

Jenni Byrne's Big Gamble

The ruthless tactician behind Pierre Poilievre's campaign has spent decades shaping Canadian conservatism from behind the scenes. This year's election will be her greatest achievement—or her undoing.

By **SIMON LEWSEN**

Photo illustration by ANNA MINZHULINA



IF YOU LIVE in a riding with a shot of going Conservative in the federal election, there's a chance Jenni Byrne has knocked on your door. If so, she was probably dressed sensibly, in comfortable shoes and an inexpensive jacket. She introduced herself as a member of the Conservative Party and asked how you plan to vote. She wasn't fazed if you said you support the Liberals. But she wanted to know why. She wanted to know other things too: how do you feel about public safety, the economy, the job market? What's keeping you up at night?

She didn't challenge you, nor praise you if you flattered her worldview. Perhaps you wondered if you'd said something wrong. (There are no wrong answers.) When she left, you had no idea you'd spoken to one of the most important power brokers in Canada—the strategist who saved Stephen Harper's career in 2008, won him a majority in 2011, defenestrated Erin O'Toole in 2022 and is now Pierre Poilievre's top adviser, bringing him within striking distance of the Prime Minister's Office.

Canvassing is the lowest form of political grunt work, tiers below Byrne's pay grade. Yet over the past three decades she has knocked on tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of doors, in ridings across the country. As a colleague of hers told me, "Jenni lives and breathes the ground game. If you work in this business and aren't knocking on doors, you're secondary in her eyes." Byrne knows that the high-level work of politics—the committee meetings, the legislating—only happens because someone got elected. And she believes elections are won or lost on Canadians' doorsteps. Throughout her career, Byrne has embodied a spiky, gut-based conservatism, one that makes few concessions to the political centre and defends itself with brass-knuckled ferocity. Her world view is rooted in a sense of aggrieved class solidarity, a belief that progressive and centrist elites don't know or care about ordinary people.

That isn't an affectation. When Byrne was coming of age in the '80s, the two dominant political figures in Canada were Pierre Trudeau, a patrician who practised yoga, wore a boutonnière and dated

Barbra Streisand; and Brian Mulroney, a captain of industry who collected Gucci shoes. Byrne grew up in Fenelon Falls, a former mill town two hours northeast of Toronto. Her father was a carpenter and her mother a teacher. The family, who often struggled to make ends meet, organized their lives around the hunting and fishing seasons. They saw no trace of themselves in Canada's leadership class.

This made them a natural fit for the Reform Party, an upstart populist movement founded in 1987 and committed to small government and family values. Its power base lay in Western Canada, where resentment of country-club conservatism ran high. In the mid-'90s, Byrne's father joined the party, as did Byrne, then still a teenager. Her political commitments hardened in 1995, when Jean Chrétien's justice minister, Allan Rock—a Bay Street lawyer who'd palled around with John Lennon—announced new gun regulations, including mandatory registration for hunting rifles. The move felt like a rebuke to the Byrnes' way of life. While studying nursing at the University of Ottawa, Byrne threw herself into the Reform Party as a volunteer campaigner. Soon, she'd been named a youth organizer.

It was unglamorous work. Byrne spent her time shuttling to events in a school bus and bunking at Super 8 motels. The party was anti-hierarchical, so even young organizers had access to the top brass. These included party founder Preston Manning, a firebrand Alberta populist who became federal Opposition leader in 1997, and the two men—Stockwell Day and Stephen Harper—who succeeded Manning after Reform became the Canadian Alliance in 2000. When Harper decided in 2003 to merge the Alliance with the established Progressive Conservatives, he first told a select group of advisers. Byrne, not yet 30, was in the room.

She has been a key player in the united Conservative Party ever since—and one of the most powerful operators in Canadian politics. Her goal, and that of the movement she came up in, has been to realign the nation's political axis, to move the centre further to the right and end the long dominance of the Liberals. During Harper's tenure as leader, she was among his strongest tacticians—his secret weapon against

the opposition. When he lost power, she became a pariah. A decade later, as Pierre Poilievre's most trusted adviser, she was on the verge of a comeback. In Poilievre, Byrne found a candidate who embodies her own world view—a bristling, sometimes vengeful anger against Canadian elites. And in Justin Trudeau, the pair had a perfect opponent: the privileged scion of an eastern political dynasty, whose popularity was sliding after a decade in power.

