April 22, 2024 / Just in: Trudeau’s plan to fight populism

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

*<CLIP> FAMILY GUY, FAKE TRUDEAU: Well then, I’ll just go do some awesome Canada stuff. Hey, call me if you ever need help movin’!   
CANADIAN GEESE: <squawks in Canadian>   
FAKE TRUDEAU: Trudeau, away!*

SCORING <Rabbit Hole - No Transmission Sounds-01>

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): In a lot of ways, the leader of Canada is not like the leader of the United States. Justin is 52. Joe is 81. But the two do share some struggles.

Trudeau’s been in office for a while. He’s being challenged by a conservative populist. And he’s struggling in the polls – especially with young people.

But now he’s got a plan to fix it – all of it!

*<CLIP> CBC NEWS: Among the $52.9 billion in new spending… <fade down>*

*<CLIP> CHCH NEWS: <fade up> … a $23 billion program to get nearly four million homes built between now and 2031.*

SEAN: He’s got a budget that speaks directly to Millennials and Gen Z (or Gen Zed as he calls them). And he’s hoping it’ll help keep populism at bay in Canada, too.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is gonna join us on *Today, Explained* to tell us all about it.

[CANADIAN THEME]

PRIME MINISTER JUSTIN TRUDEAU (Canada): There you go, can you guys hear me?

SEAN: Yes. Welcome.

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Sean Rameswaram. When we start interviews for this show, we typically remind our guests to put their phones on silent.

PM TRUDEAU: I haven't turned my ringer on in eight years, so there's that.

SEAN: <laughs> Fantastic.

SEAN: Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau did not need the reminder.

PM TRUDEAU: Glad to be here.

SEAN: Mr. Prime Minister, I grew up in Canada but have now lived in the United States longer than I lived up there. But your politics look familiar lately. People are angry, especially young people, and it looks like a lot of them are angry at you. Why are Canadians young and old so angry right now?

PM TRUDEAU: Well, I think the world's in a really complicated place right now. We're still dealing with the hangover from Covid. We're looking at wildfires and uncertainty around climate change. That's having a huge impact. We're seeing things like global inflation and interest rates up. We see wars, we see changing geopolitics. We see the changing world of work back home and, and challenges in thinking that this generation can succeed as well as previous generations did. I mean, there's a lot of things to be worried about. And of course, people look at whoever's in charge and say, ‘Oh, no, the world's going in a bad place. It must be your fault.’ And that's totally, totally understandable. My focus – and our focus as governments – has to be, ‘Okay. How do we solve for this? How do we look at the fundamental problems that people are facing, and how do we start getting things back to a place where people can be ambitious and optimistic about the future?’ And that's not an easy thing, but it requires… It requires hard work. It requires seriousness. There's a temptation out there in politics to really point fingers and make people angrier and show them you hear them by amplifying back what they're saying. But to be able to actually solve the challenges and put a dent in it? That's sort of what we got into politics for in, in 2015, when, you know, the hangover and the impact of the 2008 recession was still very, very active. And there were populist solutions starting to come around. Certainly, 2016 in the States was a populist moment. We sort of said, ‘Okay, let's get elected to try and fix things, try and make sure the middle class feels supported and optimistic about the future.’ And those are the things we've been working on since then. And it's even more important now.

SEAN: I want to get to the populism in a moment here, but I, I first want to focus on solutions because you've been touring Canada, talking about one of your proposed solutions, your new budget, and it focused squarely on something we've talked about on our show a bunch recently, which is housing affordability, especially among younger generations. Can you tell people a bit about your plan?

PM TRUDEAU: Actually. I mean, housing is – is a big, big part of it. But the budget and the plan is actually about fairness. It's about recognizing that for a lot of people, particularly young people, Millennials and Gen Zed – Gen Z, in the States –

SEAN: <laughs>

PM TRUDEAU: People are facing an anxiety that the economy doesn't work for them anymore. That the principles that held true for us Xers, for Boomers, of getting a good job, being able to save up for – while you rent – to buy a house, eventually. And then you get a mortgage and you build things forward like that. That just doesn't work anymore. That the deck is stacked against young people in a way that is different from previous generations.

