



“Canada is back.” Justin Trudeau’s first weeks in office were dominated by a whirlwind of international travel. In Paris, he spoke at the COP21 Conference on Climate Change. Adam Scotti photo

# Trudeau’s Summitry Marathon —Impact Without the Pirouettes

Jeremy Kinsman

*It could have been a disaster. As every political professional and journalist knows, foreign trips are a minefield for any leader. For Justin Trudeau, the whirlwind of international summitry that immediately followed his election on October 19 might have been a baptism by fire. As it happened, the parade of world-leader bilaterals, citizen selfies and quotable quips seemed more like a multinational victory lap. Veteran diplomat Jeremy Kinsman provides a post-tour analysis.*

Two weeks after being elected, Justin Trudeau set off for the first time to a series of world summits: The G20 leaders’ meeting in Turkey, an APEC summit in the Philippines, a Commonwealth leaders’ gathering in Malta and climate talks in Paris. As Trudeau himself put it, he was “thrown into the deep end” of the foreign policy pool right at the start.

Trudeau wasn’t the international neophyte his rivals depicted during the campaign. Having visited more than 50 countries with his father before he turned 12, he had seen with young eyes the diversity of perspectives in international life. While recent years of getting

elected and parenting a young family limited outside trips to Orlando's Disney World, he came into office with a realistic sense of the world's complexity.

He had to be all ears as he headed off to meet his new peers, a kind of variation on Josef Haydn's belief he owed his accomplishments as a composer to the fact he "listened to music more than he studied it." But the whirlwind tour was about more than intake. Trudeau intended to project that "Canada is back," re-assuming its role as a constructive multilateral activist. He also meant to begin to build his international network.

Critics and the usual skeptics mentally plotted their put-down pieces, anticipating blunders and boo-boos from the guy who was "just not ready." One Conservative MP tweeted she was sickened and embarrassed by the idea of Trudeau even being on the world stage.

Underestimating newcomers on any stage is a chronic fault, often fatal in politics; ask Gorbachev about Yeltsin, Democrats about Reagan, Republicans about Clinton, or Hillary about Obama. Since the risk of being "left in the political dust" by an upstart rival's heels is never far from their preoccupations, international leaders take a professional interest in the people skills of surprise political winners from major countries. Even autocrats vaunt their own connections to "the people" to justify holding onto power, radiating charisma, in the way of benevolent tribal chieftains or patriarchal Mafia bosses. For foreigners, they turn on the charm. Looking back at my own diplomatic career, I recall Hosni Mubarak as all smiles, Hafez al-Assad as a benign sort of sage and Vladimir Putin in the 1990s as about the most reasonably-sounding Russian I knew. Long-time Ugandan dictator Yoweri Museveni provided the humour at Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings.

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natural outgoing warmth, especially in one-on-one situations, is a real asset. He is different from his father, whom he does not imitate. But he knows that Pierre Trudeau's network of like-minded leaders, whom Justin jokingly recalls as "all his 'uncles'" spanned the globe—Sweden's Olaf Palme, Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, François Mitterrand, Jimmy Carter, Aleksandr Yakovlev, and Jamaican Michael Manley. His father's key relationships were purposeful: Pierre Trudeau went sailing with Helmut Schmidt in the Baltic in 1978 and came back a convert to financial austerity. He teamed with Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and Australian PM Bob Hawke to rejuvenate the Commonwealth. California's Jerry Brown was his ally on the risks of nuclear miscalculation. Gerald Ford got Canada into the G7. Fidel Castro enabled an exit strategy from the FLQ crisis in 1970. Prime Ministers Mulroney and Jean Chrétien also developed vital personal relationships well beyond their well-known chumminess with US presidents, and through them greatly strengthened Canada's influence.

Justin Trudeau knows his father's lofty intellectual discourse could turn some others off—Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, Richard Nixon, and if not Reagan himself, people around him. He won't make the same mistake, not because he is less assertively intellectual—though he is, mercifully—but because he reads people far better than his father did.

This trip would be Justin Trudeau's investment in future relationships of consequence to his goals, starting with our neighbourhood. He knew the session with President Obama could be a game-changer for a bilateral relationship that had become barren at the top. After being up-front about a change in Canada's military contribution to the fight against ISIL,

he pledged to work with Obama for real change in the energy/carbon swirl of issues. Obama has since invited the younger man for a state visit in January, an opportunity for Trudeau to ensure the man at the top will prevent the self-involved US political process from side-swiping Canadian interests the moment the red carpet's been rolled back up.

