

CANADA

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau Apologizes for Wearing Brownface at 2001 Party

Photo from school yearbook, taken at 'Arabian Nights' costume party, marks a blow to campaign



'I should have known better, but I didn't,' Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in his apology. PHOTO: SEAN KILPATRICK/THE CANADIAN PRESS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Paul Vieira

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OTTAWA—Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized Wednesday after the publication of a photo from nearly two decades ago in which he appeared at a costume party wearing brownface, saying he is disappointed in himself.

The photo was taken in 2001, while he was teaching in Vancouver, at his school's annual dinner, which had a costume theme of "Arabian Nights." He said he attended with friends and colleagues dressed as a character from "Aladdin," with makeup on. He was 29 years old at the time.

"I should have known better, but I didn't," Mr. Trudeau told reporters on an airplane that was transporting the Canadian leader and media during the fall election campaign. "I am really sorry...I am disappointed and pissed off."

The photo marks a blow for Mr. Trudeau at the early stages of a campaign ahead of Oct. 21 elections, as polls show his Liberal Party in a dead heat with the Conservative Party.

Mr. Trudeau has positioned himself as a global champion of an inclusive, diverse society. Through the years, he has castigated political rivals who have challenged his government's moves to boost immigration. One of his most common refrains in his nearly four-year term is that diversity is Canada's strength.

Polling indicated the Canadian public "believes the Prime Minister is more sensitive to identity issues and that he's more mature" compared with his political rivals, said Darrell Bricker, president of Canadian polling firm Ipsos Global Affairs. "That is now threatened."

The photo, from the school yearbook, was published Wednesday by Time.

"I didn't think it was racist at the time," Mr. Trudeau said, "but now I recognize it was something racist to do." Asked if there were similar incidents, he told reporters that when he was in high school, he dressed up at a talent show, also in makeup, and sang "Day O."

The Canadian leader's personal popularity has sustained a significant hit in 2019 over allegations he and his senior aides tried to interfere in the criminal prosecution of a Montreal engineering company. A federal ethics watchdog ruled last month that Mr. Trudeau broke the law in his role in the affair.

The Liberal Party from the outset of the election campaign has issued damaging research about previous indiscretions from political opponents that the Liberals argued highlighted intolerance of minorities. The strategy worked in part by forcing opponents to pivot on the campaign trail. The 2001 photo potentially neutralizes that strategy, said Duane Bratt, political science professor at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta.

The photo immediately drew a rebuke from political rivals and representatives for Canada's Muslim community.

"Seeing the Prime Minister in brownface/blackface is deeply saddening," said Mustafa Farooq, executive director of the National Council of Canadian Muslims in a written statement. "The wearing of blackface/brownface is reprehensible, and harkens back to a history of racism, slavery, and an Orientalist mythology that is unacceptable."



The photo was taken in 2001, while he was teaching in Vancouver, at his school's annual dinner, which had a costume theme of "Arabian Nights." PHOTO: BOB MACKIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

After Mr. Trudeau's apology, the council issued a tweet thanking the prime minister for his contrition.

Meanwhile, the leader of Canada's left-wing New Democratic Party, Jagmeet Singh, said the photo was insulting. Mr. Singh is a Sikh and wears a turban.

"What does that say about what he thinks about people who because of who they are—the color of their skin—face challenges, barriers and obstacles in their life," he said.

Mr. Trudeau said he would be seeking Canadians' forgiveness through the rest of the election campaign, and would speak to Liberal Party members and cabinet members—among them South Asians and Sikhs—about the photo.

"I am going to be thinking how much harder I am going to have to continue to work to demonstrate to Canadians that I am focused on building a better world with less discrimination, less intolerance and less racism," he said. He added he would have a conversation with his children Thursday about "taking responsibility for mistakes we make...and promising to do better."

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