SEAN: Sure.

PM TRUDEAU: And that's a problem because it leads to a sense of uncertainty about the future and a sense of, ‘Okay, the institutions and society and government can't actually help.’ And that sort of feeds into populism. The challenge that we have is, ‘Okay, what are the biggest challenges out there?’ In Canada, housing. People can't imagine working as a nurse or a carpenter or an electrician or a police officer and living in the city that they serve.

SEAN: Mm.

PM TRUDEAU: Well, that's something that we should be able to fix, and we're working on fixing that. We need to make sure things like people who are paying 2000 bucks a month on rent beside someone else [who] is paying 2000 bucks a month for a mortgage – well, that rent should be counted towards their credit score so they can eventually get a mortgage. That's something that nobody thought of before, because rent was never such a huge part of people's expenditures. Making that change gives people hope again that you can see a better future in which you're going to be able to succeed.

SEAN: But part of the issue here is that there's just simply not enough housing. That's an issue in the United States. That's an issue in Canada. What can the federal government and what can you, the Prime Minister, do about that?

PM TRUDEAU: Well, first of all, we've had from the beginning, a re-engagement in housing after previous federal governments sort of stepped out of it and said, ‘No, no, that's a regional- and local- level issue.’

SEAN: Yeah.

PM TRUDEAU: We started moving forward on a number of different initiatives for affordable housing here, for different projects there. But more recently, we realized we needed a larger- scale approach. So we actually put huge amounts of money, billions and billions of dollars on the table for municipalities to convince them – some might say bribe them – to change the rules around how housing is built…

SEAN: Hm.

PM TRUDEAU: … allow four units as of right on every single lot, allowing four stories on single residential areas, enforcing more density near transit, you know, removing parking minimums, for example, using more federal public lands. If you have a post office building, well, let's build a tower of affordable housing above it and still have the post office on the ground floor, instead of having just a one-storey building there.   
  
SEAN: Mm.   
  
PM TRUDEAU: These kinds of things are changing the way we're building housing across the country and pushing really hard back against the NIMBYism that, that happens everywhere of people who've made it, who've got their home, who don't want to see the densification around them, us putting money on the table for the municipalities to change the rules is going to massively boost supply over the coming years, and we're sort of putting money out there and saying to our provinces, the regional governments, that they have to step up and meet our level of ambition if they're going to benefit from the federal funding that we have, that is conditional. And if they, they don't want to get ambitious around it, that's fine. We'll put the money in a part of the country that does want to be ambitious and that sort of idea of, ‘Hey, let's be all together and trying to solve this supply challenge’ is, is a huge part of how we create a future that, that young people can see themselves succeeding in.

SEAN: The conservatives in Canada have said that they're going to vote against this budget of yours. You're still working to get other caucuses on board, I understand. The leader of the opposition, Pierre Poilievre, He's out chanting “Ax the tax!” which is, of course, compelling to some out there. At a time when Canadians are feeling squeezed by inflation and are feeling maybe a bit more nervous than, than historically they have about immigration, are you worried that your opposition's messaging around this plan might resonate more than yours?

PM TRUDEAU: Um, I think the opposition is recognizing that there is concern and anxiety out there. The thing is, though, they're not offering any solution at all for it. And I believe, I mean, the biggest choice, and the biggest difference between me and the conservatives right now is: They don't think government has a role to play in solving for these problems and these challenges. And I think government can't solve everything, nor should it try. But it can make sure that if the system isn't working for young people, that we rebalance the system. Market forces are not going to do that at all. Like, one of the things we did in this budget – we're *doing* in this budget – is: we're raising capital gains. So the wealthiest .1% pay a little more. Capital gains will still be lower than they are in California and, and New York, for example, so it's not going to go after innovation. But it's bringing in money so we can actually invest more in young people, in fairness, in those kinds of things. And that's something that the conservatives are totally against.

SEAN: But still, are you worried that that's a more compelling case for Canadians who are maybe less concerned about what their fortunes look like in seven years, and more concerned about what their fortunes might look like tomorrow?

