

CANADA

Trudeau Tries to Pivot Away From Controversy Over Blackface Images

Seeking re-election, Canadian leader proposes ban on military-style assault rifles



Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau speaking during a campaign stop in Toronto on Friday. PHOTO: COLE BURSTON/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By Kim Mackrael and Paul Vieira

Updated Sept. 20, 2019 3:58 pm ET

After two days of apologies over photos showing him wearing blackface, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tried to change the subject on Friday.

Mr. Trudeau promised to ban military-style assault rifles and give cities the power to ban handguns, turning the focus to an issue that will appeal to voters in urban areas, like Toronto and Montreal. Mr. Trudeau was already in a tough election fight before the images emerged, with his Liberal Party running in a virtual tie with Conservatives ahead of a vote on Oct. 21. Shoring up support in urban areas, which have sizable immigrant communities, is crucial for Mr. Trudeau to hang on to power, analysts say.

Despite his effort to move on, the blackface controversy continued to dog Mr. Trudeau's campaign on Friday. In response to reporters' questions in the Oval Office, President Trump said he was surprised to learn Mr. Trudeau wore blackface, "and I was more surprised when I saw the number of times."

Asked about Mr. Trump's comments, Mr. Trudeau said he recognized he "hurt people who in many cases considered me an ally...by the terrible choices I made many years ago. I apologize deeply to them." Mr. Trudeau declined for a second day to say with certainty that more damaging photos wouldn't emerge.

The proposed ban on military-style assault rifles—which follows a similar move by New Zealand earlier this year after the Christchurch mosque shootings—comes amid rising concern over gun violence in Canadian cities, and a spate of mass shootings in the U.S. that have prompted Trump administration officials to explore a possible tightening of gun laws.

For the three-year period ended Dec. 31, 2018, Canada recorded an average 246 gun-related murders a year. In the prior decade, covering 2006 to 2015, the average was 174 a year.

Mr. Trudeau used the policy announcement to launch an attack on his main rivals, the Conservatives, and portray them as a threat to urban safety. Nightly polling during the election campaign from Ottawa-based Nanos Research indicates a tight race between the Liberals and Conservatives, although the firm's numbers have the Tories recently pulling slightly ahead.

"Thoughts and prayers are just not going to cut it," Mr. Trudeau said. "The choice could not be clearer. Liberals are for tougher gun laws, Conservatives are for weaker gun laws."

Mr. Trudeau said a re-elected Liberal government would set up a buyback program for assault rifles that were legally purchased. He also said he would work with Canadian provinces to give local governments the power to ban or further restrict handguns in specific cities. The mayors of Toronto and Montreal have both called for a ban on handguns.

Under current Canadian laws, individuals are required to hold a license to purchase and possess a firearm and buy ammunition. According to data from Canada's national police, there were 2.2 million firearms licenses in force as of 2017.

Gun control is a divisive issue in Canada. People in larger cities and suburbs tend to favor strict controls, while rural residents argue tougher restrictions target law-abiding gun owners who use the weapons for hunting and self-protection.

Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer said Friday he supports gun-control measures such as screening for gun owners, but questions whether a blanket ban on particular firearms would make a difference.

"What we've heard from police experts is that it's more effective, it will lead to safer communities, if we use police resources to go after criminals and illegal firearms," Mr. Scheer

said.

—*Vivian Salama in Washington contributed to this article.*

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