

The Insatiable Political Ambitions of Douglas R. Ford



FOR THE PEOPLE



**Is Ontario's pugnacious premier charting
a course for Ottawa? He definitely isn't
not considering a run for prime minister.
A long, hard look behind the curtain**

By Katrina Onstad
Photograph by Christopher Wahl



DONALD TRUMP'S OBSESSION with making Canada the 51st state can be traced to an offhand comment around a white linen-draped table at Mar-a-Lago last November. Trump had been mouthing off on Truth Social about imposing tariffs of 25 per cent on Canadian and Mexican goods unless both countries cracked down on fentanyl and illegal immigration. When Justin Trudeau called Trump to address the threat and landed an impromptu invitation for dinner, it seemed like a coup: Canada was suddenly at the front of the line to get in good with the mercurial president-elect. At some point during the meal, the mood, and maybe the game, changed. Trump was banging his tariff drum, and Trudeau warned that if he slapped a tariff on Canada, he would destroy the country's economy. This caught Trump's ear. If Canada can't survive without the US, he quipped, maybe it should become the 51st state.

In the weeks that followed, Trump began to take the idea seriously. He talked ad nauseam about annexing Canada and imposing tariffs, raising eyebrows and ire north of the 49th. When Trudeau announced his resignation in January and exited stage left, he created a leadership vacuum. Canadians wanted someone, anyone, to do something. Enter Doug Ford, under the media-anointed nickname Captain Canada. On March 10, the premier held a press conference during which he seemed to be expressing not just Ontario's anger but all of Canada's. He'd already made threats earlier in the month: "If they want to try to annihilate Ontario, I will do anything, including cutting off their energy, with a smile on my face." Now he followed through, announcing retaliatory measures that included a 25 per cent surcharge on the electricity Ontario exports to Michigan, Minnesota and New York. The move would cost residents in those states up to \$400,000 per day.

Within hours, Ford's phone rang. US Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick, the former Wall Street banker tasked with barking Trump's trade war across the world, was on the line. He and Ford had spoken a couple of times prior, and those conversations had been tense—"essentially yelling matches," one of Ford's staffers told me. But, this time, Lutnick seemed flustered. He invited Ford to Washington, offering what the premier described as an olive branch. Ford suspended the surcharge and took the meeting.

On March 13, Ford arrived in DC with federal Finance Minister Dominic LeBlanc, Innovation Minister François-Philippe Champagne and Kirsten

Hillman, Canada's ambassador to the US, as his plus-ones. According to Patrick Sackville, Ford's chief of staff, the Canadians pre-gamed at their embassy, walking through scenarios of how the meeting might go. "On one end of the spectrum was the five-minute dressing down, a 'Thanks for coming but go fuck yourself' meeting," he says. "The other end was the overly optimistic 'I hear you; let's fix this.'" Ford proposed that the goal should be realistic: Trump was too hell-bent on tariffs to back down, but renegotiating CUSMA, the free trade agreement Trump himself had signed in 2018, seemed like a viable objective. Reopening a trade deal was a story Trump could turn into a win.

Before heading to the department of commerce building for his meeting with Lutnick, Ford made a stop at the Fox News studio for an interview with *America Reports* co-anchor John Roberts. Class-photo rictus turned to 11, the premier did what he'd been doing for weeks on any US news program that would have him: making a case against Trump's slingshot tariffs, talking point by talking point. Ontario does half a trillion dollars in two-way trade with the US. Check. Key trading partner. Check. Tariffs wreak uncertainty and destabilize economies. Best friends. Betrayed. Check, check, check. He pitched the Fortress Am-Can, a Canadian-American super-alliance that would sidestep China. Everything he said was designed for the possibility that Trump, a known TV addict, might happen to tune in.

After wrapping, Ford hopped in a Chevy Suburban with his team for the 10-minute drive to Lutnick's office. As they waited for their meeting to begin, they discovered that Lutnick was busy doing his own interview with Fox News, from outside the White House. Of course Lutnick would have to get the last word in before talks started—the last word is a big deal in the Trump orbit. They listened to Lutnick chirping the premier in real time: "Why are we doing all this business in Canada if they're not respectful, if they're not thankful? Imagine a provincial leader, the equivalent of a governor, deciding that they're going to attack America."

