

OPINION

Poillievre fumbles the Trump crisis: a missed opportunity to show himself as a prime minister-in-waiting



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A portrait of Donald Trump hangs in the bar at the Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Fla., on March 4, 2016.

ERIC THAYER/THE NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

That was quite the meeting at Mar-a-Lago. As our Steven Chase [reports](#), they started in the Library Bar, beneath the [portrait](#) of a much younger Donald Trump “in a white V-neck sweater and white pants.” The Prime Minister met first with Judge Jeanine Pirro, of Fox News fame, before the president-elect joined them.

The meeting itself was held over dinner on the patio, among the club members and their guests. Mr. Trump amused himself by selecting songs from his iPad to play through the patio speakers – “two versions of Leonard Cohen’s Hallelujah, a song from the musical *Cats*, as well as work by Luciano Pavarotti” – stopping the conversation at various stages to point out a highlight.

So just your regular working meeting between two world leaders.

It was the Prime Minister who had first suggested the meeting in an election-night call. It had taken the following three weeks to nail it down. The days leading up to it had been filled with intense preparation. Once in the meeting, the Prime Minister and his officials made a determined effort to impress upon Mr. Trump that the Canadian border was not the porous menace he believed, but also advising him of the measures they were putting in place to secure it: drones, helicopters, personnel, the works.

And what did they receive in return? Bupkis. No assurance of any kind with regard to the 25-per-cent tariff Mr. Trump has been threatening, since that supper-hour social-media post, to impose. No indication of what measures, if any, would induce him to change his mind. Just a volley of complaints about how Canada was “ripping off the U.S. to the tune of \$100-billion” by which he apparently meant the U.S. trade deficit with Canada (it’s nowhere near that large but never mind).

Oh, and a little “joke,” which the Trump team carefully leaked to [friendly media](#), about Canada being annexed as the 51st state, with the Prime Minister allowed to remain as its governor. Ha ha ha.

A few things should be clear from this exchange, if they were not before. It never was about the border. Nothing we do about the border – not that there is much that can be done – is likely to avert the tariff that is coming our way. Mr. Trump cooked up the border “crisis” solely to provide himself with a legal and political pretext to do, on national security grounds, what he was going to do anyway.

He is going to do it because he believes in tariffs – because he sees trade, as he sees life, solely in terms of winners and losers; because he understands a trade deficit, not as, essentially, an accounting identity, the flip side of a capital surplus, but as an indication that one country is winning and another is losing; because, most of all, every economist regards tariffs as an abomination, and because the closest thing Mr. Trump has to a code is always to do the opposite of whatever expert opinion recommends.

So we can turn ourselves inside out on the border to please him. Mr. Trump may even seem to entertain our efforts for a time. This will produce in him another frisson, when at length he decides to impose them anyway: not only for

the pleasure the tariffs themselves will bring, but the pleasure of crushing and humiliating Justin Trudeau.

Even so, it is hard to fault the Prime Minister for trying. It is [easy to say](#) that the effort was doomed, even foolish; that Mr. Trump does not operate by any of the normal rules – of human behaviour, let alone international diplomacy; that efforts to appease him only offer him an opportunity to do what he likes best, to dominate.

But to many people the Prime Minister will nevertheless have looked practical, reasonable, adult, in all, prime ministerial. It is not a given that Mr. Trump's bullying will be to Mr. Trudeau's disadvantage, politically. Mr. Trump's unreasonableness is well known. If Mr. Trudeau is seen to have gone the extra mile, [or 1,300](#), to deal with him; if he then is forced to take retaliatory measures, painful as they may be, the public may conclude that he has made the best of a bad hand.

They may even conclude that Canada is likely to suffer less from Mr. Trump's depredations under Mr. Trudeau, given his experience in dealing with Mr. Trump, than they would under another leader. I am not saying they would be right to draw this conclusion. Neither am I saying they necessarily will. But it is not a possibility one can rule out.

Where does this leave Mr. Trudeau's primary domestic antagonist, Pierre Poilievre? In the wake of the Trump tariff threat the Conservative Leader has looked jittery, uncertain, off-key. I think he senses the political danger. He knows, I think, that if there is one issue that can let Mr. Trudeau up off the mat, however implausible it may seem at the moment, it is this.

