

What Impact Will Trudeau's Marital Separation Have on His Political Career?

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Global Research, August 03, 2023

[The Epoch Times](#) 2 August 2023

Region: [Canada](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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With the sudden announcement that the 18-year marriage of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his wife Sophie Grégoire Trudeau has ended and the couple is separating immediately, it remains to be seen what impact the split will have on Mr. Trudeau's image as a political leader.

Mr. Trudeau has carefully cultivated an image of a family man, with photos of the couple on holidays, trick-or-treating on Halloween, taking horseback rides with their children, and decorating the tree at Christmas.

He told The Canadian Press on Dec. 18, 2015, that his image was an integral part of his governing the country. Mr. Trudeau said he would continue to be public because he "need[ed] people to stay involved and stay engaged and stay positive about what we're doing."

"The more I can stay attentive to people and close to them, the better I will be at serving them," he said, adding that the danger of his job would be "disconnecting, getting stuck behind walls and motorcades and in the bubble."

Public Perception

Unlike in the United States, Canadians generally do not see marriage-related news about their politicians making headlines. Canada also does not have a First Lady, and the spouse of a prime minister has no official role.

Divorces while in public office are exceedingly rare, especially in Canada. Mr. Trudeau, with the news of the split with his wife on Aug. 2, has now become only the second Canadian prime minister in history to break up while holding office, following in the footsteps of his father, the late former prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

Ms. Grégoire Trudeau, as a former television host who quietly devoted time to pet causes, attracted attention in her own right, and it has been generally favourable. Similar to Mila Mulroney, wife of former prime minister Brian Mulroney, who was often photographed dressed stylishly, Ms. Grégoire Trudeau was also praised for her fashion sense.

It's not clear how Mr. Trudeau's image will be affected by the separation. The Liberals were lagging the Conservatives by 10 points in the latest [Abacus poll](#).

Marco Navarro-Génie, president of the Haultain Research Institute, says there's been a lot of speculation about the prime minister's marriage and people will be forming their own opinion. But, absent any further details about the separation, while for some the latest development may lead to a less favourable view of the prime minister, for others it may have the opposite impact, at least in the short term.

"[There may be] a little sympathy bump in the polls," Mr. Navarro-Génie said in an interview.

Although Pierre Trudeau and Justin Trudeau are the only prime ministers to have separated from their spouses while in office, they're not the only ones who were single while serving in the highest office.

William Lyon Mackenzie King was an unmarried bachelor who led his party for 29 years and served as prime minister for a total of 21 years, including during World War II. He was reportedly devoted to his mother and created a shrine for her in his library after she died.

Pierre Trudeau

Mr. Trudeau's father, who served as prime minister from 1968 to 1979, and again from 1980 to 1984, was 51 when he married his much younger wife, Margaret, 22.

As a couple, Justin Trudeau's parents drew intense media attention. Pierre Trudeau's marriage and relationship with Margaret Trudeau was widely publicized. The two separated in 1977.

Pierre Trudeau became the first prime minister who both married and publicly separated while holding office. He was also accused by his wife of giving her a black eye, after she spent time with the guitarist of the Rolling Stones band.

A statement issued at the time of their split said: "Pierre and Margaret Trudeau announce that because of Margaret's wishes they shall begin living separate and apart. Margaret relinquishes all privileges as the wife of the Prime Minister and wishes to leave the marriage and pursue an independent career. Pierre will have custody of their three sons giving Margaret generous access to them. Pierre accepts Margaret's decision with regret and both pray that their separation will lead to a better relationship between themselves."

The marriage lasted only six years, in contrast to the younger Trudeau's 18-year marriage to Ms. Grégoire Trudeau.

The two filed for divorce in 1983 and were officially divorced in April 1984. Just a few weeks later, the newly separated Ms. Trudeau made the news with her marriage to Ottawa businessman Fried Kemper. She later wrote an autobiography stating she'd had wild affairs

with movie stars, including Jack Nicholson.

Pierre Trudeau never remarried, but documents released years later show the advice he was given behind the scenes about the political implications of the change in his personal life.

A [memo](#) written to Pierre Trudeau by Jim Coutts, an adviser to the prime minister at the time, which was posted on social media on Aug. 2, the same day the younger Trudeau's separation was announced, discussed the political implications of the breakdown of the high-profile marriage of a public figure.

“This is not advice on your domestic life. However you should know what is believed and how you are perceived,” the memo said.

“Ironically the events have almost wiped out the feelings that you are uncaring about ordinary people and arrogant—people believe you are going through what they go through in life but handling it better than they could.”

It warned of the “danger that lies ahead” with the opposition and “unfriendly people in the media” trying to goad Pierre Trudeau into an “ugly exchange.” The memo said that would “do much harm and remove the good will that exists.”

It also said the marriage breakup would be “the topic at every dinner table in the country and will be for a while.” The senior Mr. Trudeau was warned to take “extreme care” to “keep the stance you have already adopted.”

Separation

Justin Trudeau and his wife posted identical statements on social media on Aug. 2, stating they would be separating “after many meaningful and difficult conversations.” The couple asked for privacy for the “well-being” of their three children, who are between 9 and 15.

The Prime Minister's Office indicated the Trudeaus “signed a legal separation agreement,” and it was reported that Ms. Grégoire Trudeau is moving to a new home in Ottawa while the prime minister will stay at Rideau Cottage, where the children are expected to remain to minimize upheaval in their lives.

The couple is said to be sharing joint custody of the children, and it was announced they would take a family vacation together later this month.

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Featured image: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his wife Sophie Gregoire wait for the arrival of Governor General Julie Payette before the Throne Speech at the Senate in Ottawa on Dec. 5, 2019. (Justin Tang/The Canadian Press)

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