



Justin Trudeau with his son Xavier James at the launch of his leadership campaign in Montreal last October 3. Where his father Pierre Trudeau had been a top-down politician, Justin's grassroots style is very much bottom-up. Photo: Montreal Gazette.

The Two Trudeaus: Passing the Torch

Patrick Gossage

From the moment Justin Trudeau first articulated his political ambitions, the comparisons were inevitable: Did he have the intellectual heft of his formidable father? Would he see the country and his relationship with its voters through the same – often ambivalent – lens? Some of the differences are generational and some personal, observes Gossage. But don't measure the son against the father we said goodbye to, he cautions; compare him with the Pierre Trudeau Canada first got to know in 1968.

Having worked with former prime minister Pierre Trudeau as his press secretary in the late 1970s and early 1980s and being now somewhat involved in his son Justin's political ascent, I feel I can legitimately compare the two.

There are substantial differences in the political strategies of the two men, although they share a dedication to the classic Liberal values of equality of opportunity for all citizens, and a belief in pragmatic, non-ideological, evidence-based solutions to Canada's social and economic challenges.

They contrast most markedly in leadership styles. Pierre Trudeau was a classic top-down leader with a commanding presence, a big intellect, and usually a clear and forthright portfolio of policies. He was no grassroots politician. Nor did he seek consensus on areas in which he knew he was right – notably Quebec and the Constitution. By contrast, his son is a natural bottom-up politician, open to new ideas, with the skills of a community organizer.

They entered public life with very different experiences. Pierre was formed as a public intellectual when he ran for the Liberal leadership in 1968. He had launched his "Just Society", and was seized with bringing Quebec and the French fact into the Canadian mainstream, a mission he only partly fulfilled.

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Justin may lack a personal national mission. But his political strategy is anything but telling Canadians what they should be concerned about. Instead, he embraces a more contemporary strategy – throwing out a few big ideas (on the economy and education, for instance) then launching a dialogue and actually incorporating the ideas of Canadians. This is one mark of the generational change he has launched in Canadian politics.

The elder Trudeau would not have been comfortable with such an approach, and it is certainly the polar opposite of the way the current government leads. Actually launching a democratic conversation with the party and the wider electorate seems foreign to the Ottawa chattering classes, too. What could this conversation about policy be about? Well, 25,000 people a day punch into Justin's "Soapbox" website policy platform to endorse the approach.

Pierre Trudeau communicated through traditional media in his leadership campaign because journalists and cameras couldn't resist his charismatic appeal. Justin gets front page coverage wherever he goes in the country, but the media don't know how to interpret his natural charisma. He underpins this appeal through social media and his website. He "Tweets", often several times daily, to keep in touch with his almost 160,000 followers. As Thomas Walkom noted in the *Toronto Star*: "He has mastered the Internet's youthful style, employing the air of spontaneous intimacy that convention demands..."

Justin's formation was more down-to-earth and modest than his father's. In any case, it would be impossible today to match the intellectual ferment of Quebec society in full self-liberation that his dad experienced. Justin attended McGill, taught at a private school in British Columbia and did graduate work in environmental geography. His admirable grassroots skills seemed to emerge full blown when, in 2008, he accomplished a political feat his father could not have and did not. He was not handed a seat in Parliament, but got there through hard campaigning. First, he won a competitive Liberal nomination, and later defeated a popu-

lar Bloc incumbent in the working class East End Montreal riding of Papineau, where his name was, if anything, a detriment. Then, in 2011, when the Liberals were reduced to a rump of seven seats in Quebec, he survived the party's flameout.

Some observers have gone so far as to credit his remarkable political acumen to his mother's side of the family. As one organizer told the *Globe and Mail*: "Justin's B.C., Scottish-Canadian, James Sinclair (his grandfather) roots are clearly demonstrated in his activities as an MP in Papineau, his hard work on the ground, his ability to organize, pull together a team and, frankly, to win and then hold a riding in the most difficult election that the Liberal Party has ever faced."

In every sense Justin is a new, thoroughly modern Trudeau. Not bored by pressing the flesh as his father was, but galvanized by meeting ordinary Canadians, the more the better. Not dragged to local political events like his dad, but the master of them, and the master of the rousing stump speech – without notes, and without a phalanx of speechwriters.

I asked my old friend Craig Oliver, the dean of the Parliamentary Press Gallery, to share some thoughts on the two Trudeaus from the point of view of a veteran journalist who knew the father well and is a keen observer of the son. He wrote:

It should surprise no one that father and son are different people. At least in part because of the famous name, Justin has the same magnetism as his father. He turns on a crowd and is the centerpiece of every room he enters. But there is an open question about whether he shares the same gravitas. He is less remote and more approachable with a casual charm which did not come easily to Pierre. Does he inherit the ability to focus intently on an issue and frame it in an intellectual concept that is persuasive with voters? Nor is it clear whether he has the judgment, as his father did, to surround himself with the brightest people around and know the difference between bad and good advice. If he is only Pierre Light it will be a long fall for the son.

Oliver reflects accurately a constant refrain from the media about Justin's leadership ambitions: "What does he



Working the crowd, Trudeau clearly enjoys retail politics in a way his father never did. Photo: Adam Scotti.

stand for"? Do we really believe there can be a kind of "action plan" approach to leadership today? Justin's positive politics and moderate, pragmatic approach to policy could serve him well when the time comes.

Also, it is surely fairer to compare Justin with his father when he entered his own leadership, not with the Trudeau of the 1980s. Look more clearly at where his father was in 1968. After all, a long and hard fought 14 years separates the Just Society of his Leadership Campaign from the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* of 1982. During Pierre Trudeau's own leadership campaign, he was criticized for standing for very little.

Justin has set out some major themes. He has said that a Liberal Party led by him would make its top priority to have Canada be the best educated country on Earth. He has said this is his goal because education is the key to progress for the middle class. To put a fine point on his argument, he has proposed a national goal whereby 70 percent of Canadians would achieve post-secondary education. Interestingly, a more activist federal role in post-secondary education was an unfulfilled dream of his father's.

What is and was seen as a triumph of charisma in both their cases will, with Justin as with his father, morph into a more rounded appreciation of a leadership of sustained values and dedication to nation building policies.

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