Now, Donald Trump has scrambled the rules of Canadian politics. Poilievre's victory is in jeopardy. And following Trudeau's resignation, Poilievre is going head to head with Mark Carney: a Yukon-born career banker with an intimidating CV who has driven one of the greatest polling resurgences in Canadian history.

But Byrne will fight until the end. Everyone I spoke to for this story—colleagues, acquaintances and observers—characterized her as a political operator who has consistently and defiantly stuck to her principles, even when they've thrust her into conflict with allies or landed her on the wrong side of public sentiment. Friends and enemies alike describe her as focused, ruthless, tactically brilliant, detail-oriented, loyal to a point and merciless beyond that point, and perhaps the best practitioner of grievance politics in Canadian history. Her reputation is fearsome; some people were afraid to talk or be quoted. One figure in the Conservative Party said, "I fear attribution because I fear retribution."

If Poilievre becomes prime minister, Byrne could easily be appointed his chief of staff, and she will certainly be one of the most powerful people in Canada. If he loses, the party will turn on her, just as it did before—perhaps this time forever.

NONE OF THE ENERGETIC twentysomethings who volunteered for the Reform and Canadian Alliance parties decades ago could reasonably have expected to end up at the centre of power in Ottawa. But once the Alliance merged with the Progressive Conservatives, that's where they found themselves. There, Byrne fell in love with Poilievre, a rising star and transplant from Calgary who'd been elected in an Ottawa-area riding in 2004, at the age of 25. They started dating in 1999 and broke

up in the early 2010s. Both came from humble backgrounds—Poilievre's parents were teachers—and they shared a brash, youthful zeal. Poilievre was part of a cohort of outspoken MPs nicknamed the Khmer Bleu, who criticized Harper when he veered to the political centre.

Like Poilievre, Byrne was staunch in her partisan commitments. She ascended from deputy director of Harper's 2006 and 2008 campaigns to assistant to the chief of staff, then to director of issues management—a job that required her to rise before the sun, read the morning papers, figure out which topics would dominate the headlines and coordinate a party-wide response. Nick Kouvalis, a conservative political strategist and a colleague of Byrne's, says she was adept at every role and unsparing in her candour. "MPs, campaign managers, riding presidents—they can all get lazy," Kouvalis says. "Everyone they talk to is telling them how super awesome they are. Nobody is saying, 'You're getting old, you're not adding value and a third of the people in your riding hate you.' Jenni tells it like it is."

Whenever an MP got on Harper's bad side, she'd ring them up, ream them out and rein them in. Sometimes, she'd let them go. In 2008, Maxime Bernier—today the leader of the right-populist People's Party of Canada, then Harper's minister of foreign affairs—left a confidential document in his girlfriend's house. Byrne called him into a meeting, where he learned he was being kicked out of cabinet. Sometimes she dropped the axe herself. "It wasn't uncommon, during the Harper years," one source told me, "for people to get a call from Jenni at midnight on a Tuesday, then wake up to a voice message saying, 'If you don't call

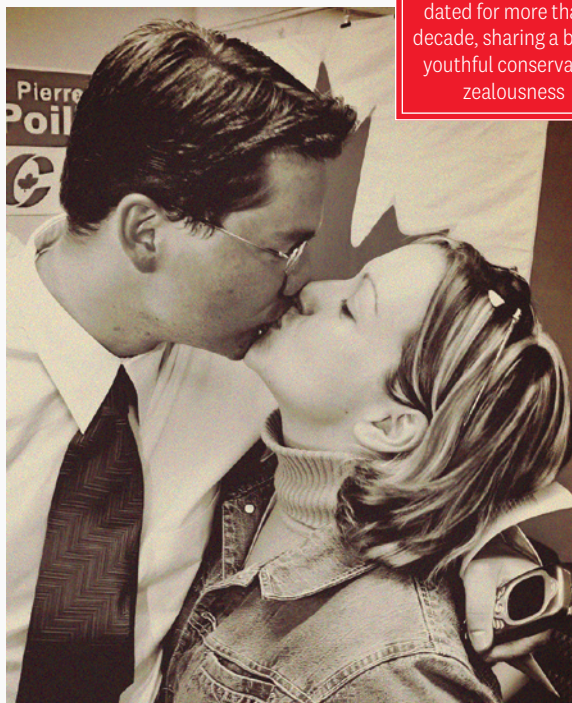
back in 15 minutes, your phone will be deactivated and you're fired.'"

