

Reboot of Trudeau 'from sunny to serious' a recognition Canadians want a serious prime minister, say politicos

'It's almost like we're seeing a new prime minister,' says Jennifer Stewart, CEO of Syntax Strategies.

Continued from page 1

ous," said Nik Nanos, chief data scientist for Nanos Research, in an interview with *The Hill Times*. "It's pretty clear that what the Liberals are trying to do is to remake Justin Trudeau, and I think this is a recognition that sunny ways might have been good in 2015. But in 2019, Canadians want serious."

Since the Oct. 21 election, Mr. Trudeau has undergone a significant change in style by showcasing a team of his cabinet ministers, changing his style of speaking, making himself available to the media only when he has something important to say, and reaching out to experienced, veteran Liberals for advice. He has also made a change in his appearance by sporting a salt-and-pepper beard.

A seemingly humbled Mr. Trudeau has also made a number of significant changes to running the operations of his cabinet and the PMO, including bringing in a number of new staffers to run his office. In his cabinet, he has created the offices of deputy prime minister, and a minister responsible for the middle class. Unlike the last mandate, he's now sharing spotlight with his team by letting his cabinet ministers play a more high-profile role than before.

All this is in sharp contrast to the 2015 election when the whole Liberal brand was built around Mr. Trudeau. He was front and centre, the face of the Liberal party. At the time, the party achieved the unprecedented feat of leaping from third place to winning a majority government in the space of only one election. After forming government, Mr. Trudeau became a global figure by putting in place policies such as appointing the country's first gender-balanced cabinet, accepting thousands of refugees from Syria, promising to address the issue of climate change, and doing more for Indigenous Canadians. Because of his team's skillful use of the social media to project his carefully-crafted image and

policies, some also described Mr. Trudeau as the first prime minister of the Instagram era.

The prime minister enjoyed one of the longest honeymoons in Canadian history, but over time, he and his team started to make unforced political errors that negatively affected his star power. The two scandals that hit his brand the hardest were the SNC-Lavalin affair and the blackface controversy.

In the last election, the Liberals were reduced from 184 to 157 seats in the 338 seat House, where they needed 170 to form a majority government. The governing party also lost the popular vote to the Conservatives and won about one million fewer votes than it did in the 2015 election. The new minority government dynamic means the Liberals will have to seek the support of at least one opposition party on every confidence vote, which will be an obstacle for the government to operate in the way it wants. The new mandate will be a challenge for the Trudeau government in the West in particular, after the Liberals failed to win any seats in Alberta or Saskatchewan, and with the sentiment of western alienation at its peak.



Pollster Nik Nanos says that one of the messages of the last election is that Canadians want a prime minister who is serious and focused on working on challenges facing the country. *The Hill Times* file photograph

Meanwhile, Mr. Trudeau's handling of the Ukrainian plane tragedy, the first high-profile foreign policy challenge of the new mandate, has earned some praise from friends and foe alike. A number of opposition politicians from across the country and pundits have publicly endorsed the prime minister's handling of the tragedy.

"It's almost like we're seeing a new prime minister," said Jennifer

Stewart, president and CEO of Syntax Strategies, an expert in strategic communications, branding, and a political pundit in an interview with *The Hill Times*.

"They're doing exceptionally well; we haven't seen a lot of Trudeau since the new year. But what we have seen, he's done a complete brand 180, I mean, particularly dealing with the issue in Iran. He's had a profound impact as a leader, even some of his biggest critics are saying that as well. ... He addressed the public on the plane crash, he really was, his tone was the best that I've seen in terms of his ability to project emotion. He did show outrage at what happened, but he also showed empathy."

Last week, Mr. Trudeau announced that his government would provide a compensation of \$25,000 per victim to assist with the immediate financial needs of affected families, such as travel and funeral arrangements. The Ukrainian airliner that was shot down by an Iranian surface to air missile earlier this month had 57 Canadian passengers on board.

Pollster Frank Graves of Ekos Research said that Mr. Trudeau's rebranding and the changes he made in the way he's running the



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, pictured Jan. 17, 2020, at the National Press Theatre in Ottawa. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

per cent. The January poll also showed that 50 per cent of Canadians approve of Mr. Trudeau's job performance, an increase of 11 percentage points compared to December. The online poll of 1,196 Canadians was conducted between Jan. 11-Jan. 14, and had a margin of error of 2.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

"On all fronts, it looks like the reboot, Justin Trudeau 2.0 of 2020 seems to be finding favourable ground with the electorate," said Mr. Graves, adding that Canadians are so far happy with the way Mr. Trudeau has handled the downing of the Flight 752.

"His response to this, the government's response to this has ... pretty much hit the mark with what we're, Canadians, are looking for. So, he's handled himself well on this specific issue, both in terms of style and substance," said Mr. Graves.

Mr. Nanos said that things might be going well for the Trudeau Liberals now, but budget time would pose a major test of how Canadians feel about the government's performance. It remains to be seen how the measures contained in the next budget resonate with Canadians.

"The big thing to watch out for is going to be the budget," said Mr. Nanos. "How much will this budget be focused on the middle class? What will be different in this budget compared to other budgets? And what will be the state of the economy and the future state of the economy, come the spring when the Liberals roll up the budget plans for the future?"

Meanwhile, Clive Veroni, an expert on political branding, said that in his opinion the changes that Mr. Trudeau has made since the election are because the prime minister has been "shaken" by the federal election result and also the brownface/blackface controversy. He said the prime minister is going through "a moment of deep personal reflection."

"My take is that he is not so much rebranding himself as he is

a man who feels chastened both by the outcome of the last election, but also, more significantly, by the brownface scandal," said Mr. Veroni.

"He's going through a moment of deep personal reflection. ... It's for someone who has, I think, a pretty lofty ambition as prime minister, pretty personal, pretty lofty ambition. I think he's starting to rethink, who he really is and what role he's playing, I think that's what's going on. That's my arm chair psychological assessment, from a distance."

Mr. Veroni said that Mr. Trudeau suffered numerous setbacks in his first mandate, but added that the brownface controversy stood out.

"It was the character of that scandal [that] was different from the others," said Mr. Veroni, author of *Spin: How Politics Has the Power to Turn Marketing on Its Head*.

"The others were sort of politicking, you know, writ large, political maneuvering, whatever you might think of it. ... This is about his behaviour before the world of politics, long before he was involved in politics. So, it had a different character because it was reflecting on him personally, and his own values, his own beliefs and how he lives those values every day."

Mr. Veroni also praised Mr. Trudeau's handling of the downing of the Ukrainian plane. He said during this crisis, the prime minister has emerged as a compassionate, and empathetic figure, which is resonating with Canadians.

"What's going to help him politically is the kinds of things that he's been doing lately, which is his very compassionate and empathetic response to the downing of the Ukrainian airplane," said Mr. Veroni. "I think his response to all of that has made him a more ... sympathetic figure."

arana@hilltimes.com
The Hill Times