The secretary of commerce arrived at his office a short while later, flanked by US trade representative Jamieson Greer. Ford made a light joke about the fact that Lutnick still had makeup on his face from the Fox appearance, and they posed for photos next to the Canadian and American flags. Inside the boardroom, the teams were offered Diet Coke, Trump's favourite drink. Lutnick spoke first, calmer than he'd been on their call the previous week. He warned that the White House saw cutting off energy as a security threat and didn't want any more surprises. Then, for 15 minutes, Lutnick spelled out Trump's motivations for the tariffs: deficits and debts. The president held firm to the belief, not rooted in fact, of an egregious trade deficit with Canada. And in Trump's view, tariffs would help pay down the US's \$37-trillion national debt.

Once Lutnick finished speaking, Ford took the floor. People with knowledge of the meeting told me that Lutnick and Greer seemed under-informed about the scope of the US-Canada trading relationship. But Ford was well-briefed, rattling off facts: close to half of the US's high-grade aluminum comes from Canada; we provide 40 per cent of its high-grade nickel; US farmers can't farm without Canadian potash. Lutnick was quiet, taking it in. It was like a real-world enactment of the joke where the Canadian asks the American, "What do you think of us?" The answer: "We don't."

Shortly after the hour mark, Lutnick was pulled out of the room for another meeting. Greer stayed behind to underline

that global tariffs were coming on April 2, so-called Liberation Day. No trade negotiations would happen until then. Renegotiating CUSMA was not yet on the table. It was a forceful performance on Ford's part, but Greer had retreated to the comfort of his talking points, which were Lutnick's talking points, which were Trump's talking points.

David Paterson, Ontario's representative in Washington, was at the meeting and says that as the Canadian delegation filed out of the room, their mood was that of someone leaving a doctor's office with a diagnosis after months of suffering. "You feel more in control because you understand the situation better, and you have an explanation directly from the doctor. But you don't have to like the prognosis, and you certainly don't. In fact, you hate the disease—and you hate tariffs."

Even if progress was slim, there had finally been a substantial conversation between Canada and the US. And it had been brokered not by the feds but by Ontario's premier, whom Trump himself had begrudgingly labelled "a very strong man in Canada." It was the same kind of high-profile manoeuvring that had, two weeks earlier, helped Ford pull off his third straight majority. At the ballot box, it didn't seem to matter that Ontarians face longer hospital wait times than when Ford was first elected seven years ago; that his pledge to build \$500,000 starter homes for young people had gone poof; that his party had broken their promise not to touch 7,400 acres from the protected Greenbelt. In our perhaps not-so-healthy relationship with the premier, there's a pattern: he screws up, he apologizes and Ontarians forgive. He shakes off his missteps and broken promises like a dog shaking water off its coat.

The forgiveness is particularly free-flowing right now because Ford's failures and policy imbroglios (including the latest, Bill 5) appear less consequential when measured against the existential threats raining down from the US. But his edges have been undergoing a sanding for a long time: a more paternal, cozier version of Ford emerged during Covid and completed its evolution in this Trump moment. His friendliness with politicians such as Liberal loyalist Chrystia Freeland and progressive mayor Olivia Chow sets him apart from the hard-line conservative movement, and he now hovers just right of centre—in other words, he may have figured out the exact ideological mix for a country historically repelled by extreme views. This image reboot, combined with Ford's elevation to national statesman, causes funny feelings among those who, a decade ago, might have reviled the yelly populist, triggering a confusing thought: *Wait—do I like Doug Ford?*

Certainly Ford's big-tent conservatism has gotten something right that was missed by the more strident maple-MAGA brand of Pierre Poilievre, and it has only served to push the country's two most powerful conservatives—who appear to loathe each other—and their parties even further apart. Following Poilievre's disastrous showing on election night, there's a crack at the top of the federal Conservatives and a minority

Liberal government precariously holding power. For Ford, an opportunity presents itself. Months of raising his profile on the national and international stage may have been priming the premier for the place where, logically, a soaring Captain Canada would eventually hope to land: the PM's office in Ottawa.

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RUMP'S TARIFF FIXATIONS may have shocked Canadians, but the people running Ontario were mapping out responses to disaster scenarios as early as the spring of 2024. Unlike their boss, a 60-year-old suburban dad, Ford's core team are young, ambitious, data-driven urbanites. Along with Sackville, the inner circle includes Travis Kann, Ford's genial deputy chief of staff for strategy and communications, who came to Queen's Park from the crisis management consultancy Navigator. Kann worked closely with Ivana Yelich, Ford's recently departed deputy chief of staff for media, until she took a job in government and corporate affairs at Labatt Breweries. Advising from outside Queen's Park is Kory Teneycke, former VP of Sun News Network, the brash campaign manager from Stephen Harper's office who led Ford's three election victories and can be heard spilling the tea on the weekly *Curse of Politics* podcast. Ford's team has gotten tighter since his first term: he's shed most of the Ford family connections, the hangers-on from the party under former leader Tim Hudak and ideologues from the federal Conservatives. "His dramatic evolution as a leader is probably why I'm still doing this job," says Sackville. "If 2018 Doug Ford, the one who relished a fight, was still premier, I think that would have been impossible. He had to adapt to be competitive politically but also for the competent management of the province."