PM TRUDEAU: Yes, Canadians are worried and they're anxious and they're listening to all sorts of people with different – you know, different levels of solutions. But I ultimately trust Canadians to be thoughtful and reasonable. And when, when they see things that we're putting forward that are actually solving the things that are making them worried rather than just amplifying them, I'm confident that in, in a year and a half, the conversations we're going to have about the kind of country Canadians want to live in – Where we move forward as a government that's investing to solve the housing crisis, not just trying to get out of the way and hope that developers fix it themselves, or making real choices like $10-a-day childcare that is a huge driver of economic growth that the Conservatives continue to oppose, or even further, even as we're investing in health care, which is delivered by the provinces, there's a role for the federal government. These are things that actually meet people where they are in their cost of living, and provide solutions for a better life. Those choices are going to be on the table in the next election, and I'm confident the Canadians are going to remain responsible, ambitious and optimistic about their future.

SCORING <A Doy>

SEAN: More on their future and ours, with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, when we’re back on *Tod-eh? Explained*.

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> JONI MITCHELL, “A CASE OF YOU”: I drew a map of Canada – O, Canadaaa!*

SEAN: *Aujourd'hui, Expliqué* is back with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who is not up for reelection this year. At least thus far. It’s a parliamentary system. You know how those can be. But he will likely have to face his opposition next year. And his opposition, like Biden’s here in the U.S.A., is looking populist-y.

*<CLIP> CONSERVATIVE LEADER PIERRE POILIEVRE: After eight years of Justin Trudeau, everything feels broken. No – after eight years of Justin Trudeau, everything IS broken. <applause>*

SEAN: And just like here, that populism’s got people fretting about democracy in Canada. We asked Justin Trudeau if *he’*s fretting, too.

PM TRUDEAU: Well, first of all, it's a global trend. In every democracy, we're seeing a rise of populists with easy answers that don't necessarily hold up to any expert scrutiny. But a big part of populism is condemning and ignoring experts and expertise. So it sort of feeds on itself and relies on a lot of misinformation and disinformation. And ultimately, you have to trust in people. You have to trust in democracy itself. That people are going to be thoughtful and reasonable about how, how one moves forward. And yes, it's really easy to, to slap on a bumper sticker and wave a flag and sort of say, ‘Oh, yes, no, everything – everything should be burned down because the system doesn't work.’ It's harder to roll up your sleeves and fix the system. But that's one of the things that has made Canada successful and quite frankly, made the United States successful over the past generations: People rolling up their sleeves and believing in building a better world together through hard work, not through easy shortcuts or buzzwords. And I think that for all the the appeal of simplicity and, and simplistic solutions, and, you know, clever TikTok videos…

SEAN: Hm.

PM TRUDEAU: … I think people understand that government is about being there to create fairness, being there to make sure that everyone has an opportunity to succeed, being there to make sure that we're there to lean on each other. And I think there is a difference between Canada and the United States. And I think – might be the weather, might be the big empty spaces – but Canadians know we need to be there for our neighbors. It goes to, you know, trudging across a field on a moonless, snowy night, you know, 300 years ago to be there for your neighbor if there was a, a challenge. Like, Canadians are there to push an old lady's Buick out of a snowbank.   
  
SEAN: <chortles because Buicks are American>  
  
PM TRUDEAU: We're there to support each other and understand that we all do better when we're there for each other. And there's a lot of populism that folds into a level of individualism that I think is counterproductive to the kind of world we need to build where we are so interconnected – whether it's the pandemics, whether it's climate change, whether it's just living in safer neighborhoods – we need to be there to watch out for our neighbors and be there for each other. And that's something that Canadians have always done well. And our focus on this budget, in asking the wealthiest to pay a bit more so we can make sure young people feel that pathway to success, is not just about making sure those young people are successful, it's about making sure that everyone is successful. Because when our economy is growing well and everyone's doing well – Well, the wealthy will find lots of ways to make money off of a prosperous and successful middle class. I'm not worried about innovation and creativity. I'm worried about people being able to pay their rent and eventually buy a home.