Her superpower was public communications. She knew, seemingly instinctively, which messages would fly with the electorate and which would fall flat. Fred DeLorey, a Harper-era colleague, remembers Byrne for two risky, counterintuitive decisions, both of which paid off.

had their Christmas party. The mood was glum and everybody was pale-faced. Byrne took Lynette Corbett, Harper's director of strategy and policy, aside and gestured at the room. "These people are worried they'll be unemployed next week," Corbett remembers her saying. "We've got to fight for them."

Byrne believed Harper could beat the insurgency. At her directive, the party's senior leadership stayed behind after the Christmas party, creating a constitutional argument for why the Governor General should prorogue Parliament and a public-facing argument for why voters should hate the Liberal-NDP coalition. Byrne helped craft the latter message, which presented Liberal leader Stéphane Dion as a man so duplicitous he was willing, in his quest for power, to abandon the will of the voters and embrace the Bloc, a party that didn't believe in Canada. The Conservatives hammered that message home in speeches, press conferences and interviews. When Parliament reconvened in January, the coalition, once seemingly inevitable, had fallen apart, its proponents too weak-kneed to defend their legitimacy. Harper's second term lasted another two and a half years. When it ended in 2011, he appointed Byrne his campaign director—at which point she made what might have been her most consequential decision.

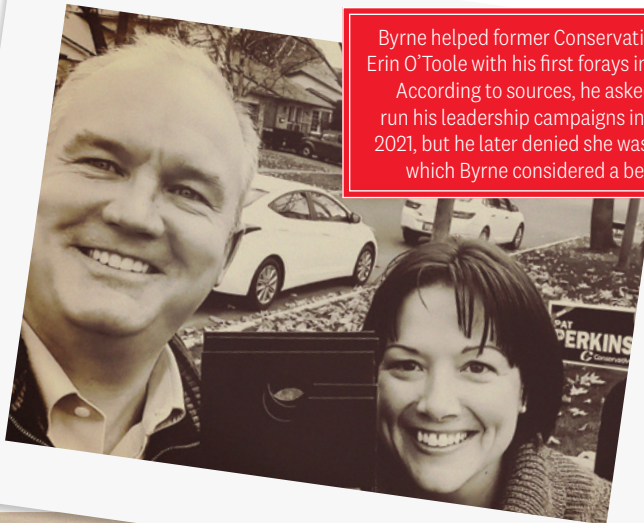
It is often said that Canada is a nation of progressives, and the Liberals are its natural governors. Voters will occasionally hand the reins to the opposition, but they're rarely comfortable doing so. Conservatives, therefore, do their best electorally when they don't push hard to the right. In 2011, this meant not campaigning outright for a majority. That kind of talk could send voters scurrying back to the Liberals.



For years, Byrne has worked to realign Canada's political axis, to move the centre to the right

In November of 2008, six weeks after Harper won re-election, the party learned that the Liberals and NDP were planning to defeat the Conservatives over a budget confidence vote and install themselves, with support from the Bloc Québécois, as a coalition government. The prime minister was apoplectic but resigned to his fate. In early December, the Conservatives

Byrne took the opposite view. If you thought the Harper Conservatives were scary outsiders, she reasoned, you were spending too much time in the boardrooms and steakhouses of eastern capitals and not enough in small towns like Fenelon Falls or bustling, ethnically diverse suburbs like Richmond, B.C., or Brampton, Ontario. Conservatives, she argued, should campaign hard in these districts, leaning into messages about faith, family and people's right to keep the money they earn. She also thought that Harper should talk proudly



Byrne helped former Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole with his first forays into politics. According to sources, he asked her to run his leadership campaigns in 2017 and 2021, but he later denied she was involved, which Byrne considered a betrayal.



Byrne helped engineer Stephen Harper's 2011 victory. She also ran his 2015 campaign, but after that year's loss to the Liberals, she was ousted from the Conservatives' inner circle.

about his majority-government ambitions. A majority meant stability, which would resonate with Canadians rocked by the 2008 recession.