In the run-up to the US election, Ford's advisers pored over polling information, paying attention to districts that were particularly entwined with Ontario. They were struck by public opinion data from Dearborn, a majority Muslim district in Michigan whose auto manufacturing sector is tightly braided with Ontario's. Dearborn had swung for Joe Biden in 2020, but polling registered a U-turn. "There were just enough bellwether indicators that it was like, *Okay, this might be a sweep night for Trump*," said Sackville. "That's what got us out of the starting block fast." Ford's team did a SWOT analysis—strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats—of Trump's stump speeches, paying attention to how often he talked about trade. Late last summer, a new file was handed to Kann: Ontario-US relations. When Trump appeared on the right-wing podcast *The Joe Rogan Experience*, he more or less laid out a blueprint for the tariff war we're living through now. Ford's staff took notes.

By August, Biden was out, and Ontario hired a Washington-based consulting firm to promote the province's interests in DC for \$1.3 million. The charm offensive rolled out with an "Ontario:

Ford's image reboot causes funny feelings among those who, a decade ago, might have reviled the yelly populist, triggering a confusing thought: *Wait—do I like Doug Ford?*

We definitely exist!” ad campaign last fall. One \$8-million, 30-second spot ran right before the Super Bowl half-time show. Featuring a lulling narration reminiscent of a Tim Hortons ad, the clip reminded Americans of their “secure and stable” trading partner with archival footage of soldiers, hard hat-wearing actors, robot arms and mineral mines. David Paterson says Trump took notice of the ads, and they have been a boon for Paterson’s Washington networking: “Republicans mention them in at least 50 per cent of our meetings.”

On the home front, Ford was busy schmoozing American governors. New Jersey’s Phil Murphy came to Toronto last fall to sign a memorandum of understanding on trade and investment and exchange hockey jerseys. Before Tim Walz was Kamala Harris’s running mate, the Minnesota governor tossed a football around with the premier in his office. These play dates are Ford at his Fordiest, involving two of his favourite things—sports and buddies. “He told me this all the time,” says Yelich. “It’s about the relationships.”

All of this adds up to a tangible strategy, but those closest to Ford worry that his most recent rise may be seen as a fortuitous accident—he just happened to be in the right place at the right time. “There’s this persistent view that Ford and his team are kind of knuckle-draggers, unsophisticated,” says Sackville. “This is the stuff that we’ve dealt with for years and that the premier’s dealt with his whole life.”

To the casual observer of Ontario politics, the original knuckle-dragger was Rob Ford, who would come to be known around the world as Toronto’s crack-smoking mayor. But older brother Doug was always there, pulling the strings. He encouraged Rob to run for office, managed his sibling’s campaigns and eventually took his seat on council when Rob moved over to the mayor’s chair in 2010. After Rob died of cancer at the age of 46, Doug ran for premier. When he was elected in 2018, he was suddenly in charge at Queen’s Park without ever having been an MPP; the fundamentals of the Westminster parliamentary system were foreign to him. At one of his early briefings, Ford asked his advisers how they would carry votes on a piece of legislation—he was thinking like a municipal politician who has to rally his own support. “Then we had the conversation,” says Sackville, “where I explained how party discipline works, how the structure provincially works. He was a sponge.”

Ford’s first-term moves were combative and steeped in old grievances. He immediately looked to cut Toronto’s city council nearly in half, invoking the notwithstanding clause of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to prevent the courts from stopping him. (The Supreme Court later ruled that the cuts were constitutional.) Soon afterward, a slash-and-burn budget immediately removed cap-and-trade and cut education and health care spending. A year in, polls showed that 75 per cent of Ontarians felt the Ford government was a failure, and Ford’s personal popularity was plummeting.

