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OPINION

EDITORIAL

Parliament returns but time is running out for Liberals to restore trust with voters

The Liberals can properly be accused of having squandered valuable time and time will become their enemy as the runway to the next election shortens.

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Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre (from left to right), Prime Minister and Liberal leader Justin Trudeau, and NDP leader Jagmeet Singh will be ready for the return of Parliament on Monday.

THE CANADIAN PRESS

For François-Philippe Champagne, Justin Trudeau's sprightly industry minister, the political imperative appears simple enough.

Cell service on the TTC? "Enough is enough," Champagne intoned. High grocery prices? "Enough is enough," he declared. But he and his Liberal colleagues have been roused from their summer somnolence by a message from Canadian voters who are telling pollsters that when it comes to Trudeau and his government, "Enough is enough."

As the House of Commons returns for a new session Monday, we will see whether a flurry of affordability measures announced by Trudeau late last week can address some of the anxiety in this country, or whether they merely address some of the anxiety in his caucus.

The landscape has been radically altered since MPs last convened in the capital as the Liberals endured a political version of "Suddenly Last Summer," watching themselves being lapped by a surging Conservative opposition led by Pierre Poilievre.

First, Trudeau had to deal with a restive caucus that former prime minister Jean Chrétien liked to call "Nervous Nellies" for their angst over their electoral prospects. Chrétien's bromide was meant to calm frazzled nerves, but in 2023 these Nellies had real cause for nervousness. When one MP, Fredericton's Jenica Atwin, tells the Globe and Mail that for some Canadians it's become "cool not to like our Prime Minister," you've got trouble.

So, Trudeau announced Ottawa would scrap the GST on construction of new purpose-built rental buildings, a move that should speed construction for renters and slow construction of pricey luxury condos. Less impressive is that the Liberals were acting on something they promised before they came to power in 2015 and subsequently shelved.

Also, less impressive was the fact the NDP called for that move six months ago and leader Jagmeet Singh rightly accused the Liberals of missing an entire construction season with their heel-dragging.

Champagne will summon grocery executives for a stern talking to and try to extract a promise of “price stability” by Thanksgiving, armed with some undefined punitive measures to make his case. Less impressive is that Singh, again, had been demanding action on spiralling grocery prices for months and rightly said the Liberal plan is vague and does not force CEOs to act.

Poilievre will try to table his own housing solutions when the House returns, but neither his plan nor Trudeau’s is likely to bear any real results before Canadians go to the polls again. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation says Canada needs to build an additional 3.45 million housing units by 2030 — above the 1.68 million already targeted — to meaningfully address affordability.

At best, Trudeau is hoping to neutralize Poilievre’s clear advantage on the housing file and only he holds the levers to enact solutions, as incremental as they may be. Well, technically only he holds those levers, and this is where Singh comes in. While Trudeau and Poilievre will command centre stage, Singh holds substantial leverage with the government with his confidence and supply agreement with Trudeau and he will continue to push for action on affordability.

But any short-term opportunity for the NDP is linked with longer-term peril. It risks being seen as a co-dependent, propping up an unpopular party and extending the life of the Trudeau government. No matter how often and loudly it proclaims it pushed the Liberals into needed progressive policies, rewards at the ballot box will be elusive if the electorate sees those initiatives as Liberal policies.

If progressive voters feel they must coalesce to prevent a Poilievre election in the next vote, historically they have turned to the Liberals — whether they are holding their noses or not — leaving New Democrats on the outside looking in.

Yes, the government may have two years remaining, but the reality is that affordability fixes do not magically take effect in days, weeks or months. Liberals can properly be accused of having squandered valuable time and time will become their enemy as the runway to the next election shortens. They will have only themselves to blame if time runs out on them.

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