

“Justin Trudeau’s narcissism reveals Canada’s divisions”

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Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s official trip to India earlier this year, with its mock piety and clumsy handling of relations with a rising power of 1.2 billion people, rightly set off alarm bells in addition to a lot of ongoing jokes. A larger pattern of bizarre Trudeau behaviour is coming into focus, Canadians now realize, that’s been obscured by his progressive politics and human rights activism at home and abroad.

The asylum-seeker issue and Trudeau’s handling of Canada-U.S. relations are cases in point. Though snapshots from two years in power, each is vital to Canada’s unity and prosperity.

A Globe and Mail columnist recently argued that the Trudeau government needs to re-establish control over the border before the broad-based and all-party Canadian support for immigration is threatened by the surge in asylum-seekers from the United States.

That assumes there is a pro-immigration consensus in Canada in the first place. In fact, Trudeau’s politics have served to expose pre-existing divisions among liberal and conservative Canadians on immigration issues.

Asylum-seekers became a hot political issue after U.S. President Donald Trump moved to block migration from certain Muslim-majority countries in January 2017. Trudeau, former U.S. president Barack Obama and many Canadians objected to the travel ban. The prime minister tweeted that Canada was a tolerant, welcoming haven.

Exodus to the north begins

Soon after, asylum-seekers began flowing north in large numbers – more than 26,000 in the last 15 months while as many as 400 a day are expected to cross Canadian borders this summer – many of them saying they would have remained in the U.S. if not for Trump’s rhetoric and policies.

When that happened, Liberal government ministers started emphasizing Canada’s tough and selective admission process.

Why the tricks? Because many Canadians are conservative enough that they apparently do not support the open-ended invitation that many assumed was contained in Trudeau’s tweet.

Once people began crossing the border illegally, it became clear that Trudeau’s politics on asylum-seekers was yet another type of shallow conceit that saw him play dress-up in India and embarrass himself internationally for almost a week.

Read more: [Justin Trudeau's India debacle shows the pitfalls of 'nation branding'](#)

The tweet earned the progressive prime minister some global kudos, but the truth is that Canada under Trudeau failed the first time it was tested only slightly on the issue of asylum-seekers.

In fact, every effort is being made to stem the flow of asylum-seekers from coming to Canada by the federal government amid provincial complaints.

Read more: [It's time to abolish the inhumane Canada-U.S. deal on asylum-seekers](#)

Many asylum-seekers favour Quebec's long, often isolated border with the United States. But Quebec operates only four asylum-seeker shelters, 1,850 spots in total, and citing the drain on provincial resources, refuses to open more. The claim an entry point has "reached capacity" is actually a tactic, used by U.S. officials at the border with Mexico, to discourage asylum-seekers.

Quebec also wants the federal government to pay to redirect asylum-seekers in excess of provincial capacity somewhere else in Canada.

The Trudeau government is pursuing more comprehensive measures to stop asylum-seekers from coming to Canada illegally. Since last fall, Canadian officials have been talking with their U.S. counterparts about changing the Safe Third Country Agreement.

Canada wants a tougher deal

The bilateral deal, allowing asylum-seekers moving either way to be turned back, only covers official border points. So people crossing into Canada at an isolated field, for example, are not covered. Canada wants the agreement rewritten to apply to the entire border, raising this "at least a dozen" times.

In the meantime, Canadian officials have been trying to staunch the flow of border-crossers through proactive efforts. They've travelled to Nigeria, where many recent asylum-seekers are from, to discuss the issue with the Nigerian government and U.S. embassy officials.

Canada has also asked the U.S. government to tighten its visa procedures so that it does not have to greet so many asylum-seekers, arguing that migrants are merely using the U.S. as a transit point before heading to Canada.

Trudeau, however, broadcast to the world that Canada was prepared to welcome everyone.

Avoiding honouring that boast is now the government's priority on the asylum-seeker issue. It is not just about conservative voters any longer. The government risks alienating fundamentally liberal voters — people who remain committed to the progressive politics espoused in the original tweet, but who believe that there have to be rules and Canada's immigration rules must be respected and preserved.

These two segments of the electorate comprise the core of Canada's liberal-conservative political culture, and perhaps the difference between victory and defeat in federal election 2019.

Canada superior?

Trudeau's tweet also called attention Canada's distinctiveness and separateness — and actually suggested a superiority — from the United States, an unnecessary risk at the best of times. These are not the best of times.

American relations with its major trading partners have not been this bad since the early 1980s. Trump claims the U.S. is getting fleeced by its free trade pacts. He doubts multilateralism and the liberal-democratic international order that has stabilized the world since 1945. He gained the White House promising to put "America First."

So what has Trudeau been doing with an infamously thin-skinned and erratic president? He's been poking at him, including when Trump falsely asserted that the U.S. has a trade deficit with Canada.

Canadians may not like Trump, but Trudeau is responsible for protecting Canada's national interests. Far from kowtowing, which would be highly unpopular, Trudeau is going too far the other way.

It is not about going along to get along. The point is about working smoothly with the leader of a country that Canada depends upon economically. By constantly asserting Canada's distinctiveness, Trudeau is failing to do everything he can to work with the U.S. and prevent bilateral irritants from multiplying.

Now we see it's Trump's turn to emphasize the differences. He has imposed a 25 per cent tariff on steel imports and 10 per cent on aluminum, targeting "economic enemies" like China and allies like Canada.

Exempted – for now

Trump has granted temporary exemptions to Canada, Mexico and others, delaying a potential trade war while American negotiators work on extracting trade concessions. The latest extension expires on June 1.

Canada and Mexico can avoid the tariffs by agreeing to "modernize" NAFTA to suit Trump's call for a better deal for America. If not, the U.S. will apply the tariffs, citing impairment to national security. Trudeau has most recently questioned Trump's logic on the president's suggestion of auto sector tariffs.

Of course, the Canada-U.S. relationship is about far more than the leaders. But as I and others have argued elsewhere, what happens at the top is of crucial importance. The leaders set the tone, and if the U.S. president decides that he/she likes the Canadian prime

minister, then that electrifies the system and things can happen. Trudeau is not encouraging that.

And, perhaps consequently, the Americans are not co-operating with Canada. The asylum-seeker issue is worsening, and the U.S. is practically blackmailing Canada on NAFTA.

So, two years on, and we are left with a sad realization and a sobering question.

What face will Trudeau show to the country and to the world: Will it be the smiling fool, the grinning narcissist, or the self-aware, constructive and sober world leader?