In the summer of 2019, the Raptors’ victory parade ended in Nathan Phillips Square. When Ford stepped onstage, he was greeted by a rush of angry booing and looked truly upset—bite-the-inside-of-your-cheeks-to-stop-from-crying upset. Journalist and former Toronto councillor John Filion, who sat behind Doug Ford in city hall, wrote a book about Rob Ford called *The Only Average Guy*. He believes the Raptors debacle was a hinge moment

in Ford’s career. “Doug didn’t mind being booed by a bunch of lefties, but when a crowd full of non-ideological sports fans from across the city boos, I’m pretty sure that would bother him. He’s a sociable guy who likes to have everybody appreciate him.”

Covid provided Ford with the opportunity to show off his better side and win back the haters. The pandemic pummelled Ontario, but it provided a distraction from the premier’s unpopular decisions. At daily press conferences, Ford promoted vaccines and let the medical experts lead policy. He drew a line between himself and conservative peers who were pulling further right—the convoy people, the anti-vaxxers. Laryssa Waler, who worked as Ford’s executive director of communications and is now a lobbyist with Henley Strategies, says Covid was the fight Ford had been waiting for. “Defender Doug is peak Doug. He cared deeply about his younger brother, who



Conservative MPPs Stephen Lecce and Vic Fedeli joined Ford stateside this past February

struggled so publicly, and Doug’s job was to protect and defend him. He couldn’t always, and that broke his heart,” Waler says. “During Covid, he had that same fight mentality. He wasn’t fighting another person; he was fighting a disease.”

Five years later, the province’s Covid strategy has been retroactively assessed as piecemeal at best, dangerous at worst, with the youngest and the eldest residents shouldering the grimmest outcomes. Ontario students spent 135 days out of school, more than those of any other province, and 4,000-plus seniors died in long-term care homes. But no matter, apparently. Covid Doug—the guy who baked cheesecake on YouTube and told reporters on Zoom that he’d let his daughter cut his shaggy hair with dog clippers—lodged just deep enough in the collective consciousness to secure himself a second majority in 2022. He had been handed a public crisis and turned it into a private victory.

THE HOUSE IN ETOBICOKE where Ford lives with his wife, Karla, used to belong to his parents. An unremarkable mid-century bungalow backing onto a ravine, it sits at the end of a cul-de-sac where the family used to host their annual barbecue, Ford Fest, before it got too

big. In summer, the greenery around the house is probably quite lovely, but in March, when I visited, the gardens were beige and prickly. Even the lion statues looked cold. Police cars and security men in sunglasses cluttered the driveway.

The solarium off the back porch had a rec room vibe, if your rec room featured a giant Ontario flag on a pole. A wood-carved Ford Nation banner stretched across the top of one wall. On the coffee table sat a glass bowl filled with Coffee Crisp bars and Lindor truffles. Ford entered wearing a starched white shirt and blue tie, hand extended, teeth as snowy as his button-down. He showed me the number of texts and messages on his phone: more than 5,000. “Some people just want to call to see if it’s my number. Some people call about the weather, about dogs running loose, everything and anything that you can think of.” He turned his phone to silent.

Ford is a devotee of Dale Carnegie, the ur-motivational influencer whose book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* he has read many times. Carnegie recommends repeating the name of whomever you’re trying to win and influence, which Ford did during our conversation, as well as making unnerving, unblinking eye contact. He was also very concerned that I might be too hot, as my easy chair was next to a small wood-burning stove. A *Toronto Sun* cover from two weeks earlier, when Ford threatened the electricity surcharge, had already been framed and hung near his shoulder. “ART OF THE DEAL,” read the headline, with a photo illustration of Ford grinning and Trump looking furious. I asked Ford how he weighed the risk in his decision to play the electricity card. “You have two choices,” he said. “Either let them run you over with a bulldozer 10 times or stand up and fight like you’ve never fought before. You’ve got to negotiate through strength, not weakness.” Howard Lutnick seems to follow the same playbook, I mentioned. “He’s a tough SOB, and I told him that. I said, ‘I’m used to dealing with guys like you. I just want what’s in the best interest of Canadians.’”

When Ford first heard Trump’s 51st state comments, he was in his office at Queen’s Park. “It was like getting stabbed in the heart,” he told me, exasperated. “I can’t understand protectionism. It doesn’t work anywhere in the world, never has.” The president’s behaviour wasn’t just a betrayal—it was bad politics. “Trump surrounded himself with numerous billionaires, Howard being one of them,” said Ford, referring to Lutnick’s pre-White House role as the CEO of financial services firm Cantor Fitzgerald. “These folks are brilliant, but some of them don’t understand politics.”