If Mr. Trudeau's appearance with Mr. Trump struck you as cringeworthy, try to imagine how Mr. Poilievre would look next to him. Would he look like – behave like – a prime minister? Would he conduct himself with the dignity and the self-confidence that the job requires, knowing when to speak up and when to stay silent, when to show his hand and when to keep his cards in reserve?

Or would he look boyish, callow, too eager to impress; talk too much, give away too much, signal insecurity throughout? It's difficult to say, of course. All one can do – all the public can do – is draw inferences from what we already know of Mr. Poilievre's character and judgment, extrapolating from his comportment to date to predict how he will behave in future.

And what we have seen of him to date has been, not a future prime minister, but a perpetual opposition critic, someone who is seemingly incapable of taking the high road, who never misses the opportunity for a partisan cheap shot, who is always, always in attack mode, no matter the issue, the setting or the situation.

Certainly there is plenty to criticize in this government, and this Prime Minister. They have mishandled the economy, undermined public finances, ignored rising threats to national security, bollixed immigration, inflamed the housing market, and much else besides, all wrapped in a peculiarly divisive and doctrinaire form of identity politics.

Mr. Trudeau's serial ethical lapses, combined with his tendency to preachiness, combined with his shallowness and vanity, combined with his flippant disdain for detail or the hard work of governing, have long since paled on the Canadian voter. There is a reason his government has reached such historic depths in the polls.

Mr. Poilievre's often incisive criticisms and relentlessly on-message performance have no doubt contributed to the government's fall from grace. But there is a time and a place for everything, and if ever there were a time and a place for a change of tone, this would be it.

The Conservative Leader's many and justified complaints about this government would be, if anything, more persuasive, not less, if in the current crisis he were able to say something like: "Whatever our differences, the Prime Minister has my full support as he defends Canada's interests against Mr. Trump's unprovoked attacks. The national interest must always come before any particular political interest."

Nothing in that formula would prevent him from presenting constructive criticism of the government's approach, or indeed framing his "support" as support for his own preferred approach to the question. But the grace note would attract attention, not least in someone who so rarely displays it. It would mark him as someone with the ability to sense the public mood, to offer the strength and calm they are looking for in a crisis – in a word, to lead. Instead Mr. Poilievre has, from the day the tariff threat was issued, sounded almost hysterically harsh. At times he has seemed to take Mr. Trump's side in

the controversy, even appearing behind a podium with the slogan “Fix The Broken Border.”

His rhetoric, too, has sounded vaguely ... Trumpian. “The Prime Minister,” he said, “has vacated the border and turned it open to anyone who wants to come in.” He is “weak,” “weakened,” “unbearably weak.” He has “lost control of everything.” And this flourish: “With our border in chaos, our economy collapsing and everything broken, we need real, responsible leadership from a strong, smart prime minister who has the brains and backbone to put Canada first.”

Canada First, you say. Yup. The phrase, which I have not heard him utter before the last week or so, has cropped up repeatedly. “We need a plan ... to put Canada first on the economy and on security.” “I only care about Canada. I want to put our country first.” And so on.

I’m not sure what he thinks he is accomplishing with this. Perhaps he worries that the Prime Minister will get a lift out of the crisis, a rally-round-the-flag effect often seen in public polling. Perhaps he is afraid that sections of his base, many of them vocal on social media, are inclined to side with Mr. Trump, especially on border issues, and might stray into the People’s Party fold. Maybe he is betting the public believes Canada will be treated better with someone more in sync with Mr. Trump in charge.

Or maybe it’s just that that’s the only gear he’s got. Mr. Poilievre is already unusual in a political leader for being his own attack dog, a task generally assigned to talented thugs and burner MPs. Until now I had been inclined to assume this was strategy of some kind, a matter of zigging while others are zagging.

But it may be that Mr. Poilievre is genuinely unable to strike any other note – that his experience and personality permits no other. We shall see. Maybe he will surprise us yet. But it is hard to escape the feeling that the Trump question has become the dominant issue in Canadian politics, and may decide the election.

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