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The rise and fall of Justin Trudeau

From progressive icon to cautionary tale — the prime minister's exit marks the end of an era for Canada

On a cold and windy January morning in Ottawa, Justin Trudeau stepped up to a lonely podium outside his official residence and announced that he would step down as Liberal leader and prime minister — a stunning close to a political career that began with his meteoric rise to global prominence, but ended with his party in crisis and Canada grappling with political instability.

In the early days, Trudeau's path to high office often felt like a political fairy tale marked by charisma, heritage and impeccable timing. Son of Canada's legendary former Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, he spent his childhood in the public eye. Youthful and telegenic, he was well known to Canadians before launching his political career in 2007.

Canada's centrist Liberal Party has long been regarded as the country's natural governing party. But in 2011, beset by years of weak leadership and internal division, it suffered a crushing electoral defeat. Two years later, Trudeau ran for the party's leadership and won a landslide first-ballot victory. He and a close-knit team set about completely rebuilding the beleaguered party by recruiting star candidates, modernising communications and welcoming a broader base of members.

A progressive icon...

The narrative was irresistible: the heir to Canada's most iconic political family had taken his place to lead the Liberal Party back from the political wilderness. And lead, he did: championing 'sunny ways', Trudeau delivered a decisive Liberal majority government in the 2015 general election, vaulting the party from third place to government.

Trudeau's agenda was in spirit of the times: a self-declared feminist with a gender-balanced cabinet, a climate advocate promising bold environmental action and an internationalist welcoming refugees, he

steered his party leftward to outflank Canada's social democrats. Trudeau was a star among the liberal centrists who held power during that period and quickly rose to worldwide prominence as a progressive icon.

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Yet, Trudeau's global success was often starkly at odds with the political challenges he faced at home. A series of ethical scandals and ill-advised luxury trips early in his mandate dulled the shine of the new government. He grappled with the chaos of Trump's first presidency and the high-stakes renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

His ambitious policy agenda produced real wins – he dramatically reduced child poverty and established a national affordable childcare programme – as well as embarrassing failures, such as reneging on a promise to reform Canada's outdated first-past-the-post electoral system.

The 2019 and 2021 federal elections were less successful, reducing his party to an unstable minority government. Trudeau's handling of the Coronavirus pandemic gave Canadians generous income support and prevented thousands of deaths, but vaccine mandates and lockdowns bitterly divided communities.

...and his gradual downfall

What began as cracks in Trudeau's support widened into deep rifts as post-pandemic inflation gripped the country. Canadians struggled with skyrocketing housing costs and expensive groceries, yet, Trudeau's government seemed unable to address these issues convincingly and stumbled from crisis to crisis. The bold increase in immigration that they championed went from being an asset to being seen as competition for housing supply, and for the first time, Canadians began to turn against the idea of welcoming more newcomers.

What started as a slow erosion of support in 2023 had turned into a freefall by late last year. Trudeau's leadership was weakened by devastating by-election losses in once-safe Liberal ridings. As the Liberal government floundered, the Conservatives under populist leader Pierre Poilievre grabbed the mantle of change and hammered on affordability issues, securing a lasting 20-point lead in public opinion polls.

The *coup de grâce* came in December, when Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland – a key ally and Trudeau's right-hand – dramatically resigned on the eve of a critical economic update,

leaving his government on the brink of collapse. In these circumstances, Trudeau's subdued announcement in January was an acknowledgement of the inevitable: after three terms and nine years in office, he had simply run out of political runway.

Trudeau's exit marks the end of an era for Canada, but also serves as a cautionary tale about the risks of prioritising progressive style over substance.

While external factors undoubtedly contributed to Trudeau's downfall – punishingly steep interest rate hikes, global instability, the re-election of Donald Trump in the US – he had sown the seeds of his own political demise by making important strategic errors. He delayed difficult decisions, lost touch with the electorate, failed to define Poilievre early on and allowed a gaping polling deficit to fester.

Canada now faces a perilous moment. Trump's inauguration is just days away, with threats of economically devastating tariffs hanging over the country. Trudeau remains as a lame-duck prime minister until the Liberal government faces near-certain defeat in March, leading to a snap election that they will lose. A Conservative majority government under Poilievre will shift Canada's policy trajectory drastically, undoing much of Trudeau's progressive legacy.

In time, history will remember Justin Trudeau kindly. He reduced child poverty, strengthened pensions and, with the social democrats' prodding, made historic expansions to public healthcare in Canada. But in the present, his unwillingness to confront the writing on the wall and act decisively has imperilled not only his party but the country itself.

His exit marks the end of an era for Canada, but also serves as a cautionary tale about the risks of prioritising progressive style over substance. His bold vision earned him global admiration, but his reliance on symbolism and rhetoric created a dangerous distance from the bread-and-butter concerns of regular voters.

In the end, Trudeau's own foibles and his inability to keep his government focused on Canadians' everyday struggles eroded public trust in his leadership and drove voters towards the Conservatives. The Canada he leaves behind is better in many ways — but also more divided, more precarious and more uncertain of its future.



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