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Trudeau widened that encouraging mutual engagement to include President Enrique Peña Nieto, who was elated at the removal of the grating visa requirement for Mexican travelers. He had a warm meeting with Angela Merkel, an extended working lunch with François Hollande, and bonded with Generation-X age-mates David Cameron of the UK and Italy's Matteo Renzi. Add new Australian PM Malcolm Turnbull and King Abdullah of Jordan—a key partner for refugee plans—and Trudeau's own network began to take shape, reinforced by colleagues at the Commonwealth Summit, and especially by the new secretary-general, Dominican-British

Patricia Scotland, who may be able to lift the organization from a long slide into marginalization.

Meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Ukraine's Petro Poroshenko were politically mandatory, while strategic interests engaged a warm Xi Jinping and a cool Putin, which was the only fractious encounter. Putin didn't welcome hearing Trudeau's opposition to Russia's action in Ukraine, or his position that sanctions remain until Russia meets its commitments on the Minsk II agreement.

Trudeau knew he could only make a first impression once, and would be tested on substance. Apart from the Paris climate change meeting, the substance in the bureaucratically prepared meeting agendas was underwhelming. The G20 has failed to break the policy logjams. But Trudeau's presentation on Canada's investment in infrastructure as a stimulus to growth won plaudits from fellow political deciders.

The meetings' real substance was driven by events.

At the G20, terrorism in Paris launched a wide-ranging discussion of the need to confront and defeat ISIL, while engaging the global refugee crisis, so aggravated by the seemingly intractable Syrian civil war. Trudeau's first reaction to the Paris outrage could have been sharper but his message of welcome for Syrian refugees was a confidence-building boost to the pull factor in the refugee dilemma, even if our situation, with the luxury of screening candidates from refugee camps, is hardly comparable to the challenges of Germany, Sweden, and others inundated by a mass exodus of millions of refugees that seems to obey a momentum and logic of its own.

The resolution of the Syrian refugee crisis demands peace in Syria. But Russia rejects the US line that "getting rid of Assad" is the answer or even a legitimate goal that complicates the outcome, given that Assad's army is also under siege from ISIL. Russia's entry into the civil war with tactical combat air support of Syrian troops has probably stalled ISIL's expansion but provokes the US because the

Russians also targeted non-ISIL opponents of their ally Bashar al-Assad. The need to align priorities and purposes certainly drove the pull-aside talks between Obama and Putin and preoccupied others.

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No one holds that the US-led air war alone can defeat ISIL. A UK analyst observed there are now "more planes in the air than there are targets available."

Nonetheless, Canadian pundits slammed Trudeau for withdrawing Canada's CF-18s from the air war while others are ramping up in the wake of the Paris attacks, though their ramps are pretty symbolic. His wasn't a snap decision. No topic received more attention in Trudeau's preparatory consultations in his foreign affairs advisory council (of which, full disclosure, I was a member). No one wanted to rain on Obama's upbeat evaluations of the airstrikes or on Canadian efforts, but our aged six CF-18s seemed statistically incidental to a military success that would have to rely on the disparate and frequently competing ground forces from Syria and Iraq, including the fairly effective Kurdish peshmurga Canadians have been training. The value of expanded training was understood by Canada's allies but Canada has to make it militarily significant. The West initially underestimated ISIL and there has

to be a Canadian contribution that meets the revised reality.

In terms of broader messaging, Canada's best international brand in my experience has been our ability to manage pluralism, which Trudeau articulated impressively, especially for the Commonwealth. Other leaders respect it because many of them are sitting on top of powder kegs of sectarian unrest.

**T**he Paris COP meeting was expected to be a watershed event, billed as the last hope for remediating the threat of climate change. Trudeau met key holdouts such as India's PM Narendra Modi. He publicly channeled his "Canada is back" commitment—Canada will reassume its abandoned vocation for constructive multilateral solutions to critical world issues, backing it up with a \$2.65 billion financial package for developing countries.

The standing ovation he received in Paris shouldn't surprise. Even national leaders looking primarily to their own interests welcome fair-minded mediation and effective multilateral agencies. Canada's withdrawal from the field had left a void in creative leadership that Trudeau has promised to fill. A US observer remarked "Trudeau is what we thought Canada was."

Back home, Canadians were encouraged by the sight of a national delegation bringing together provincial premiers and federal opposition leaders (though not the Conservatives). Moreover, Trudeau and Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard formed a single team in France, a great relief for those scarred by "les guerres triangulaires."

Given that Trudeau's message was the need for inclusivity, there was an existential symbolism in the creative and committed Canadian spirit on display. Long may it last. **P**

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