SEAN: My colleague Zack Beauchamp, who's something of, like, a honorary Canadian himself, he's got a book coming out called *The Reactionary Spirit*. And in it, he looks at the rise of authoritarian politics in advanced democracies. And he thinks Canada is an example of a country that is resistant to far-right populism, because he thinks Canadian identity is so bound up in multiculturalism. And, and that makes it harder for these movements to gain traction. At the same time, the ‘Freedom Convoy’ from a few years ago didn't exactly feel like a celebration of –

PM TRUDEAU: Mm-hmm.

SEAN: –Canadian multiculturalism.

PM TRUDEAU: Yep.

*<CLIP> SKY NEWS: It started as a protest against vaccine requirements for lorry drivers, but it’s mushroomed to an anti-government movement, which has paralyzed not only this capital city, but vital trade routes between Canada and the US.*

*<CLIP> DW: There are reports of protestors displaying Confederate and Nazi symbols.*

SEAN: Do you think that that Canadian identity that you're talking about – pushing a lady’s Buick in the snow, regardless of maybe her, her creed or color – do you think that identity might be under threat right now?

PM TRUDEAU: Oh, I think it's absolutely under threat. And in – everywhere around the world. Canada is not a magical place of unicorns and rainbows. You know, we have the same kinds of pressures that everyone is facing. We just, you know, we're trying to approach it a little bit differently. And quite frankly, that sense of being there for each other – which comes from an incredibly diverse country that didn't go for the US melting pot, where everyone became sort of a similar American, or at least in the ideal – where we actually continue to celebrate the diversities, the languages, the backgrounds, the stories, the, the, the cultures that everyone brings to enrich our country, to make more of a tapestry or mosaic, are that are the cliches we use, that give us a level of resilience that is, that is there so that you understand, despite your identity, your experience, someone totally different from you is just as much a Canadian as you are. Because we share the same values of openness, of freedom, of willingness to work hard and succeed for each other, of respect, of compassion. Those things that define any, you know, progressive, positive economy or democracy around the world, including the United States. These are things that we, we tend to try and hold on to more than ever.

But I will say that the advent of social media and the, the echo chambers and the filter bubbles and all those things that are making people stop listening to each other and hearing each other in our communities the same way is worrisome. And I think the big question Canadians are going to be facing – like, like people will face in democracies all around the world over the coming years is – what kind of country do we want to be? Do we want to be a country where we can be friends with someone, even if they have a different background from us? Or more importantly, these days, a different political view or viewpoint from us? Can someone from the right really be friends with someone from the left? Yes! Absolutely! That's what always has made our, our, our societies and our economies robust. That, you know, when you know, someone you didn't vote for becomes prime minister or president, you sort of shrug and say, ‘Okay, I better luck next time, I hope. I hope my, my person gets it next time. But for now, this person is the president. And we'll, we'll deal with it and we'll work around it best we can.’ The falling into, if someone you didn't support becomes leader, then your life is over and the, the economy is ruined and there's an illegitimacy there. That's really scary. And quite frankly, it's one of those things that our authoritarian opponents – or, adversaries – around the world, from Russia to a whole bunch of different countries …   
  
SEAN: Mm.   
  
PM TRUDEAU: … are trying to actively encourage ~~f~~or people to believe –

SEAN: I don’t hear – Sir, I don’t hear you. Can you hear me? Mr. Prime Minister, if you can hear us, we have lost you for a minute. But hopefully we can get you back…?

PM TRUDEAU: There we go.

SEAN: Hello! <claps for some reason>

PM TRUDEAU: There we go. Sorry.

SEAN: No problem.

PM TRUDEAU: That was totally my fault. I was fiddling with – fiddling with the cord. It was the power cord, but it’s also the - But it's also the, the, the connection cord. So, uh, I was, uh…

SEAN: Oh, no. <laughs>

PM TRUDEAU: Totally my bad on that.

