

## OPINION

# The best way to break Pierre Poilievre's media-baiting strategy: ask actual questions

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Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre rises during question period in the House of Commons on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, on Oct. 25.

SEAN KILPATRICK/THE CANADIAN PRESS

They are still flexing in Tory circles over that video of Pierre Poilievre being interviewed by a small-town newspaper editor.

You know the one. The Conservative Leader is theatrically eating an apple, looking bored. The questions come, stumbling, convoluted, and front-loaded with preamble:

“You’re obviously taking the populist pathway ...” And are met with questions:

*What does that mean?*

*Well, appealing to people’s more emotional levels ...*

*What do you mean by that? Give me an example.*

...

*A lot of people would say you’re simply taking a page out of the Donald Trump book.*

*Which people would say that?*

*A great many Canadians.*

*Like who?*

*I don’t know who ...*

You can see why conservatives would seize on it. It’s more than just a reporter being made to look silly – it’s a TKO for conservatives generally over the mainstream media. The video has gone viral, gushed over by well-known righties in the United States and fuelling a fresh round of Conservative Party fundraising. Certainly Mr. Poilievre seems pleased by his showing: He’s the one who posted it.

And yet, it’s basically a party trick. I’ve seen him do it before. Rather than answer the question, you turn it back on your questioner, forcing him to cite sources and otherwise document his question on the spot. You can do that with just about anything, if you’re brazen enough. At one point Mr. Poilievre challenges the interviewer’s suggestion that he uses polarizing ideological language (“Like what?” “Uh, ‘left-wing,’ you know, this and that ...”), then blithely follows with: “I never really talk about left and right.” It didn’t take the Liberals long to post a video with about a dozen instances of Mr. Poilievre publicly attacking “the left,” “socialists” etc. But it’s a little harder to come up with those when you’re standing in the middle of an apple orchard.

Still, if journalists would like to avoid making themselves props in Mr. Poilievre's media-baiting strategy, there's a simple enough remedy: Don't ask loaded questions! In fairness, it's difficult to avoid falling into this trap. It's all too easy to imagine the confrontational, accusatory style ("Isn't it true your company has been dumping toxic waste in the river?") is how you "get tough" with an interview subject.

In fact, it's the simplest thing for the interviewee to flip to his or her advantage. A question that is not really a question offers cover to give an answer that is not really an answer. A breezy "not at all," a pivot to your preferred talking point ("in fact we care deeply about the environment"), and you're away.

Many years ago I had the good fortune to attend a seminar by the great John Sawatsky, the reporter and biographer of Brian Mulroney, who in the latter part of his career became something of a guru on the art of the interview.

His technique is simplicity itself: Ask a series of short, open-ended questions. Don't lard them with lengthy preambles, or pack several questions into one, or disguise a statement as a question. Just let the questions do what questions are supposed to do: elicit new information.

It's effective, because it isn't really a technique: It's an attitude. Mostly, that attitude boils down to humility. An interview is not about you, the interviewer. It's about the interviewee. So get your fat self out of the way.

And: You're a journalist, not a prosecutor. Your job is not to put people away. It's to get news: to learn something new about your subject, and how he or she sees the world.

That's hard with people in politics, whose job is to ensure they make as little news as possible: to stay "on message" at all times, no matter what. The simpler the question, the harder it is for them to do that. It's more obvious they're dodging or twisting the question when you don't give them thickets of surrounding verbiage to hide in. And the more open-ended it is, the more they have to think on their feet, and the more likely they are to say something new. Not a gaffe. Not a gotcha. But something that reveals how they actually think about things. If they're worth hanging, they'll hang themselves.

You may recall Tom Mulcair's finest hour, as opposition leader during the Mike Duffy affair. As long as he stuck to the usual opposition leader-type questions ("when will the minister admit ..."), he got nowhere. It was only when he started asking those short, open-ended questions that he started making yards. Or if you want a more pertinent example: That's what Mr. Poilievre is doing, interviewing his interviewer.

*What do you mean by that? Like what? Give me an example.* It's devastating, really. More reporters should try it.

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