Similar criticism has been levelled at Ford himself, another rich business guy who got elected, in part, on the promise of the transformative power of a CEO mindset. Still, Ford has been able to reach across the aisle and make friends. The day before we met, he surprised Olivia Chow, the bike-riding left-wing downtowner, with a store-bought chocolate cake for her birthday. “I love Olivia,” he told me. “I snuck in the office and swung her around. Her feet were about that high off the ground.” Despite being ideological nemeses, the two have managed to work together on deals such as a \$4-billion “new deal” that includes uploading the Gardiner and the DVP to the province. “He likes to fix things,” says Chow. She reminds me that they got to know each other on the campaign trail for mayor in 2014, before they both lost to John Tory, and discovered

that they share what Chow calls a “Let’s get it done” style. “People who supported him or his brother have come up to me and said, ‘Olivia, we like you, but we’ve committed to Rob or Doug. But if they’re not there, we’ll support you.’”

The fact that Ford can appeal to the same voters as Chow mirrors a broader trend, the migration of racially diverse working-class voters to the conservative camp, the same shift that has happened all over the world, notably in Trump’s America. Ford was embodying this slippery new order when he told me, “I don’t believe in party lines.” When we spoke, the list of people Ford mentioned with affection was long and nonpartisan, including the NDP premier of Manitoba, Wab Kinew (“He’s incredible! I always joke around with him that he’s politically misguided, because he talks like a conservative!”); Dominic LeBlanc, the federal minister of Canada-US trade (the two have been known to shake their police detail to hang out, and Ford has been to LeBlanc’s cottage); and Chrystia Freeland, now the minister of transport and internal trade.

During the pandemic, Ford and Freeland, who was then deputy prime minister under Trudeau, would speak on the phone every night. These unlikely bedfellows, the Oxford-educated liberal and the plainspoken college-dropout conservative, developed Covid initiatives. Ford, with his American contacts in supply management from his days running the US arm of Deco Labels, his family’s business, worked his phone for leads, which he would pass on to Freeland. But they also decompressed together. “We became real friends. It wasn’t performative,” says Freeland. “We called each other our therapists.” Ford, who doesn’t drink, joked that because Freeland might be imbibing a glass of wine during these sessions, he had the upper hand and could get more money for Ontario.



Canadian ambassador Kirsten Hillman and federal minister Dominic LeBlanc joined Ford to talk tariffs with Howard Lutnick in March

The two still talk and text regularly. Lately, they’ve been discussing Trump—Freeland is one of just a handful of Canadians who has gone head-to-head with the president in trade negotiations. Freeland’s son knows Ford’s voice when he calls the house, and Freeland spends time at the Etobicoke compound. “I trust him. I can be candid, direct and unguarded with him and not worry that a misplaced word will appear in the news

the next day,” Freeland says. “In my experience, he’s kind, unpretentious, not narcissistic. These aren’t always qualities one finds in a leading politician.” Her observations sound pointed coming from the woman who took down Justin Trudeau.

Ford has always presented himself as the protagonist of an anti-Trudeau story—a working-class outsider to the political world—even though his father, Doug Ford Sr., ran a multimillion-dollar company and was a backbencher in Mike Harris’s provincial government. But if there was money and access to the corridors of power, the path forward was still bumpy with dysfunction. A TikTok psychologist might say that Ford’s fix-it approach to governance makes sense: he grew up around problems that needed solving—eldest brother Randy was convicted for assault, robbery and possession of narcotics; sister Kathy struggled with addiction and was accidentally shot in the head by her then-boyfriend in the Ford family home—so he wants to solve problems. “He is far more of a consensus guy than a ram-it-down-your-throat guy,” says Kory Teneycke. “He’s got a middle-child peacemaker personality.”

When our interview was over, Ford showed me to the door, which was off a small room adjacent to the back solarium. He caught me being startled by a giant stuffed gorilla perched on a shelf. At the height of Covid, Ford told a news conference that testing rates needed to go up: “I will be like an 800-pound gorilla on their backs every single day if I have to until I see these numbers go up.” One of his ministers sent him the stuffed animal as a gift, and, tickled, he kept it.

The giant gorilla and Ford’s constant pursuit of connection sprang to mind a few weeks later when my phone rang: private number. Curious, I picked up. “Katrina? It’s Doug Ford.” My first thought was, *Good prank, husband*, but if a politician was ever going to call me, it would be our premier, who, famously, will give his number to anyone who asks. Ford: “I just want to acknowledge the great team that I have. I wouldn’t even be here without my great caucus, my cabinet. I’ve never seen a more talented team in politics than what we have right now.” He went on like that for three minutes, praising his people. It seemed like maybe not the best use of his time but also a precise illustration

of his relationship-first approach: leave nobody out.