She was right. In May of 2011, Harper won a decisive majority, flipping long-held Liberal ridings and making inroads in the big-city suburbs. At 34, Byrne was the first woman to run a successful

After Stephen Harper's 2015 loss, Byrne became like Voldemort: "The name you shouldn't say"

federal campaign, achieving a feat—"a strong, stable Conservative majority government," to quote the campaign slogan—that many people had deemed impossible. It was more than a mere win.

The Conservatives had earned their mandate by campaigning unabashedly to the right, led by a prime minister whose populist, Reform-era bona fides remained intact. To many observers, it looked like Byrne and

her colleagues had brought about a political realignment: the end of the Liberal Party's long domination, and the arrival of a new, unapologetically conservative consensus.

IMAGINE YOU'D SPENT your adult life bucking conventional wisdom only to find out, repeatedly, that you were right. How would that change you? Would you suffer fools? Would you even know who is a fool and who isn't? "In politics, you rack up wins and losses, which makes you humble," a veteran operative told me. "Jenni is the exception. She almost never admits she's wrong."

In 2015, she was tasked with getting Harper re-elected. It was a heavy lift: no Conservative prime minister since John A. Macdonald had achieved a fourth consecutive mandate. Nobody knew for sure whether Harper's chief rival was the NDP's Tom Mulcair, the polling frontrunner, or Justin Trudeau, the drama teacher and political dynast heading up a pitiful caucus of 34 MPs. And nobody knew exactly what to make of social media, which had brought out young Americans for Barack Obama.

Smart people in the party inevitably disagreed over these questions. But when Byrne took over as director of the campaign, she wasn't in the mood for debate. From the jump, she butted heads with campaign chair Guy Giorno and chief-of-staff Ray Novak. When her colleagues moved, against her advice, to attack the NDP—neutralizing Mulcair and clearing the way for Trudeau—she accused them of scoring on their own net. She downsized the party's social media team, earning the ire of colleagues after Trudeau started lighting up Facebook and Twitter, making young voters swoon.

The stress was getting to Byrne. According to four sources I spoke to, she became so temperamental on the road that Harper pulled her off the campaign plane and made her return to the Ottawa war room; she blamed Giorno for encouraging Harper's decision. (Byrne's friend and colleague Lynette Corbett denies this account. She says Byrne wasn't unduly affected by the stress of the campaign, and that she chose to stay in the war room to focus on saving endangered seats.)

People close to the campaign told me that it had split into warring camps.

Communication was minimal. "Silos?" one source said. "It was more like separate bomb shelters."

In many respects, Harper's final campaign was a lot like his previous ones. It was leader-driven and focused on the anxieties of the time—deficits, legal cannabis, radical Islam. But after nearly a decade, Canadians were eager for a brighter and more aspirational style of politics. The problem was that sunny ways weren't Byrne's thing. There had always been a hard edge to Harper's messaging, whether he was proposing cuts to cultural funding or mandatory life sentences for repeat criminals. In 2015, with Byrne at the helm, the campaign's harshness was dialled up when it should have been dialled down; it is best remembered for a proposal to create a snitch line, whereby Canadians could report on neighbours for "barbaric cultural practices."

Trudeau's victory was decisive—the Liberals won 184 seats to the Conservatives' 99, a stunning reversal of Harper's win four years earlier. Byrne was forced to wear the defeat. For the first time in her adult life, she found herself outside of federal politics. "In the party, she was like Voldemort," the campaign operative told me, "the name you shouldn't say."

She moved to Toronto with Ty, the corgi Poilievre had given her, and fell back on close friends—including Erin O'Toole, a former Bay Street lawyer who became an ally in 2012 after she helped him win a by-election in Durham, east of Toronto. Byrne became a regular guest at the O'Toole home, where his children called her "Aunt Jenni."

For years, she bounced between ventures. She pitched in with Doug Ford's first campaign to be premier of Ontario and worked in his office. She started her own PR consultancy, Jenni Byrne and Associates. And she became a panellist on the podcast *Curse of Politics*. In some ways, her life was opening up. Amanda Galbraith, a former Harper adviser, knew her as a smart, successful, funny person. "During the Harper years, people only saw a caricature of her," she says. "When she started doing the podcast, they were surprised that there were no horns growing out of her hair."

