

Trudeau and his team are in office, but not in power

There is too much posing and pandering and not enough innovative policy. Canada yearns for leadership that will make it an envied and admired nation

by Conrad Black



This election campaign in Canada often seems dull, vapid, but civilized, and as the late finance minister Jim Flaherty said of his last budget, "Boring is good," up to a point. It is largely, and more than most federal elections, a contest between attitudes and styles of the main party leaders. It has been my privilege to know the past 12 prime ministers (there have only been 23), starting with Louis St. Laurent, though with a couple of them there was little more than a couple of exchanges of pleasantries. A few of them were unremitting and charmless, unusual in politicians, and with a couple I had rather acerbic public disagreements (though that does not

influence my consideration of them historically). John Turner and Brian Mulroney have been close and valued friends for more than 50 years. Justin Trudeau and Andrew Scheer (I've known most of the opposition leaders over that time, too) are among the most amiable and naturally likeable party leaders I have met. I have my policy differences with Trudeau, and am disconcerted by some of the things he has said and done, but I will not join the ranks of those who profess dislike for him. He sincerely likes most people, genuinely has a good and charitable nature, and is as attractive a personality as he generally seems. Andrew Scheer is more reserved and is unglamorous, but he is an exquisite example of the thoughtful, reliable, intelligent Canadian: a man of convictions and tolerance, not always an easy combination to maintain. He reminds us, by example, that to be undemonstrative is not to be shallow, and to have principles is not to be prudish or narrow-minded.

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Trudeau performed a remarkable feat in bringing the Liberal party from a distant third-place party with barely 30 seats to an absolute majority government in a couple of years; it is the only time in Canadian federal history that a party has jumped from third to government in one election. (Mike Harris did that in Ontario, but it had not happened federally.) It was a bonus that in doing that he smashed the aberrant NDP hold in Quebec and obliterated the sleazy Jack Layton-Thomas Mulcair promise that Quebec could remain in Canada while outlawing the English language within its borders. It absolutely will not do to claim that Trudeau is an idiot; he has maintained a tight ship in his caucus, and some of his predecessors did not, and his aptitudes as a public personality are what most politicians dream of having. Stylistically, he has enlivened the dowdy image of the

country, somewhat as his father did, but without the intellectual aspect. Nor is it remotely fair to portray Scheer as a dullard in ill-fitting suits with a dimpled face, behind which there lurks a medieval bead-rattling Roman Catholic swaying on his knees asking the Almighty to strike down gays and pro-choice agnostics. These are caricatures. Good caricatures have some truth to them and that is why they are effective. These are bad caricatures.

Unfortunately, Trudeau's government has a shallow record. Almost the entire policy agenda has been native rights, the elevation of feminism and other gender issues, and environment. I will address these issues in the next two weeks. The fiscal policy has been completely irresponsible, without even the customary lip-service and window-dressing for deficit management, in a country that previously ran 14 consecutive budget surpluses under governments of both major parties. The least acquaintance with the history of Canada and its relations with the United States reveals the dangers of having all income tax brackets in this country substantially above those in the United States, and now we have steeply falling foreign investment in Canada: an 80 per cent decline in five years, and a tripling in the same time of Canadian-generated capital resources being reinvested outside this country. To deal with it we have a government that officially pretends it isn't happening. Unless Trudeau is going to lead us back to the Club of Rome his father flirted with and the theory that economic growth is a bad thing and that what we need is a more equitable distribution of the wealth we have in a zero-sum game (a recipe for economic stagnation and political suicide), a course correction is necessary. The present government gives no hint of any such thing. It is not only to prevent all our money decamping to the United States that we need a course correction; it is a good idea for positive reasons. The only way for Canada to gain the recognition for good government and a workable, civilized society that we rightly aspire to is to attract the capital

and the confidence and admiration of others.

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There is no reason to doubt Trudeau's sincerity in being a globalist – a person happy to share Canada's wealth with less fortunate countries and their emigrants, eager to be their representative on the United Nations Security Council, who believes in the post-nationalist state he speaks of, and illustrates his strongly held universalist beliefs by renaming what was the department of external affairs, and then of foreign affairs, to be the department of global affairs. Symbolism is insubstantial, but indicative. That is the problem, in a phrase, of this regime: it is full of symbols indicative of well-meaning policies that are failing. It is a government of no ideas but an irritating and oppressive attention to the Sisyphean (and undesirable) goal of reducing all mankind to one inclusive sex, one supra-nationality, no religion but a unanimity of trite good intentions, to make a country that has been relatively indistinct to the world anyway, become completely indistinct, on the theory that this is the future. Unemployment is low because of the roaring boom generated by the giant ogre to the south, but Canada's own job creation and capital formation are following the prime minister's love of globalism by going, people and money, to places where talent and effort are better rewarded. Those who accuse the prime minister and his government of having no direction are unjust. But those who fear it is the wrong direction are not.

The government is relying on the legendary gamesmanship of the Liberal party to keep it in place, as it has governed in Ottawa for 84 of the 123 years since the rise of Wilfrid Laurier in 1896, the most successful record of any party in a large democratic country over that time. But that was mainly

because of its mastery of the complicated relationship of Quebec with Canada prior to the Mulroney Conservative era. Quebec's status is not a burning issue now and the Liberals don't have a monopoly of insight into it. The Liberals would make a virtue of their leader's belief in abstract niceness and inoffensiveness, but that is not a policy, not a program, and not really government. Given the India-costuming fiasco, the SNC-Lavalin illegalities, the malicious persecution of the vice chief of the defence staff (Vice-Admiral Mark Norman), and the Aladdin blackface fiasco, they don't look like the team that could make "nice" work anyway, and most people recognize that nice is good, but not in an unlimited (and false) deluge. And it doesn't suffice. There is too much posing and pandering and faddish platitudes and not enough innovative policy. Canada yearns for the kind of leadership that will make it an envied and admired nation, and our standard of living is falling steadily behind Australia and even the natural resource-less Netherlands and Denmark. In the sense of providing government, unlike Pearson, Pierre Trudeau, Mulroney, Chrétien-Martin and Harper, Justin Trudeau and his largely nondescript team are in office but not in power.

As space is exhausted, barring the intervention of world-shaking events, I will try to assess the alternative party next week.

Note: Professional courtesy requires me to say a word about last week's column. The editorial from the Globe and Mail that I criticized was sent to me by a friend in a way that inadvertently made it seem it was an editorial from the newspaper's editors and not a signed opinion piece by Lawrence Martin. The NP editors rightly inserted Lawrence's name in my column. Had I known Lawrence was the author, I would have been less gratuitous in my opening description of his piece, though I would not have altered the opinions I then expressed or omitted the facts supporting them. I have known Lawrence Martin reasonably cordially for 40 years. I think he has been

brain-washed by the Trump-hating media in Washington and that he has a problem understanding the appeal of conservative politicians as he did with Ronald Reagan. But he has many fine qualities, has done much good work, and I apologize to him for my excessive severity.

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