DURING FORD’S US MEDIA BLITZ, the most memorable appearance was in January with Jesse Watters, the Fox host and David Schwimmer lookalike. Watters, whose smug comic shtick was peaking, needled Ford: “I would consider it a privilege to be taken over by the United States of America. For some reason, that’s repellent to you Canadians, and I find that personally offensive, Premier!” In response, smiley Ford uttered six simple words: “This property is not for sale.”

The cutting riposte was not improv—Ford’s team had brainstormed a slogan that would speak to Trump’s real estate roots. A pair of Ottawa marketers who saw the exchange promptly embroidered a blue baseball cap—a riff on the red MAGA hat—with CANADA IS NOT FOR SALE. Their company, Jackpine Dynamic Branding, sent one to Ford, who was prepping for a meeting with Trudeau and the premiers to discuss how to respond to Trump’s threat. Of the hat, Kann thought,

That’s a victory right there—something visual to cut through the noise. Ford wasn’t persuaded. He doesn’t wear hats, as a rule. “I got a big noggin,” he told me. “I thought it’d be ridiculous. And around the prime minister?” But he wore it in front of reporters, and the hat was a smash. Months later, when newly elected PM Mark Carney sat in the Oval Office with Trump, he used Ford’s exact phrase.

In February, another Ford flex made the news. It was his turn to head up the Council of the Federation of Premiers, a toothless organization of Canada’s provincial and territorial leaders that usually meets a couple of times a year. During a trade war and a leadership vacuum in Ottawa, the council suddenly mattered, so all 13 premiers took a field trip to Washington. Whether this joint mission should be deemed a success isn’t clear—the premiers met only with low-level officials—but the win for Ford was the optics. In the photos of the premiers standing shoulder-to-shoulder, Doug Ford, the de facto spokesperson for Canada, is smack in the middle.

Canadians were watching clips of Ford making the US media rounds, and his public approval ratings were rising. According to internal polling, older voters were especially agitated by Trump, and Ford’s team saw an opportunity. Nick Kouvalis, a Conservative pollster and strategist, was one of Ford’s inner



Doug Ford has carved out his own path in politics, but his brother’s legacy is never far from his mind

circle nudging the premier toward an early election. “Trudeau’s going to leave—that’s not good for us,” he said. “And Trump has a four-year mandate. If we’re going to go and spend \$50, \$100, \$200 billion to protect businesses and workers, you need a mandate for that.” Of course, Ford’s Conservatives already had a majority and therefore a mandate. A \$189-million election in the dead of winter smelled very much like a power grab and maybe even a way to secure office before any potential criminal charges stemming from the RCMP investigation into the Greenbelt scandal could be announced. But all that was really talked about during the four-week campaign was Trump, a strategy refined by Teneycke. Initially, the Conservatives had been focused on painting Liberal leader Bonnie Crombie as a high-taxing, soft-on-crime opponent, but they

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pivoted fast, steering the story to tariffs, embodied in the slogan “Protect Ontario.” It worked. Ultimately, voter turnout was low, and the number of PC seats—80—was about the same. But the victory was historic: Ford is the first Ontario premier since Leslie Frost in 1959 to win three straight majorities.

In the immediate wake of his re-election, Ford fielded congratulatory calls from an array of leaders including Trudeau and governor Tim Walz. One person who didn’t call: Pierre Poilievre. In fact, in the two and a half years since Poilievre had become leader of the federal Conservatives, he’d never called Ford at all. According to Yelich, Ford left Poilievre a voicemail after he clinched the federal leadership, but Poilievre hadn’t followed up. When the two men ran into each other at a service in Ottawa after the death of Queen Elizabeth II, the CPC leader claimed not to have received the message. During the federal election campaign, the silence continued. Even when Poilievre came to Ontario to rally his base, he didn’t let Ford know or invite him to share the stage. Ford was insulted, according to one insider. It was a bewildering strategy: Why would the CPC shrug off Conservative voters from the country’s most populous province? The insider says that Poilievre thought he could win without Ford. Perhaps going it alone was preferable to looking cozy with a leftward-drifting premier.

Beyond the Red Tory–Blue Tory philosophical split lies a more personal explanation. Jenni Byrne, Poilievre’s notoriously hard-core campaign manager, helped Ford get elected in 2018 and served as his principal secretary until early 2019. The split, according to several people in the inner circle, was acrimonious. I asked Ford if his sidelining by the CPC was an act of revenge stemming from Byrne’s time on his staff. He didn’t want to go there—“It’s a nothing burger,” he said—and Byrne did not respond to my requests for an interview. Still, tension heated up during Ford’s election campaign. “Poilievre’s people were talking shit about Ford,” says Kouvalis, and pulling focus. “They went door-knocking and held rallies when we were heading to the polls.”

