Justin Trudeau, Canada’s Next Prime Minister, Returning to Childhood Home

Liberal Party leader was raised in Ottawa home as son of former prime minister Pierre Trudeau

By PAUL VIEIRA
Oct. 20, 2015 12:24 p.m. ET

OTTAWA—When Justin Trudeau takes office next month as Canada’s prime minister, he will return to the residence where he was raised.

After spending his early childhood in the official Ottawa home for Canada’s leader, the 43-year-old son of former Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau is under pressure to demonstrate that he has grown enough politically to lead a country struggling with deep economic challenges.

Mr. Trudeau and his Liberal Party rode a wave of discontent with incumbent Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper to claim a majority government, despite persistent political campaign attacks by Mr. Harper repeating that “he’s just not ready.”

Having won a sweeping majority, the former high school teacher with only eight years of experience as a politician inherits a troubled economy staggering under the burden of a hollowed out manufacturing sector and collapsing commodity prices in its core resources sector.

Mr. Trudeau grew up in the Canadian spotlight, with photos of his father toting him around like a football or of them attending Montreal Expos games. He and his two siblings were raised at the prime minister’s official residence in Ottawa, 24 Sussex, up until 1984.

Monday night, as returns started to come in showing the Liberals were sweeping eastern and central Canada, Canadian television networks started running decades-old footage of Mr.
Trudeau’s famous family. The country’s leading newspaper, The Globe and Mail, ran a page-one picture of Mr. Trudeau embracing his mother, Margaret.

Pierre Trudeau died in 2000, and his funeral in Montreal became in some ways the launching pad of his eldest son’s political career. Justin Trudeau delivered a moving eulogy that was watched across the country.

Justin Trudeau’s childhood afforded him early exposure to world leaders. Patrick Gossage, a press secretary for Pierre Trudeau, recalled the time former U.S. President Ronald Reagan visited 24 Sussex in 1981 and Justin and his brothers were playing in the living room. Mr. Reagan met all the Trudeau sons, “but Justin was the most formal. He shook his hand,” Mr. Gossage said.

In 2005, Mr. Trudeau married Sophie Grégoire, at the time a TV and radio host in French-speaking Quebec. The couple have three children, ranging in age from 20 months to 7 years old. On the couple’s wedding day, they made a getaway in his father’s signature silver two-seat Mercedes-Benz convertible.

Much like his father, Mr. Trudeau engages in physical activities, including canoeing and boxing. Mr. Gossage said Pierre Trudeau would often spar with his son, and that was where Justin Trudeau initially learned to box.

Mr. Trudeau scored a knockout against a former Conservative senator in a charity match back in 2012. Before the fight, Mr. Trudeau was billed as the underdog against his Tory foe—just as he was in the buildup to the 2015 election.

But even those with deep ties to the Liberal Party acknowledge Mr. Trudeau has a steep learning curve ahead of him. “The job of being prime minister is night and day compared to campaigning,” said Penny Collenette, an adviser to former Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and law professor at University of Ottawa who has known Mr. Trudeau since her husband served in his father’s cabinet more than three decades ago.

Becoming prime minister “is a big, big leap up for him and his staff,” said Ms. Collenette.
Childhood friends said Mr. Trudeau recognizes the challenge in front of him.

“He’s well practiced and well versed in being the son of an iconic prime minister,” said Terry DiMonte, a host at Montreal’s CHOM radio station, who has known Mr. Trudeau for over two decades. “He’s put that behind him.”

Mr. Trudeau proved his political chops, friends and analysts say, when he first ran as a Liberal candidate for the country’s parliament in 2008. He chose not to run in a safe electoral district that his father represented in west Montreal, but rather an ethnically diverse part of the city where Quebec’s independence movement enjoyed strong support.

Part of the reason was to debunk his critics, who claimed he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and had everything handed to him. He won election to Parliament in 2008, and was re-elected in 2011 and again on Monday. “His father held the kids to a high standard,” Mr. DiMonte said. “People have constantly underestimated this guy.”

—Jacquie McNish also contributed to this article.

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