

## **Justin Time for the Liberals**

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Justin Trudeau has declared his candidacy for the leadership of a party has been desperately seeking a saviour for years. As one leader after another has failed to connect with Canadian voters, many Liberals have longed for "a new Trudeau." But like characters in a careful-what-you-wish-for fable, some are now unnerved by the fact that their wish has been granted so literally.

Most critics of Trudeau's candidacy complain that he lacks the gravitas and experience to lead the country. Some have warned that, aside from a few feel-good bromides, Trudeau's policy positions are either concealed or unformed or both. (Some have quipped that Trudeau 2.0 is shiny but perhaps not bright.)

But if young people and others are attracted to Trudeau, it is not because they support a slate of nitty-gritty policy positions; it is because they like his style and find his sensibility refreshing. Although some will argue that good vibes are insufficient credentials for national leadership, we might remember that a new tone and a feeling of generational change have been powerful motivators before. The name Kennedy comes to mind. The name Trudeau (the other one) also comes to mind. (A few years ago an Environics survey asked Canadians to name the person they admired most. Pierre Trudeau came out on top.)

Recent polls on support for a Justin-led Liberal party in the next election will obviously not be predictive. But as of this month nearly four in ten Canadians (39%) say they would vote Liberal if Trudeau were at the helm--so it's worth at least asking what it is about this man that appeals to so many.

When we look at the values of "post-Boomers," (Canadians born after 1965) we find a strong spirit of openness: openness to change, to others, to risk, to the rest of the world. Younger Canadians are at ease with complexity and diversity, enthusiastic about technology, and less risk-averse than their older compatriots. Notably, although this cohort is generally confident and not fearful (they are below average on fear of crime and fear of social difference) one thing does keep them up at night: the sense that we are careening toward ecological disaster.

The sensibility the current government embodies is an awkward fit with this profile. The government trumpets Canada's military and colonial history, asking young people to draw pride not from cool global cities or a vibrant cultural sector, but from Vimy Ridge and the War of 1812.

Like many governments, ours is all for technology that helps business but has been cool to those interested in protecting individuals' online freedom and privacy. It has also gone on the offensive against those who share young people's environmental concerns.

Although the government has studiously avoided xenophobia, its orientation to multicultural Canada has been largely tactical, with targeted riding-by-riding appeals and a shift in emphasis from welcoming new citizens to plunking temporary foreign workers into gaps in the labour market. For young people with friends from all over the world, a less self-serving and more generous attitude of openness, friendliness, curiosity, and welcome (including for refugees) may resonate.

Although post-Boomers do score high on the value Government Involvement, favouring a role for government in tackling society's challenges, I don't think youth values show a hunger to return to big-government activist liberalism in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Still, young people would probably welcome at least a serious discussion about the government's role in educating people for the information economy—assuming we Boomers can spare a few minutes from our incessant harping about pensions and health care.

Some will say that the youthful sensibility I am describing is too gauzy to run on, and that in any case young people are disengaged and unlikely to vote. Maybe. Time will tell whether the young(ish) Mr. Trudeau—an outline of a candidate who has yet to be coloured in—can draw post-Boomer cohorts to the ballot box by distancing himself from the traditional left-versus-right and regional and linguistic cleavages of Canadian politics, and whether he can stake out some appealing common ground by simply embodying what Canadian politics might feel like in the 21st century. (Most Canadians (58%) say they like politicians who seek compromise.)

A new Canada is emerging whether our politicians appeal to it or not. It is largely the Canada of cities and suburbs—not just Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver and their vast multicultural suburbs, but Naheed Nenshi's Calgary and others. It includes five provinces with female premiers, including an Alberta that recently rejected a right turn with Wildrose in favour of old-fashioned Progressive Conservatism. It also includes Quebec, whose social liberalism, joie de vivre, and passion for culture have a way of asserting themselves politically in unpredictable ways.

The opportunity is there. The question is whether Trudeau can add to his sizzle of generational change enough steak to get people to the polls—and to pin their hopes for the future on the struggling group formerly known as Canada's natural governing party.

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