



Speak to Your Stakeholders

MAY 2024

The Implications of Pierre Poilievre's
View on Corporate Political Engagement

Introduction

Directors, business leaders and C-suites with an interest in Canada should pay close attention to a May 3, 2024 op-ed in the National Post from Conservative Party of Canada leader, Pierre Poilievre. Poilievre and his party currently hold a significant lead in public opinion polls and if a federal election were held today, they would be projected to come to power with a commanding majority.

In the op-ed, Poilievre delivers a blunt message to business leaders about how they should engage with him and his party, assuming they win the next election. He takes the rare step of calling out, by name, specific projects, companies, and well-known business stakeholder organizations and criticizes certain lobbying practices.

FGS Longview believes it is critical for business leaders to consider the implications of Mr. Poilievre's thinking, which we discuss at a high level in this note. It is not simply a function of how today's opinion polls look. Rather, the message Poilievre is delivering, and its direct tone and tenor, provide important insights into how Canada's political landscape is already shifting, and will continue to shift, as the country approaches the next federal election.

THE MESSAGE – BACK TO BASICS

Poilievre's latest op-ed is not the first time he has sought to send a clear message to Canada's business community. On March 8, 2024, he gave a speech at the Vancouver Board of Trade which called out businesses that pursue specific policy outcomes by relying on access to government insiders through lobbyists, while failing to build support for those policies at the grassroots level of their employees, partners, and local communities.

His May 3 piece builds on, and significantly sharpens, this theme. The core of his thesis is that Canadian businesses end up with government policies they find problematic because they are not spending personal and political capital to shape public opinion. Their efforts focus on access-style lobbying rather than a genuine effort to build support among Canadians.

Some have accused Poilievre and his party of being "populists" in this current political moment and may try to view this message to business through that lens. But it should not be missed that Poilievre cites the 1988 public debate over free trade as a precedent for a better approach by business stakeholders. Arguments in favour of free trade are hardly the stuff of populism and point to the heart of Poilievre's message: that business leaders and stakeholders must get "back to basics," that Ottawa will move as Canadians move, and that asking Ottawa to make policy changes without accounting for the public support of Canadians will ultimately lead to failure.

While Poilievre is leading in the polls, Canada's next federal election is 18 months away – the equivalent of a lifetime in politics. Nonetheless, Poilievre's message to business is

an important reminder of the critical importance of your approach to, and connection with, Canadians and a reminder to prepare for the strong possibility that he is the next Prime Minister. The best time to evaluate your foundation is now – regardless of which voting decision Canadians might reach in 18 months' time.

Poilievre's message – in his speech to the Vancouver Board of Trade, the National Post op-ed, and in other forums surely to come – has high-level implications for businesses and stakeholders.

FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Understand your connection with your relevant constituencies (e.g. staff/employees; local communities; suppliers and partners; etc.) and with Canadians. To "carry your own water" with Ottawa, you first need a clear picture of how your business – and industry – is standing with the people around you, and with Canadians generally.
2. Align your messages with what matters to stakeholders. If people cannot understand or come to support what you are seeking, you will have a problem.
3. If something you want doesn't matter to Canadians, it's on you to make it matter.

4. A long-term effort brings the best outcome. Public opinion changes, and our political moment has a way of making these shifts feel permanent when they happen; but durable public support is built in a careful, strategic fashion with an eye on the long-term trend, not short-term volatility.
5. Staying silent does not keep you out of the debate. If you have a stake in the direction a policy is taking, you need to decide if you will speak up, clearly and directly, and reach the right audience.

DIRECTORS AND CANADA'S EVOLVING STAKEHOLDER ECONOMY

If you are a Director, consider that the key takeaways outlined above will require a different way of thinking about government engagement for many organizations – maybe even yours. Government engagement cannot be siloed, or be an after-

thought; instead, how an organization operates, communicates, and advocates must be integrated and aligned.

Directors should consider how they see their own company positioned in this context. Are you prepared to challenge the CEO and management on their current government and stakeholder relations strategies and operations? Does your organization have a clear-eyed view of where you enjoy the support of your stakeholders – internal and external – or is this a blind spot? If a merger or acquisition is being considered, can the organization speak about it beyond the terms of what it means for your shareholders, and articulate what it means for your employees, your customers and for Canadians? Have siloes been allowed to build up between government relations, investor relations, and the communications and public engagement functions within your organization? How confident are the board and management in assessing stakeholder senti-

ment and evaluating plans to nudge that sentiment in a direction that advances your broader goals?

If changes are needed, ensure they are a matter of calibration and not over-correction. A public campaign will not suddenly become the answer to every public policy challenge. Communications should not drive strategy or policy. It will still be important for key figures in Ottawa to have open, constructive links with your company, particularly in matters where your organization's interests and operations intersect with areas of significant public interest or regulation.

FGS Longview has the team with the skills and experience to help you evaluate your organization's position in the evolving stakeholder economy in Canada and around the globe, and develop it strategically for the long term.

We would love to speak with you about this – don't hesitate to get in touch.

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We support our clients across all aspects of strategic communications – including corporate strategy & reputation; crisis & issues management; government affairs, policy & advocacy; and transaction & financial communications.

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