When Ford won his third term anyway, one person who did call was Mark Carney. Soon afterward, Ford and Carney met in front of the cameras for poached eggs at Wally’s Grill in Rexdale. “He’s a very, very astute business person,” Ford gushed about Carney. “Extremely smart.” After that breakfast, Poilievre did finally call. “He did not ask me to endorse him or help him,” Ford told me. “He asked what advice I had, and I had very simple advice: ‘Tell the people what you’re going to do to protect their jobs, their communities, their businesses. It’s a simple message.’” Was he annoyed it took Poilievre so long to call? Ford shrugged. “He didn’t want to reach out to me, that’s his problem.”

Poilievre’s call did little to temper the bad blood. Teneycke hit hard, criticizing Poilievre’s calcified *Axe the Tax* sloganeering, a message the Tories hadn’t adapted to the Trump moment. He

aimed straight at Byrne, his former colleague, calling Poilievre’s staggering drop from a 25-point lead in the polls “campaign malpractice.” Asked to comment, Ford told reporters, “Sometimes the truth hurts.”

THE PREMIER’S OFFICE at Queen’s Park was decorated by his mother. Yelich described the aesthetic to me as “kind of Asian fusion,” and sure enough, there is a big red ceramic Buddha in the corner and a Ming-ish vase that stands about four feet tall. For my second interview with Ford, a few weeks after my visit to his home, I was left alone in this ornate office to wait, which felt both weird and deliberate—like a test to see if I might pocket an item, perhaps the marble egg on a low shelf. A more likely outcome, one that kept running through my head, was that I would somehow break that giant vase. Sitting very still, I took in one of the family photos on the mantle, Ford standing between all the miniskirted women in his life: his wife, Karla, and their four K-named daughters, Krista, Kara, Kayla and Kyla.

If you asked ChatGPT, “Show me the office of a Canadian political leader,” it might look a little like Ford’s. The bookshelf housed *Egotists and Autocrats: The Prime Ministers of Canada* and *Flame of Power: The Story of Canada’s Greatest Businessmen*. Next to that was Ford Nation swag (T-shirts, a football), a drawing of Gandhi and, nearby, an enormous mosaic portrait of Rob Ford. The premier’s desk was empty. Ford doesn’t like to sit in the big chair—a populist would never.

It was now late April. That morning, on the Queen’s Park lawn, a rally put on by the Ontario Nurses’ Association had drawn crowds protesting cuts to funding for home care. At the same time, in the basement media room, Ford was signing an interprovincial trade agreement with Nova Scotia premier Tim Houston and New Brunswick premier Susan Holt. After the papers were signed, Ford made a speech about how the agreement would bring freer movement of people, like nurses, and also goods.

But another story detracted from this win. That morning, the *New York Times* had published an article about the Therme spa, the centrepiece of Ford’s controversial \$2.2-billion plan to redevelop the waterfront at Ontario Place. According to the *Times*, a man named Robert Hanea, the founder of an Austrian wellness company, had presented himself as operating several successful spas around the world, but in fact only one was up and running, in Romania. The story brought back the spectre of Disaster Doug. Therme had been granted a 95-year lease from the province, essentially privatizing a swath of Toronto’s public waterfront. The auditor general had investigated and found that environmental assessments had been sidestepped and that the bidding process had been unfair. The new details about Hanea made the already controversial situation that much worse. It felt like the monorail had come to Springfield.

“People don’t care about the Greenbelt,” Ford told me. “It doesn’t even exist on their radar. People care about jobs”

When the mic opened to media questions, a CBC reporter asked, “Did you get scammed by Therme?” Ford started off calmly and quietly, promising to get to the bottom of things. Then, as he confirmed that the project was going ahead, his voice started to rise. “We’re going to build a beautiful facility down there. They’re working hard. And it’s gonna be world-class and spectacular.” The phrasing—big promises, superlatives—was unmistakable: it’s Trump’s signature oratorical style. There is plenty of connective tissue between the Fords and the Trumps: the salesman pitch, the domineering family patriarch, the bombast. And there has always been something stereotypically American about the Fords (Football! Barbecue! Fight, fight, fight!). When the premier arrived in his office and sat down on the couch opposite me, I asked if he could spot any overlap between himself and the US president. “Maybe in the populism—” He stopped. “I’m nothing like him. Nothing at all.”