But Byrne longed to return to federal politics, which was all she'd known since

the age of 16. For a while, it seemed like O'Toole might offer a way back in. When he ran for the party leadership in 2017, he sought her advice. Corbett says he asked Byrne to manage the campaign, but O'Toole has denied this—possibly because her name still bore the baggage of the Harper years.

In 2021, O'Toole's Conservatives lost that year's federal election against Trudeau's Liberals—and Byrne tore O'Toole apart, deriding him as a "fake conservative." She began calling disgruntled MPs, and soon an internal putsch was under way. Byrne wasn't the only backroom operator behind the insurgency, but she was a major player. "Every caucus meeting was a living hell," says a person close to the events. "The anti-O'Toole people were sending a message: 'The pain stops when Erin's gone.'" At a leadership review in February of 2022, more than 60 per cent of the caucus voted to recall O'Toole.

Byrne probably wouldn't have savaged O'Toole so thoroughly had she not felt personally rebuked. But their politics had diverged. O'Toole had become the kind of gentlemanly conservative Byrne disdained. He'd run a centrist campaign, complete with a carbon-pricing scheme. "He wants to be loved," says Nick Kouvalis. "When he became an MP, he surrounded himself with sycophants and Bay Street lawyers." When I asked O'Toole to comment, he responded by email: "If you have done some research on this topic, I am sure you can understand why I prefer not to participate in this exercise."

IN 2022, PIERRE POILIEVRE asked Byrne to help him win the party leadership. Here was an avenue back to Ottawa—and a chance to right the ship of Canadian conservatism. In Poilievre, she had a candidate who would never tack to the centre. He was as savvy as Byrne about tapping into the anxieties and anger of the moment. The leadership campaign made that clear. That April, Poilievre's chief leadership rival, Jean Charest, said that his opponent's support for the Freedom Convoy should disqualify him. In an episode of the CTV show *Power Play*, Byrne squared off with political strategist Tasha Kheiriddin over the issue. Kheiriddin defended Charest's decades of service to

conservatism and his dedication to free trade and environmental regulation. Byrne countered that Poilievre's support for the truckers put him closer to the party's true base. "It's hard for me to understand why Jean Charest is even running for leadership of the Conservative Party," she said, "because he seems to dislike every member of the Conservative Party."

Byrne has been having a version of this debate her entire life. She has resisted the counsel of academics, mainstream pundits and business leaders, because their opinions are meaningless to her. Even Conservative thought leaders—deficit hawks and foreign-policy nerds—speak a stilted language that leaves most people

been on leave from her consultancy, and Poilievre's campaign has acquired all the Jenni Byrne hallmarks.

First, there's the ground game. The Conservatives have amassed a formidable war chest and have had candidates lined up in nearly every riding since 2023. Poilievre has repeatedly taunted the Liberals with opposition motions and confidence votes because he knows that if the government fell, he would be ready for an election. Next is a commitment to extreme message discipline. Today's Conservatives may be a big tent coalition of libertarians, thecons and *Barstool Sports* fans, but they're all singing from the same songbook, and there is less room for dissent than is typical

When Trudeau resigned, Byrne and Poilievre lost their foil—and their punchlines

cold. The point isn't that these elites are wrong about everything, or that they're wrong about anything. The point is that they're offside with ordinary people, especially those who swing Conservative. Byrne ignores the chattering classes and spends her leisure hours knocking on random people's doors. Some folks have information she needs. Others don't. And while her ability to intuit what ordinary people are thinking may seem uncanny, it's nothing of the sort. If you'd spent the last three decades chatting about politics with hundreds of thousands of Canadians, you'd understand the electorate too. When Kheiriddin defended Charest, she was telling Byrne that she and Poilievre were out of touch with the history of conservatism. Byrne's rebuttal was that Kheiriddin and Charest were out of touch with the times.

To see who came out on top, check the numbers: at the leadership convention in September, Poilievre won nearly 70 per cent of the votes. Charest barely broke 10. Poilievre then appointed Byrne as an adviser, a bland job title that obscures her position as the most influential member of his brain trust. Since then she's

in party politics. There are surely backbench MPs or obscure candidates who'd love to sign on to X and run their mouths about gay people or abortion, but no one does. Everybody knows that if they step out of line, they'll get shanked—and if they're important enough, Byrne might do the shanking herself.

