

GLOBAL

Justin Trudeau's Feminist Brand Is Imploding

The resignations of two female cabinet ministers suggest Canada might not be as committed to gender equality as the prime minister wants the world to believe.

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Jody Wilson-Raybould and Jane Philpott watch Justin Trudeau announce the shuffling of his cabinet ministers on January 14. (PATRICK DOYLE / REUTERS)

TORONTO—The day Justin Trudeau was sworn in as Canada's prime minister, he stood on Ottawa's Parliament Hill flanked by the 15 women and 15 men he'd appointed to his cabinet. A reporter asked him why he felt such a gender balance was important and Trudeau, pausing for only a beat, held his palms up to the sky as he replied, "Because it's 2015." It was a sound bite heard around the world.

For Canadians who'd spent the past nine years under Stephen Harper, a Conservative who wouldn't even use the word *feminist*, Trudeau's response was refreshing, energizing, even exciting. The newly elected Liberal prime minister had campaigned on a platform of transparency, emphasizing feminism and indigenous rights as points of focus for his government in the years to come. And though appointing a cabinet with equal male and female representation didn't guarantee a

feminist agenda, it was an important step, one that several countries—including Colombia, Ethiopia, France, and Spain—would follow.

To the prime minister's right that day in 2015 stood the newly appointed justice minister and attorney general, Jody Wilson-Raybould. A former senior prosecutor, she was the first indigenous, and third female, politician to hold the position. She stood in the sun, pensive and proud, her face emitting a hard-won optimism shared by so many women across the country.

Then last month, Wilson-Raybould resigned from the cabinet, alleging that Trudeau and his office had for months interfered inappropriately in a prosecution effort against SNC-Lavalin, a company employing thousands of Canadians that had been charged with corruption and fraud in connection with Libyan business contracts. The prime minister's office was pushing for an unorthodox workaround, whereby SNC would get off with a fine, an admission of wrongdoing, and a pledge to do better. When Wilson-Raybould refused, the prime minister's office, she says, didn't take no for an answer. Wilson-Raybould says the pressure had been consistent and sustained until she was demoted in a cabinet shuffle in January. She quit the following month, and another prominent female colleague followed soon after.

At first pass, the SNC-Lavalin affair might not seem like an issue with a feminist underpinning. But the problem with running on a feminist agenda is that when two of your strongest female cabinet ministers resign, you face something of a feminist reckoning. Trudeau has earned international accolades for his vocal support of women's issues; here at home, he has been criticized for virtue signaling. And the question of what it really means to have gender parity—not just in the cabinet or government, but at work, at home, and in society more broadly—is something for which Trudeau's brand of feminism might not be able to provide a satisfying answer.

From across the aisle, one Conservative MP, Michelle Rempel, put it plainly. "Trudeau came out and asked for strong women, and he got them," she told me in an interview last week.

Accounts of why Wilson-Raybould was originally demoted diverge, depending on whom you choose to believe. She says she was moved out of her post for standing on principle. Trudeau's office says there was no pressure, that Wilson-Raybould

simply interpreted their interactions “differently.” The prime minister first tried to move her to the indigenous-affairs portfolio, a shortsighted idea that would have placed the country’s most prominent female indigenous politician in charge of legislation, the Indian Act, that has for years perpetuated the country’s history of colonialism. When she understandably turned that offer down, he moved her to veteran affairs.

After Wilson-Raybould testified to a parliamentary committee in February, her colleague Jane Philpott resigned from her own cabinet post, as the president of the Treasury Board, in solidarity. In Philpott’s resignation letter, which she made public this month, she wrote that she’d lost confidence in Trudeau’s moral authority to govern. Since then, another rookie female member of Parliament, Celina Caesar-Chavannes, has announced that she won’t seek reelection. Some observers suggest more resignations might come before the month is over.

Wilson-Raybould and Philpott exemplify the kinds of women the Liberals had hoped would enter politics as part of the Trudeau government. Philpott, for example, is a decorated doctor, a parent who lost her daughter to an illness, and a highly respected member of her community and the party. In government as health minister, she capably navigated tasks such as drafting the legislation that would guide Canada’s medically assisted–death regulations and later worked toward reconciliation in a fraught landscape as the minister of indigenous affairs.

