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Geoffrey Stevens: Justin Trudeau is testing Canadians' capacity, and readiness, to forgive

Opinion Sep 23, 2019 by Geoffrey Stevens Hamilton Spectator

Have last week's disclosures via social media that Justin Trudeau appeared in blackface and brownface at costume gatherings 18 or so years ago irreparably damaged the Liberal party's re-election prospects?

Political insiders — and not just Liberal ones — are still trying the gauge the fallout. Opinion polls in the first couple of days showed a dip in Liberal support and in Trudeau's popularity with a commensurate increase for the Conservatives, moving them from a tie into a small lead over the Liberals in what promises to be a desperately close election on Oct. 21. The polls levelled off by the weekend. As this week began, there were indications of a Liberal bounce back. We will have a better sense of Canadians' capacity — and readiness — to forgive as more surveys are published.

As a non-insider, it seems to me that in an election that is turning on leadership and trust — and that will be determined by presently uncommitted voters (the genuinely undecided plus loosely affiliated switchers) — four questions will determine the Liberals' fate.

Is Trudeau a racist? If not, are his apologies sincere? If so, should his mistakes or foolish behaviour in his days as a drama teacher be held against him now that he is prime minister? Finally, is he committed to the principles of equity in gender, sexual orientation, race and economic opportunity that he pledged when he was elected in 2015?

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In other words, is he still the leader he claimed to be, and the electorate endorsed, four years ago? Is that good enough for re-election?

The undecideds and potential switchers may account for 20-plus per cent of the voter pool, and I'm sure the Liberal brain trust would have an additional question for them. Is Andrew Scheer really cut out to be prime minister?

I thought the Conservative leader passed on a golden opportunity to raise his game and to display his leadership chops last week. On the night the blackface episode became public — the Conservatives, having acquired the photo, passed it to Time magazine, which posted it on the web — Trudeau held a hastily arranged news conference on his campaign aircraft. He stood there, looking shaken, as he offered several apologies, and he answered every question asked by the reporters travelling with him.

Later, when the Conservative plane landed, Scheer emerged. He offered a few angry sentences declaring Trudeau demonstrably unfit to be prime minister, turned on his heel and walked away, refusing to take questions.

Scheer would have been more impressive and might have sounded like a prime minister-in-waiting if he had said something like this: "I am as shocked as I'm sure we all are by these photos. It may have been 18 years ago, but to dress up in blackface was as racially insensitive then as it is today. There is no excuse for it.

"However, Mr. Trudeau has apologized. I have already announced that I will forgive Conservative candidates who have made stupid mistakes or acted inappropriately, provided they apologize. So, without condoning Mr. Trudeau's past behaviour, I accept his apology tonight. Furthermore, I believe it is time that all of us, Liberals, Conservatives and others, stop trolling the internet for dirt to use against our opponents.

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"Thank you. Now, I will do my best to answer your questions."

A truce on digging up social media dirt would, I suspect, find favour with many Canadians. The Samara Centre for Democracy, a non-partisan, nonprofit research organization that studies ways to improve Canada's democratic institutions, has just published a survey report on online political "conversations." Among its conclusions: "Political conversations on social media are often angrier than what we witness off-line. Harassment and extremism thrive on social media. . . . The aggressive nature of online political conversations can turn people off politics and worse, even cause mental anguish. Social media can skew our perception of what Canadians really think and feel, particularly when it's used by journalists or politicians as a representation of public opinion — which it isn't."

Amen.

Cambridge resident Geoffrey Stevens, an author and former Ottawa columnist and managing editor of the Globe and Mail, teaches political science at Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Guelph. His column appears Tuesdays. He welcomes comments at geoffstevens40@gmail.com (<mailto:geoffstevens40@gmail.com>)

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