kim Campbell, short term PM's who ushered out an era of political dominance. At the Conservative's plans for a majority government are now under real threat, with a hung parliament a real possibility. The twitches and grunts of the elephant has awakened a new political reality in Canada, and likely will continue no matter who takes charge of the true north strong and free.

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<sup>15</sup> Liberal Party of Canada. 'Liberals Launch New Ad', 2025. Accessed at: <https://liberal.ca/liberals-launch-new-ad/> .