

International

After separating from his wife, Trudeau searches for a new image

By Norimitsu Onishi
The New York Times



Doug Mills/The New York Times
Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his estranged wife, Sophie Gregoire Trudeau, at the G7 Summit in Charlevoix, Quebec, Canada, five years ago.

VANCOUVER, British Columbia — In 2005, Justin Trudeau, the son of a legendary Canadian prime minister, and Sophie Gregoire, a well-known television journalist, married inside a stone church in Montreal's wealthy, French-speaking enclave of Outremont.

"I'm the luckiest woman in the world," the bride said to a crowd of onlookers as she entered the church. Under a sunny sky, the couple drove away in a Mercedes roadster that belonged to Mr. Trudeau's father, Pierre Trudeau, producing an iconic wedding photo.

"The wedding was talked about a lot — maybe not as much as Celine Dion's, but it was talked about," said Genevieve Tellier, a political science professor at the University of Ottawa, referring to the singer who is from Quebec. "It was a media event."

Over the next decade, Mr. Trudeau, with his wife and their three children, shrewdly crafted an image that became integral to his rapid ascent — that of a modern husband, father and political figure, who would go on to win votes with a mix of idealism and glamour.

Nearly eight years ago, Mr. Trudeau was swept into Canada's highest office on a wave of "Trudeaumania," a fresh-faced leader who championed the idea that a more progressive, diverse and open Canada would make the country stronger and elevate its global standing.

Mr. Trudeau also succeeded in casting himself as an energetic, youthful prime minister and father beyond the country's borders, and with his family often by his side at world events, he became an international star.

But Mr. Trudeau, 51, is entering one of the most turbulent chapters of his career after separating from his wife of 18 years, forced to publicly weather the family's situation while facing an increasingly skeptical electorate.

Mr. Trudeau, who has clung to power in a minority government following his re-election in 2021, has vowed to run for a fourth term,

though many experts say voter fatigue will likely force him to step aside for someone new.

In announcing their separation last week, the Trudeaus said they would raise their children in a "collaborative environment," including vacationing together, even as they themselves will maintain different homes.

Mr. Trudeau was scheduled to take a family vacation this week, together with Gregoire Trudeau and their children, just as he has done countless times in his nearly eight years in office.

But this time, when the family returns to Ottawa, Ontario, the capital, things will be much different. Mr. Trudeau and the children will be going back to their official residence, but Ms. Trudeau will be going to her own home.

"Canadians," the couple said last week, "can expect to often see the family together," just as they have throughout Mr. Trudeau's political career.

With his communication and social media skills, Mr. Trudeau revolutionized Canada's political culture where, traditionally, a sitting prime minister's spouse could stroll through downtown Montreal or Toronto and go mostly unrecognized.

But the fracturing of a marriage that had been central to the prime minister's image will test even Mr.

Trudeau's political dexterity, experts say.

"The question now is, how will they change the message, the packaging, now that it won't be about Justin Trudeau in a relationship with his partner and their family?" Ms. Tellier said.

The couple have three children: Xavier, 15; Ella-Grace, 14; and Hadrien, 9.

Ms. Tellier and other experts said that the separation is unlikely to damage Mr. Trudeau politically and could actually elicit some sympathy among voters as the prime minister goes through an experience shared by many Canadians.

But striking the right chord will not be easy, experts say. How would Mr. Trudeau acknowledge any pain from his separation while holding on to the image of a family that still vacations and spends time together, as the couple announced?

"The problem with Justin Trudeau is that whether things are good or bad, there's always the impression that things are good," said Jean-Marc Leger, a leading pollster in Canada. "He keeps smiling; life is good. To many people, he lacks authenticity."

In recent months, Mr. Trudeau's government has been buffeted by revelations about China's interference in Canadian politics, and the prime minister has been criticized for not doing enough to combat the

problem. Polls show that Mr. Trudeau's Liberal Party has fallen behind the main opposition Conservative Party.

The right-wing populist leader of the Conservatives, Pierre Poilievre, has tried to smooth his rough edges by showcasing his wife, Anaïda, who immigrated from Venezuela as a child and lived in a working-class neighborhood in Montreal while her father worked gathering fruits and vegetables at a farm.

A week before announcing his separation, Mr. Trudeau, battling voter fatigue and possibly getting ready for a fourth election, carried out a major reshuffling of his Cabinet to bring what he called "fresh energy" to Parliament Hill. As newly appointed ministers brought their spouses for a group photo of the new Cabinet, Mr. Trudeau stood conspicuously alone, Ms. Tellier noted.

While Ms. Trudeau had been part of Cabinet reshuffle announcements in the past, her public appearances had noticeably declined in the past couple of years.

"She wasn't very present in the election campaign of 2021, while she had been very present in the previous elections, of 2015 and 2019, when she was very often at his side," Mr. Leger said. "That's when the rumors about their marriage started spreading."

The rumors circulated on and off but were mostly confined to Canada's political and media circles.

On their wedding anniversary last year, though, Ms. Trudeau wrote on Instagram that "long-term relationships are challenging in so many ways" and that the couple had experienced "sunny days, heavy storms, and everything in between and it ain't over."

In joint statements last week, released on their Instagram accounts, the couple said they had decided to separate "after many meaningful and difficult conversations" and pleaded for privacy.

Their plea has, for the most part, been heeded.

"Canadians are normally less interested in intruding on the private lives of public figures than the Americans or certainly the Brits

are, where the tabloid culture in Britain has made it open season on public figures," said Jeffrey Dvorkin, former director of the journalism program at the University of Toronto.

"Canadian culture defers a lot more than American culture does to the elites in society," added Mr. Dvorkin, who also served as vice president of news and ombudsman for NPR in Washington.

The largely muted reaction to the couple's separation — opposition politicians have not even mentioned it — stands in sharp contrast to the attention that the marriage received and that the Trudeaus clearly invited.

When Mr. Trudeau was elected prime minister in 2015, Ms. Trudeau helped burnish his image with a photo shoot in Vogue that a Canadian magazine labeled "steamy" and public appearances that encouraged comparisons to another famous political dynasty: the Kennedys.

Mr. Trudeau's captivating wife, young children and his own youthful good looks helped fuel a new generation of "Trudeaumania" — the term used to describe the popular excitement generated in 1968 when his father, Pierre, was first elected prime minister.

In 1971, Pierre Trudeau married Margaret Sinclair, who was nearly three decades younger. Their first son, Justin Trudeau, was born that year on Christmas Day. The birth of two other boys gave Pierre Trudeau a youthful profile even though he was already in his 50s when he became a father.

Pierre and Margaret Trudeau separated in 1977, while Trudeau was still in office. The breakup did not set off much of a political fallout for Trudeau, who went on to serve as prime minister until 1984, even staging a comeback after nearly year out of office.

When his marriage unraveled, Pierre Trudeau's image changed from husband and father to a single father who dated widely.

"After his separation, Pierre Trudeau became the most eligible bachelor in the country," Mr. Léger said. "Now Justin Trudeau might just become the most eligible bachelor in the country."

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