



# In Trudeau, Canadians See a Nice Reflection

But concern grows that the new prime minister cannot deliver on his promises.

By Randi Druzin Contributor Jan. 25, 2016, at 8:00 a.m.

**TORONTO** – **LESS THAN TWO** months after taking office, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau appeared at Toronto Pearson International Airport to welcome some Syrian refugees. The image of the dashing young leader, son of one of the most influential prime ministers in [Canadian history](#), presenting a toddler with a pink winter coat took flight and landed on countless media websites, Facebook pages and Twitter posts around the world. It made a big impression at home, too.

"Doesn't it just feel different to be Canadian now?" a Toronto woman wrote on Facebook the following week, adding that her "happiness level [had] gone up significantly" since Trudeau was elected.

There is no denying that millions of Canadians are enamored with their new prime minister. As 2016 began, Trudeau enjoyed [a public approval rating of more than 60 percent](#), stirring memories seven years earlier when Barack Obama's election to the White House raised hopes among many Americans of a [more positive U.S. image to be projected abroad](#). Trudeau, however, faces the sober realities of delivering on numerous campaign promises, including welcoming thousands of refugees, legalizing marijuana, reforming the voting system and examining the treatment of the country's indigenous people.

Trudeau and his Liberal Party won last October's general election in a landslide, bouncing back from a mediocre start in the longest Canadian campaign since the Victorian age (11 weeks) and withstanding attacks ads that claimed the 43-year-old "just [wasn't] ready" to lead.

Many pundits attributed his success to voters' antipathy toward the incumbent prime minister. Stephen Harper had led the country for nine years but by last fall he and his Conservative Party were suffering the cumulative effect of several political scandals and controversial policy decisions.

Harper's stance that the niqab, a veil worn by some Muslim women, should be banned at citizenship ceremonies offended many Canadians, who pride themselves on living in an open, welcoming society. (In 1988, the federal government enacted a law intended to preserve and enhance multiculturalism in Canada.)

Harper's decision to give the United Nations the cold shoulder – he criticized the international body for "trying to court every dictator with a vote" and "just going along with every emerging international consensus, no matter how self-evidently wrongheaded" – and to voice unequivocal support for [Israeli](#) leader Benjamin Netanyahu also rankled voters. For much of Canada's 148-year

history, its governments have embraced multilateralism, building consensus and promoting cooperation on the world stage.

Harper's demeanor also grated on some voters. National newspaper columnist Margaret Wente described him as "sour, dour, dictatorial, mean and secretive. Forget loveable," she wrote in The Globe and Mail two days before the election. "He's not even likeable."

With charisma and apparent openness, Trudeau – whose father, Pierre, helped implement official bilingualism and establish the Charter of Rights and Freedoms – presents a stark contrast to Harper. His upbeat message, an echo of the "sunny ways" platform of Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier in 1896, was widely regarded as a breath of fresh air. Trudeau cut a dashing figure at the World Economic Forum's meeting in Davos, Switzerland, on Wednesday, where he was seen hobnobbing with Hollywood royalty Kevin Spacey and Leonardo DiCaprio and Irish rock legend Bono.

But political pundits warn that Trudeau may have promised too much to too many.

At last November's climate change conference in Paris, the prime minister told delegates that "Canada is back" and [concerned about the climate](#) once again. (Harper had cut environmental programs.) Trudeau praised the pact to keep global warming increases to below 2 degrees Celsius.

At home, Trudeau hopes to reduce emissions to more than 30 percent below 2005 levels within 15 years. He plans to meet with the premiers of the country's 13 provinces and territories this year to develop a national climate strategy. But the provinces and territories, spread across a vast and diverse geographical landscape, have their own climate change policies based on their respective needs and priorities. Getting them "singing from the same songbook," as one observer put it, will be difficult at best.

Trudeau also hopes to placate voters who are uncomfortable with Canadian troops taking part in the war against the Islamic State group. Aware that many Canadians value their country's traditional role as a nation that [negotiates without threat of force or coercion](#), Trudeau has promised to withdraw the six Canadian fighter jets now participating in coalition airstrikes.

Observers note that Trudeau also has vowed to expand Canada's involvement in training allies in the region – which means there will be fewer Canadian pilots in the air but likely more boots on the ground. Such a move would heighten Canada's involvement in the war.

"This talk about pulling out the jets is mere fluff," says Nelson Wiseman, a political science professor at the University of Toronto. "Canada is going to increase its commitment to this mission. I have no doubt about it."

Paul Heinbecker, a former Canadian ambassador to the U.N. and Germany and now with the Centre for International Governance Innovation, the Balsillie School and Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, sees the focus on the jets as a "symbolic gesture."

Just like other leaders, Trudeau is finding that the issue of refugees poses a challenge. Initially, the prime minister said Canada would accept 25,000 Syrian refugees through immediate sponsorship. Two weeks before Trudeau greeted the first arrivals in Toronto, his government announced that Canada would take in 10,000 refugees by the end of year, 8,000 of whom would be sponsored privately.

Days before Christmas, however, the government acknowledged it would not reach the 10,000-person mark by year's end – just 1,100 refugees had arrived in Canada by mid-December – which has been raising questions about Trudeau's promise to accept an additional 15,000 refugees by the end of February.

## 'He has set the bar too high'

Trudeau's emphasis on [compassion and caring](#) extends to Canada's indigenous peoples, a community, the Canadian Human Rights Commission has stated, is "disadvantaged in terms of education, employment and access to basic needs such as water, food and housing."

He recently announced his government would launch a public inquiry into the nearly 1,200 indigenous women who were murdered or went missing between 1980 and 2012. The number of aboriginal women – the government uses the word aboriginal – who die is disproportionately high when compared to Canada's other ethnic groups, according to Statistics Canada.

Trudeau has also promised to enact all the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which last June wrapped up a seven-year investigation into the abuse some 150,000 aboriginal children suffered at residential schools – government-sponsored institutions whose mandate was to assimilate these children into Euro-Canadian culture. They operated from the 1880s until 1996.

Many of the commission's 94 recommendations would be impossible for the federal government to implement on its own because it lacks the jurisdiction. And there is concern that – at a time that the Canadian economy has been hit hard by the falling price of oil and other commodities – Ottawa lacks the money to pay for all of the recommendations.

"Trudeau has made big promises in this area," says Jim Farney, an associate political science professor at the University of Regina. "He has set the bar too high and set himself up to fail." Still, Farney adds, Trudeau has changed the government's tone toward the country's indigenous population to a friendlier one.

Trudeau's approval ratings will inevitably fall. Still, Heinbecker, the former diplomat, says Canadians probably won't regret electing him. "I think we're going to be seen as [a very successful country](#) in the years to come and one of the standard-bearers of liberal values."