

Pierre Poilievre revives the war on drugs

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Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre speaks to the media during a press conference in Montreal, on July 12 - Christinne Muschi/The Canadian Press

In 2021, ahead of the federal election, the Conservatives under then-leader Erin O’Toole eased back on some longstanding positions. Among the moves was a more thoughtful and nuanced stand on drug addiction.

During Stephen Harper’s decade in power, the Conservatives maintained a war-on-drugs approach to the challenges of addiction and fought against the provision of the life-saving services at Vancouver-based Insite, a supervised drug consumption site. Mr. Harper [lost that case](#) 9-0 at the Supreme Court in 2011. This space [at the time](#) declared the decision constituted “a victory for common sense over a mindless and arbitrary ‘war on drugs.’”

By the time Mr. O’Toole was in charge, seeking to appeal to more voters, the party’s 2021 platform expressed empathy. “The last thing that those suffering from addiction should have to worry about is being arrested,” the platform said. The party said its goal was “the reduction of harm and promotion

of recovery.” The Conservatives promised a focus on treatment, investing \$325-million over three years to create 1,000 beds across Canada. (The Liberals in 2021 promised \$500-million for treatment but in federal budgets since have not delivered.)

Last Friday, with the Conservatives well ahead in the polls, Leader Pierre Poilievre [announced a return](#) to the harsher approach forged by his former boss. Using his usual inflammatory rhetoric – calling Liberals and other perceived opponents “wacko” and “radical” – Mr. Poilievre said he would cut all funding to supervised drug consumption sites and close those that “endanger the public.” And, perhaps no surprise, Mr. Poilievre tried to brand the health care facilities as “drug dens” in [his attempt](#) to fire up a political wedge issue – at the potential cost of Canadians’ lives.

The [facts are this](#), even if the Opposition Leader is likely to dismiss data coming from experts he disagrees with: from the start of 2017 through the end of 2023, Health Canada reports that drug consumption sites received 4.6-million visits, from about 414,000 people. There were 55,693 overdoses. None were fatal, because professional medical aid was on hand. The sites also handed out almost 500,000 referrals to other health or social services.

It is true there are challenges around some of the locations of supervised drug consumption sites. Mr. Poilievre staged his Friday news conference in Montreal near one. There have been similar issues in Toronto, Calgary and elsewhere. More can and should be done in the oversight of such facilities, to ensure issues such as needle debris are addressed. They must adhere to the highest standards. But the cases are [sometimes exaggerated](#). When there was controversy over a site in central Calgary, it was shown that crime in the immediate area and in the downtown area were the same.

In the 2011 Supreme Court ruling on supervised consumption, the unanimous decision found that the Harper government had violated the Charter and “contravened the principles of fundamental justice” as it put the health and lives of drug users in peril. But Mr. Poilievre is right the ruling came with a limit: that drug consumption sites are permissible if there is “little or no evidence that it will have a negative impact on public safety.”

Mr. Poilievre, however, appears to be ready to use those words as a sweeping prohibition. “They’re drug dens – and they’ve made everything worse,” he claimed on Friday.

He further said, absurdly, that health officials have “caused” the increase in overdose deaths in Vancouver, and he also asserted, equally absurdly, that there is an “industry of bureaucrats, lobbyists and activists who profit from the misery of people with an addiction and who want to perpetuate it.”

The Conservatives are a long way from Mr. O’Toole in 2021. Mr. Poilievre seems focused on resurrecting the Harper-era approach. That agenda has been repudiated, in the courts and also by its former backers. Benjamin Perrin, a UBC law professor, was a special adviser on legal affairs and policy to Mr. Harper in 2012-13 and, like the prime minister, was strongly against supervised consumption sites. Mr. Perrin has since said his [views back then](#) were “a deadly cocktail of ignorance and ideology that cost people their lives.”

The challenges of drug addiction are daunting. There is no one clear answer. Treatment is everyone’s goal – but it is a deadly mistake to forsake other health care services that help drug users stay alive so they can seek treatment.