

# Should he go or should he stay?

## Should Pierre Poilievre step down as leader of the Conservative Party of Canada?

This short note will not explore the political arguments. While I share the view many have expressed that real gains were made, Conservative support is rock solid and that Liberal support is at its height with little room to grow, I will focus on this question:

*Have Canadian leaders who lost their seat either as Prime Minister or Leader of the Opposition returned in a byelection to later political success?*

Three Canadian come-back winners; certainly Robert Borden, somewhat Arthur Meighen and absolutely William Lyon Mckenzie King – all lost their ridings and enjoyed later political success.

### **Robert Borden (1854 – 1937); Conservative Leader 1901 to 1920; Prime Minister 1911 to 1920.**

- Robert Borden was first elected in 1896, the election which saw Sir Wilfrid Laurier elected PM. Borden ran in Halifax and barely won by 73 votes (26.53% to Liberal's 25.79%). (Interesting note: In several ridings until 1968, including Halifax, two MPs were elected). Borden was re-elected in 1900 in Halifax. Laurier returned as PM. Again, a squeaker for Borden. 25.67% to Liberal's 25.09%. Eked out a win with a 72 vote margin.
- Borden became Conservative leader 1901. In 1904 election, Laurier returned as PM but Borden **loses own seat in Halifax being defeated by two Liberals** (remember, riding elected two members). Runs in byelection a few months later in 1905 in, of all places, Carlton Ontario. Ran unopposed (the good old civil days of Canadian politics). Stayed on as Leader.
- In 1908 Laurier returned yet again as PM. Borden runs in both Carlton and Halifax (could do that in those days) and wins both. Chooses to represent Halifax. Second federal loss as Conservative leader. Stays on as Leader.
- In 1911, success! Borden wins as Prime Minister and wins riding (Halifax). In 1917 election, Borden wins big as PM (57%) as Unionist Party (interesting Canadian political story), and wins own riding. Retires July 1920 and Arthur Meighen becomes Conservative/Unionist PM.

### **Arthur Meighen (1874 –1960); Conservative Leader 1920 to 1926; 1941 to 1942. Prime Minister 1920 to 1921 (after Robert Borden's retirement) and (technically) June to September 1926 as result of the King-Byng affair.**

- It is beyond the scope of this note to look at the long and winding political adventures and misadventures of Arthur Meighen resulting from the 1925 election and the King-Byng affair, but Meighen was not elected PM in 1920 and only held the role June-September 1926 more as a tenuous transitory caretaker thanks to the steadfastness of the Governor General.
- He fits the context of the core question, in that he lost his riding in the 1921 federal election, won a seat in a byelection, and stayed on as Conservative Leader, significantly increasing his seat count and popular vote in the 1925 election. A 1942 attempted political come-back failed. In the context of electoral success, I would not label Meighen as a political success story, but he lost his seat and stayed on as Leader of the Conservative Party, and improved party standings.

### **William Lyon Mackenzie King (1874 – 1950); Liberal leader 1919 to 1948; Prime Minister 1921 – 1926; 1926 – 1931; 1935 – 1948.**

- WLMK is the example that answers the question with a resounding YES. Without question, through ability, cunning, political brilliance and some would say outright conniving, WLMK is the most successful Canadian political leader measured against electoral success and length of term as PM.

- Yet, WLMK also faced electoral defeat at the constituency level four (4) times (1911, 1917, 1925, 1945) and as PM once (1930 – not counting the 1925 election which evolved into the infamous King-Byng affair, and in which the Liberals returned fewer seats than Meighen's Conservatives, and held onto power until June 1926).
- WLMK first ran in 1908, winning Waterloo North. He ran again in 1911 and lost (loss #1) 48% to 52%. He left politics for several years, working first for the Liberal Party and then with the Rockefeller Foundation.
- King contested York North in 1917 and lost, 42% to 58% (loss #2). Yet, he ran and won the Liberal Party leadership August 7, 1919 (fifth ballot) and was Liberal Leader but not Opposition Leader (as he did not have a seat in the House of Commons) from August 7, 1919 until he ran and won a byelection October 20, 1919 (again, a more civil time – the byelection was quickly scheduled and WLMK ran unopposed).
- In the 1921 federal election, he won both his seat (York North) and a razor thin one-seat majority (118 Liberal versus 117 opposition seats), becoming Prime Minister until 1926.
- I cannot do the 1925 election justice in this note and it strays out of the bounds of the overall question, but the 1925 election wasn't so great for WLMK (or anyone else for that matter, including as discussed earlier, Arthur Meighen). The bottom line is this. The Liberals under WLMK ended up with *fewer* seats than Meighen's Conservatives (100 to 115), with neither having sufficient numbers to form a government. The King government held onto power partnering with the Progressives and maintained a government until June 1926, when all hell broke loose, devolving into the King-Byng affair and giving Meighen's Conservatives at least a technical hold on government. But Meighen was unable to secure the confidence of the House and another election was held September 14, 1926. More on that next. Back to our story. In the 1925 election, WLMK lost his own seat (York North) again (loss #3). WLMK ran in a byelection February 15, 1926 (Prince Albert – another famous riding!) and won.
- In the September 14, 1926 election, WLMK regained the government winning the most seats but still a minority. He ran in Prince Albert again interestingly against the young future PM John Diefenbaker and won.
- In the 1930 federal election, he won his seat (Prince Albert again), but lost the government to R. B. Bennett, with WLMK again serving as Leader of the Official Opposition 1930 to 1935.
- King then went on to win as Liberal Leader and becoming PM again in the elections of 1936 (first WLMK majority); 1940 (solid majority), and 1945 (minority). In the June 11, 1945 federal election, King *again* lost his seat in Prince Albert (loss #4) and won the byelection held August 6, 1945 in Glengarry. I point out that when WLMK ran in byelections, as is always the custom, a sitting Liberal resigned to create the vacancy. That was WLMK's last election and he retired in November 15, 1948 (Louis St. Laurent became PM) and passed July 1950.

### **The bottom line**

- Getting back to the question, it is a clear YES, and WLMK and Robert Borden are the quintessential proof. There is clear historical precedent for Pierre Poilievre to stay on. But, I will go further. It would be against Canadian political convention to have a successful political leader who successfully ran and won in his riding seven (7) times in 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2021, and who increased the CPC vote in 2025 and added 25 MPs, to be asked to step-down. Pierre Poilievre should receive a resounding declaration of support and allow the Conservatives to continue the quest for change at one of the most momentous periods in Canadian history.

**Another interesting Canadian political story consistent with the theme – Tommy Douglas**

- Let's turn for a moment to the interesting Canadian federal electoral story of Tommy Douglas, federal NDP leader 1961 to 1971 and former Saskatchewan Premier 1944 – 1961.
- After assuming the leadership of the NDP, TD first ran federally on June 18, 1962 in Regina City and lost (loss #1) big-time, capturing only 29% of the vote. He ran in a byelection in Burnaby opened by the resignation of an NDP caucus member and won.
- He was elected in 1963 and 1965 but lost (loss #2) in 1968 having to run in a byelection again February 10, 1969 in Nanaimo—Cowichan—The Islands, returning for his last election in 1972 (not as leader – David Lewis now NDP leader) and winning.
- So, right out the gate as new NDP leader, TD loses and yet goes on to be one of the most influential fourth (62 & 63) and third (65 & 68) party leaders, leaving an indelible imprint.

There are likely many more Canadian “come from behind” electoral stories, but this is enough to make the point. Pierre Poilievre should stay.

**L.A. Liversidge, May 2, 2025**