A final Byrne hallmark is a highly accessible style of politics. Since launching his leadership bid, Poilievre has been in permanent campaign mode, packing bars, legions and conference rooms. His rallies have the ecstatic energy of tent revivals—as well as a sense of ambient collective anger, which can at times feel menacing. Supporters cheer their way through Poilievre's speeches and wait hours behind ropes for a few seconds with him. The events draw all kinds of people, but they've been particularly successful with a demographic that's been absent from the Conservative coalition: aggrieved, extremely online young men. Under Poilievre's leadership, Canadian conservatism looks slicker, edgier and younger. He's buffer than his predecessors and has undergone a modest makeover since his 2022 victory—his wife,



Anaida, encouraged him to ditch his glasses and start wearing bootcut jeans.

By building out the party infrastructure and keeping MPs in check, Byrne has freed Poilievre to focus on public communications, which he does largely his way. His own political talent lies in his ability to address two demographics at once. The first is older conservatives. The second, and most consequential, is a new cohort of young Reddit trawlers and podcast bros—the edgelords. Poilievre's political opponents sometimes describe him as "far right," which is not fair given his mostly standard-issue conservative policy platform: lower taxes, secure borders and effective policing.



Yet Poilievre is different from previous party leaders. Without saying anything explicitly radical, he takes stances—crypto evangelism, or support for the trucker convoy—that put him just outside the boundaries of normie conservative discourse. He also offers his online audience a stream of “lib-owning” videos, the kind in which a dimwitted social-justice warrior is “demolished” by a sharp-tongued conservative. In Poilievre’s versions, the antagonist is typically some unwitting journalist, and the sharp-tongued conservative is Poilievre himself. The most viral of these takes is the now-famous apple orchard interview from 2023, in

which Poilievre tore into Don Urquhart, a reporter in Oliver, B.C., who fumbled a question. (Urquhart accused Poilievre of “taking a page out of Donald Trump’s book.” Poilievre responded “What page? Give me the page,” while loudly biting into an apple.) If you’re inclined to see a hapless small-town reporter as an enemy of the people, Poilievre will strike you as a fearless truth-teller—or funny, at least.

To build the broadest possible coalition, Byrne homed in on the most versatile of Poilievre’s soundbites, like his pledge to boycott the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where politicians hobnob with investors,

Poilievre’s Canada First rally, held in Ottawa this February, was among his first attempts to adjust his messaging for the Trump era

CEOs and celebrities. This stance aligns Poilievre with a paranoid online community that sees the WEF as a globalist cabal, intent on world domination—though, of course, Poilievre never says anything of the kind. But it also plays with more mainstream voters attuned to Byrne’s anti-elite messaging. Everyone, from normies to edgelords, can find something to like here.

Throughout 2023 and 2024, Poilievre’s trollish edge expanded his coalition into the weirder reaches of the online

manosphere. His public sound bites had a fill-in-the-blank quality that appealed to many demographics at once. When Poilievre promised to “make Canada the freest nation on Earth,” he was referencing a variety of possible freedoms. To walk around unmasked. To make your own vaccination choices. To speak your mind on immigration or gender without getting chastised by censorious liberals. At the same time, he capitalized on disenchantment with a past-his-prime Liberal leader and anger at the government’s inability to deal with crisis-level issues: deteriorating health care, sluggish economic growth and the skyrocketing cost of living. “Canada is broken,” Poilievre repeated, over and over. Under Byrne’s direction, he rode this dissatisfaction and anger to a 20-point polling lead against the incumbent Liberals—a lead which, until very recently, seemed invincible.

BYRNE’S GREATEST political talent is her ability to take the temperature of the party base, and to reflect voters’ grievances back at them in a way that makes them feel heard. That worked when anger was the defining national mood—which it was until last December. When Trudeau resigned, Poilievre lost his foil and his best punchlines. And that was only the beginning. Two weeks later, Donald Trump took office and waged economic warfare on Canada. Poilievre and Byrne spent two years casting Trudeau as the ultimate villain, the man who ruined Canada. Suddenly, the old enemy (who made us angry) had departed, and a new one (who makes us afraid) had taken his place. Shell-shocked Canadians now want a leader who is ready to tackle a very different threat. To the extent we are angry, that anger is directed outside the country. Our emotional needs have changed accordingly.