SEAN: And, and, you know, we lost you obviously, mid-sentence. So I'm wondering if you could kind of pick up your thought, Mr. Prime Minister, from authoritarian ideation abroad…

PM TRUDEAU: Yeah. Yep.

SEAN: … that we're trying to combat here. Could you, could you just finish that thought?

PM TRUDEAU: Yeah. And one of the real challenges is that we have authoritarian adversaries, like Russia, who are very, very interested in undermining our democracies. And they used to do it sort of an economics, or in sort of Cold War style. But what they're doing now is they're going at undermining people's confidence in our very institutions of democracies, our very ability as a society to be cohesive and make coherent choices, and legitimate choices, as democracies.

SEAN: You're talking about democratic ideals in the face of not only populism, but straight up authoritarianism – Russia, whatever it might be. China. As a member of the G7 and the G20, as, as the guy who is, you know, at all of these conferences meeting with these leaders, who do you think is winning that war between freedom, democracy and authoritarianism?

PM TRUDEAU: Well, it depends how you look and who you look at. Certainly, the authoritarians are taking up a lot of space on the world stage right now, and democracy is definitely under threat. But when you look at where people are thriving, where quality of living is better, where opportunities for growth, for advancement, for resilience in the face of massive challenges is better? There's no question that democracies remain a lot more advantageous to human beings than any other structures. But it's not as obvious as it used to be. And there's so much challenge out there to it and people exacerbating some of those challenges that there's an uncertainty there. And we have to remember: Democracies didn't happen by accident, and they don't continue without effort. And we all have to be mindful about how we tend to our responsibilities as citizens on staying engaged, staying thoughtful, staying open to different points of view, and trying to move forward in a way where we can all sort of agree on the basic facts, even though we might disagree on, you know, how to best move forward given those facts, in one political direction or another.

SEAN: You've been at it for coming up on nine years now. Three terms. You've said you want a fourth. A question a lot of Americans are asking about our politicians right now, especially because they're very old, is: ‘Why not give someone else a chance?’ You're not nearly as old as they are. But I wonder: what's your answer to that question right now, as you seek out a fourth term?

PM TRUDEAU: The stakes are so incredibly high right now. The narrative that is out there is that everything that I've done and that we've done as a government for the past eight years – whether it's fighting climate change, whether it's investing in partnerships and reconciliation with indigenous peoples, whether it's promoting feminism and bringing forward a gender-balanced cabinet, standing up for women's rights, standing up for minority rights, standing up for an economy that works for everyone, people are now saying, the conservative argument out there is, ‘All those things is why life is difficult right now.’ And the actual fact is – particularly when you compare us to other countries around the world – all these things have made life better in meaningful ways. And it would be much worse if we hadn't done all those things. But there is a moment right now where Canadians are going to have to choose over the next year and a half of what kind of country we are. Are we a country that believes in evidence and science? Are we a country that looks out for each other and believes that government has a role to play in making sure that people are protected? That the world works responsibly? Or: do you go down a path of amplifying anger, division and fear? Government gets out of the way and lets people fend for themselves, protects the wealthiest and the trickle-down approach that has never worked? These are the things that are on the ballot in the next election. And I got into politics to make a difference, to fight for fairness, to fight for opportunities, particularly for young people. And that fight is not done yet. And I am actually really looking forward to that moment where Canadians get to choose who we are. Uh, and I, I am deeply confident that Canadians are going to remain true to who, who they've always been and who they are every time I have a conversation with people from Saint John's to Vancouver, from Windsor to Iqaluit, right across the country. People are thoughtful about their future. And as long as we remain so, Canada is going to be just fine.

SCORING <Erhu On an E String (erhu, sliding melody, hip hop beat, minimal, sub)-01>

SEAN: Mr. Prime Minister, thank you so much for your time.

PM TRUDEAU: It's a real pleasure, Sean. Thank you.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Canada dot ca.

Our program today was produced by Amanda Lewellyn, edited by Matthew Collette, and fact-checked by Haleema Shah and Anouck Dussaud. It was mixed by Patrick Boyd, who wore a blazer to the interview even though the Prime Minister would never see it.

I’m Sean Rameswaram. This is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]