[*Read: Everyday sexism in a “post-feminist” world*]

“In a way, the prime minister has created two martyrs here,” says Sylvia Bashevkin, a political-science professor at the University of Toronto. “There may be a number of people who decide not to run again because of a sense that the wheels are falling off the bus.”

Evidence suggests that when it comes to politics and gender, a role-modeling effect takes place when women are elected and promoted. It works like a tipping point: A politically engaged but hesitant woman is more likely to run for office if she sees other women in positions of political power, says Michael Morden, the research director at the Samara Center for Democracy, a nonpartisan think tank based in Toronto. “We also know that women in cabinet have a more powerful effect than just women in the legislature,” Morden told me. As such, he said, the opposite

might also be true: Fewer women in the cabinet could mean fewer women encouraged to run for office.

Still, the situation could yet have a positive effect. “It’s radically unusual to see caucus members trying to hold their leader to account like this in Canada,” Morden said. “Success is reassuring; it shows that something can be done.” That is, women watching cabinet ministers standing up to a prime minister rather than kowtowing to party loyalty might inspire them to get involved—not for gender, but for justice. Rempel, the Conservative MP, agrees. Wilson-Raybould and Philpott “haven’t removed themselves from the conversation,” she told me. “They are the conversation.”

Women were losing confidence in Trudeau’s government long before this crisis, with the margin between Liberal and Conservative female voters having narrowed considerably in the past year. But over the past month, Trudeau’s feminist branding has splintered. Wilson-Raybould was replaced as minister of justice with a white male MP. That the cabinet’s major fumbles over the past three years have come from men—including Finance Minister Bill Morneau, who has not been shuffled despite a fumble of his own, and Trudeau himself—makes the decision to demote the first indigenous female justice minister out of the portfolio even more mystifying. To most Canadians, according to an Ipsos poll conducted last week, the account offered by the prime minister’s office in response to Wilson-Raybould’s doesn’t check out.

So it’s not surprising that some Canadian women are reconsidering who they’ll be voting for this fall. The country is no closer to a national child-care program, which Trudeau has promoted, and funding the government pledged to stem the housing crisis facing Toronto, Vancouver, and other urban centers has been slow to materialize. Electoral reform, an initiative backed by many women’s organizations that Trudeau promised to execute, has been halted. And the Liberals’ inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women has stalled.

[Read: Why women still can’t have it all]

Many of the feminist efforts Trudeau has championed are international ones, such as his establishment of a so-called feminist foreign policy and his efforts to restore some of the international funding for women’s reproductive health that was slashed by Donald Trump.

That has led to a striking difference in how Trudeau has been perceived abroad and at home. The Canadian leader has made headlines around the world for, among other things, stating that he'll raise his sons as feminists, photobombing a prom photo shoot in Vancouver, demonstrating his core strength in a viral photo of him doing a peacock pose, and sharing a beer with Barack Obama in Montreal. In the Trump era, Trudeau's warmth and charm have earned him an international reputation as a liberal boy wonder, advocating for stronger women's rights, better environmental protections, and more stable relationships with indigenous groups.

Back home, Trudeau's fondness for antics such as balancing babies in the palm of his hand, cuddling pandas at the zoo, and posing with his hands in a heart before a pink backdrop for the press have led to one Toronto writer calling him "the political equivalent of a YouTube puppy video"—satisfying, but lacking depth. It's a criticism that has followed Trudeau since the start of his term, but one that feels even more salient now. For Bashevkin, the political-science professor, what this scandal illustrates most starkly is the prime minister's and his team's lack of experience. "I think if he's actually going to do what he says he will, which is think about how to learn from these events, I'd suggest that he might think about revaluing the women who are currently and were formerly in cabinet," Bashevkin says.

It's a disappointing coda for the gender-parity initiative. If Trudeau weathers this scandal, he'll almost certainly run for reelection in October, and he might win. But his treatment of Wilson-Raybould and his response to the snowballing crisis give more fuel—this time with evidence—to the critics who have long accused him of being a superficial feminist, and those cries will become louder and more sustained during the campaign. If Trudeau doesn't get reelected, Canadian voters will swing back to the Conservatives, a party that opposes gender quotas in the cabinet, signaling the death knell for an initiative that stood for something much greater when Trudeau's term began.

Amid it all, one point is strikingly clear: For Canadian women who want to use their vote to ensure an equal seat at the governance table, no major party in their country can offer them even that.

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