The consequence has been a massive, entirely unanticipated reversal of fortune for the Liberals. Between early January and the end of March, the Conservatives’ seemingly unassailable lead in the polls—which had led most Canadians to view the election as a foregone conclusion—disappeared. Many reputable pollsters are putting the Liberals in majority territory. If Byrne or Poilievre hoped that Canada was in for

another realignment, like in 2011, they are now fearing that the moment has passed, putting the nation on track for something more like the Liberal restoration of 2015.

In February, I attended Poilievre’s much-hyped Flag Day rally at an Ottawa convention centre to see how supporters were holding up. I didn’t request a media pass, because I didn’t want to be corralled into some creepy cattle pen for journalists. Instead, I registered in advance as an ordinary citizen and arrived a few minutes after the doors opened—which, because Poilievre’s team had given away more tickets than the venue could hold, was too late to get in. Instead, I found myself in the cold with hundreds of registered supporters, many of whom had driven hours to get there. “Why didn’t you shut the registration down?” one guy yelled at the poor flunky who’d been sent out to deliver the bad news. “You made a mess of this.”

One woman wore a red cap with white letters: “Make Justin Trudeau a Drama Teacher Again.” Did she know that Trudeau had already announced his resignation? Did she realize that the theme of the rally was Canada, and that her clothing aligned her, if only by suggestion, with a hostile foreign government?

I asked people in the crowd why they were there. An older woman explained that she’d discovered conservatism through veterans’ rights advocacy. During the Afghanistan war, she’d campaigned to create a service-dog program for returning soldiers. The Conservative Party listened. They even consulted her on a policy.

Beside her stood a twitchy man, much younger. When I asked why he’d come out, he said he hated Trudeau, whom he described as Canada’s Mao Zedong. “Either Poilievre wins this election,” he added, “or we become the 51st state. Both are fine by me.” The veterans’ rights activist was furious. “This is Canada,” she scolded him. “If you want Trump, go to the States.”

The incident reinforced what the polls were telling me: Poilievre’s edgelord-mainstream coalition is cracking up, and some normies are decamping for the Liberal Party. Back in the good old days of 2024, they might have tolerated the edgelords because they seemed more silly than sinister. Now U.S. edgelords are gutting their own civil service, doing lasting

damage to their country while levying unhinged threats at ours. Collectively, the changing polls indicate that Poilievre’s support was always wider than it was deep—that his once-formidable lead was a caffeine high rather than a permanent realignment. They show too that Byrne’s brand of grievance politics worked, but only in a specific context, and only for a little while. Her great talent is her ability to make voters feel heard in their anger. Her big challenge now is to alchemize that anger into something greater—solidarity, say, or a sense of collective purpose.

Still, Poilievre is wounded, not dead. The issues that propelled him up the polls, especially the cost-of-living crisis, could still buoy him to a smaller victory. And the Conservatives, thanks to Byrne, are far more prepared for this election than the Liberals are, which means they may have an easier time getting out the vote. Yet the current crisis surely portends others to come. The world will continue to be a scary place for Canadians, who will continue to long for a more statesmanlike style of leadership. Will Poilievre morph into a national father figure? Will Byrne, the master of grievance, help him do it? She’s brought discipline, focus and organizational prowess to Poilievre’s team. What she needs to bring now is emotional intelligence, which means reflecting not just anger but also aspirations—Canadians’ need for comfort, reassurance and hope. She’s struggled with that job before.

Given Byrne’s clairvoyance, why didn’t she see Harper’s 2015 defeat coming? I asked this question of seemingly everyone, until one person gave me an answer so obvious I should’ve thought of it myself. She did see it coming. That summer, before the writ dropped—back when people thought Trudeau was a joke and Harper had a good shot at re-election—Byrne went door-knocking in five bellwether ridings. She returned convinced that Harper was in trouble. Voters said they found him negative, dour and dry. He didn’t energize them or make them excited for the future. It says something about Byrne’s integrity that she stuck around to lead the campaign anyway. It also says something about her limitations. She knew the vibe shift was under way long before the rest of us did. She just couldn’t do anything about it. ■