

Hashtag Politics: “Brand Trudeau” Wins a Second Term

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Region: [Canada](#)

Theme: [History](#)

“Brand Trudeau is: ‘Welcome to the new politics, just like the old politics.’” – Shachi Kurl, Angus Reid Institute, [The Guardian](#), Aug 22, 2019

Few politicians come across more as products of hashtag committee management than Justin Trudeau. His image has been doctored, massaged and spruced, and even then, the Instagram-Twitter committee did not quite see those corrupt influences that are bound to tarnish someone who believes in endless, indestructible parliamentary majorities. The image can do much, but not that much.

After being elected in October, 2015, Trudeaumania became something of a syndrome, helped along by a persistent dedication to being in the permanent social media cycle. The photo-op became staple, as is a certain shallowness that lends itself to it. In picking Canada’s first gender-balanced federal cabinet, he was mindful of the optical moment. Change was coming, and his revolution would be tweeted.

In a fast spinning, whirling age of disseminated images, lacking substance helps and acts as a powerful propulsion. The Internet, [observed](#) Eric Andrew-Gee in 2016, “has given still photos a pride of place in our media culture that they haven’t enjoyed since the rise of television. Mr Trudeau has used that power, and that technology, to the hilt. He is the first prime minister of the Instagram age.”

In July 2016, [it was noted](#) that Trudeau “has had about one official photo-op for every weekday he has been in the business of governing.” Marie-Danielle Smith of the *National Post* [considered](#) him “the most visible Canadian leader since his father, Pierre” having “participated in at least 168 public events since swearing in his cabinet last November.”

Trudeau the Brand has been in business for some time. It came to the fore in the now famed charity boxing match in March 2012 against Patrick “Brass Knuckles” Brazeau, second-degree black belt in karate and former navy reservist. The Liberal MP for Papineau seemingly did not stand a chance. Nor did the Liberal Party, having been wiped by the Conservatives. Trudeau, after absorbing the initial barrage of punches, won.

In a [film](#) on the encounter by Eric Ruel and Guylaine Maroist, Trudeau [suggested](#) that “the power of symbols in today’s world” should never been underestimated. The Liberals were weak in parliament. “We’ve never had so few MPs. The Conservatives have all the money and the support. So... wouldn’t it be fun to see Justin Trudeau win? A triumph over the all-powerful Conservatives?”

In 2017, Trudeau [would tell](#) *Rolling Stone* that the choice of opponent in the boxing bout was entirely conscious, giving the impression that the whole affair, from start to finish, had been

an exercise of eager manipulation. “I wanted someone who would be a good foil, and we stumbled across the scrappy, tough-guy senator from an Indigenous community... I saw it as the right kind of narrative, the right story to tell.” Very British New Labour; very Old Third Way.

The Canadian elections have returned Trudeau to Ottawa, but with a reduced vote. The sheen has come off, and the coat seems somewhat tattered. Trudeau was found by Canada’s ethics watchdog to have violated conflict of interest laws in pressuring his attorney general to avoid a criminal prosecution of SNC-Lavalin for bribes made to Libyan officials between 2001 and 2011. As the ethics commissioner, Mario Dion, [found](#), Trudeau “contravened section 9 of the Conflict of Interest Act”, being the only public official “able to exert influence over the attorney-general in her decision whether to intervene in a matter relating to a criminal prosecution”.

Then came the other side of branding and e-marketing political candidates. What goes around in image terms will come around. If you pontificate about the evils of toxic masculinity, be wary of what skeletal remains the historical cupboard is stocked with. And so it transpired that a younger Trudeau was prone to don “blackface” and “brownface” pose, less in terms of toxicity than being intoxicated by moment and situation. (Those few mishaps [included](#) singing Harry Belafonte’s *Day-O* at a high school revue, and sporting an Afro wig, black face and body paint in the company of fellow white water rafters.) A public apology followed: “It was something that I didn’t think was racist at the time, but now I recognise it was something racist to do, and I am deeply sorry.”

As it wore on, the nodding suggestion of Trudeau’s time in office was a return to what had been dubbed in Canadian political circles the Laurentian Consensus, the elite self-absorbed view of those in Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal and cities along the St. Lawrence River. As John Ibbitson of *The Globe and Mail* [described it](#) in 2011, “On all the great issues of the day, this Laurentian elite debated among themselves, reached a consensus and implemented that consensus. In short, they governed the country.”

Nor could Trudeau claim to be vastly different from his 2015 conservative opponent, Stephen Harper, certainly on the subjects of Canada-US ties, free trade and the Keystone XL pipeline. Trudeau might have excited millennials on the subject of legalising cannabis, or opening doors to Syrian refugees, but he caused suitable irritation, even fury, over [breaking](#) a campaign promise to end “first-past-the-post” federal voting. The Afghan Canadian Liberal MP, Maryam Monsef, was saddled with the task of gradually strangling electoral reform in the crib.

Trudeau also revealed, in his government’s purchase of the Trans Mountain Pipeline for some \$3.4 billion from Kinder Morgan, that he was more than willing to back fossil-fuel infrastructure while proclaiming green credentials. As Martin Lukacs [noted](#) with devastating precision, despite Trudeau signing the Paris Climate Accords in 2016, “the gap between Canada’s official carbon reduction targets and its spiralling emissions has grown wider.”

The record, then, is not only patchy, but abysmal for this particular cardboard progressive. Oil companies have been guaranteed continuing subsidies, organised labour has been confronted with attempts to [outlaw strike action](#), notably in the postal sector, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been assured arms sales even as Trudeau celebrates Womankind.

Fighting an Instagram prime minister might have required some marrow, but the Conservatives' Andrew Scheer was not going to provide it. He did win more votes than the Liberals and dominated in Alberta and Saskatchewan, but this merely served to eliminate Trudeau's majority and [highlight](#) a chronic sense of Western alienation. Nor did Jagmeet Singh's NDP, whose caucus was reduced by half, roar with any success. The Bloc Québécois buzzed, the Greens were a preserving stutter and the People's Party barely registered.

Scheer decided to play the card of ordinariness, and stayed, for the most part, ordinary. When supporters chanted the old Donald Trump expression of [locking up the opponent](#) – in this case, Trudeau – he doused the flames, favouring the chant of "Vote him out." A judicial inquiry would be preferable. The politics of blandness.

Canadian political strategists were even noting a certain similarity between Scheer's views and those of the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, whose tactics [he is said](#) to have embraced. But Canadians were left with the spectre of considerable vacuity. As Jonathan Kay [argued](#) this month in *Foreign Policy*, the big issues had been settled if not avoided altogether, leaving the ground on hashtag wars to be fought with mind numbing emptiness.

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