And yet, Ford’s current rise is at least partly a by-product of Trump’s chaos. I asked him if the tariff-first election provided a cover for certain missteps like the Greenbelt. This was the only time Ford’s smile completely vanished. “People don’t care about the Greenbelt. It doesn’t even exist on their radar,” he told me. “People care about jobs. They care about making sure they can get a paycheque. They want to be able to buy a home one day. That’s what people want to focus on.” It sounded like a stump speech. We were a couple of weeks out from the federal election, but there were murmurs that a Poilievre loss might clear a path for Ford to become leader of the federal Conservatives. Certainly my presence felt strategic. Though he’s made time for American outlets like the *Atlantic* and the *New York Times*, Ford rarely sits down with Canadian print media. Last year, in a radio interview with AM640, he described the media as “constantly attacking” him.

I had asked Ford, back at his house, if he had his eye on the PMO, and he said, “Ask me in a little while.” So, in his office, I asked if Teneycke coming for Poilievre was about laying track for a run at the CPC leadership. “We’ve never sat down and had that conversation. I’ll tell you one thing. I love my job. I have the best job in the world. I have just a huge amount of work to do and an agenda to move forward. And you never know. And people ask. You never know what the future brings.”

There are certainly barriers between Ford and Parliament Hill. For one, he has only Grade 9 French. But he’s taking lessons. “Comme ci, comme ça,” the premier answered when I asked how it was going. According to one insider, Ford is serious about a run and believes he can win without Quebec if he can connect in Alberta. A more practical obstacle: Ford hates flying so much that he has to sit far from the window, eyes forward. Staff can’t say anything to him, not even a comment about the weather. This could make campaigning in Fort McMurray difficult. For the record, Teneycke denied that a federal run is in the works: “If he wanted to be doing that right now, I’d be running a leadership campaign. And I’m spending 0.0 per cent of my time on it.”



O **N APRIL 28**, the Liberals pulled off the most shocking turnaround in Canadian political history. On election night, as the chances of a CPC victory were clearly dimming, Jamil Jivani, the Conservative MP for Bowmanville–Oshawa North, turned his ire on Ford. In an interview with the CBC, Jivani went off, calling Ford a “hype man” for Carney and suggesting that Ford was somehow responsible for the Conservative loss. His stance was, in a way, a compliment to Ford, crediting him with the power to alter the outcome of a federal election. Although Poilievre lost his seat and the election, his Conservatives made significant gains in Ontario, and this, too, could be read as a victory for Ford: the electorate affirmed him by keeping Ontario blue on all levels.

A month later, Ford’s fresh third-term government was already caught in a whorl of discontent. The juiciest chum for the opposition was Bill 5, a controversial omnibus piece of legislation designed to fast-track mining in the north. I last spoke to the premier shortly after Indigenous leaders told media that the passing of Bill 5 would be met with blockades and protests. Ford phoned me for our scheduled 10 a.m. call at 10:01, no patching through. He downplayed the conflict, but a day later, the bill was amended with a clause establishing the duty to consult First Nations. This amendment could be viewed as an example of Ford’s political agility and flexibility or a wimpy concession. Either way, the shift underscored how differently Ford operates than Poilievre, an intransigent leader who seems defiantly uninterested in being liked.

I asked Ford what he made of the federal Conservatives’ loss, of Poilievre losing his own seat. “I don’t have any comment,” he said—but then he did: “The people spoke. They spoke when they elected our government. They spoke very clearly when they elected the federal government.” The dig was deep: the people chose him, and they rejected Poilievre.

With the contentious election in the rear-view mirror and Trump revisiting his 51st state rhetoric in the wake of King Charles’s visit, Canadian conservatives would be wise to start bridging the divide. But, right now, Ford’s peers on the right aren’t talking teamwork. At a time when Canada is supposed to be united, elbows up, against a southern threat, conservative leaders in our country seem to be in a bitchy mood, shunning and gunning for one another, with Alberta threatening to split off altogether. And then there’s Ford doing his balancing act, bending ideologically to make just enough peace to keep Ontario grinding along, for better or worse.

For now, Poilievre is staying put as head of the federal Conservative party, and he’s almost guaranteed to secure a new seat via a by-election in an ultra-safe riding in Alberta. But, at the party’s next convention, in the wake of turmoil, a leadership review will take place. And if it’s a disaster, Doug Ford will undoubtedly make the most of it.