

Justin Trudeau bets he can win big in Ontario without beating on Doug Ford ^[1]

Author: Regg Cohn, Martin

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EXCERPTS

Ontario is once again the big battleground in a national election campaign, but you wouldn't know it from the kid gloves worn by two of the biggest players.

Doug Ford served as a political punching bag for Justin Trudeau in the last federal campaign, when the premier's name was invoked in vain — and with venom — a dozen times on good days. Notwithstanding sunnier ways.

Now, the perfect foil is no more.

When Trudeau visited the Star's editorial board on Friday, Ford's name never came up. In a week when the Liberal leader took potshots and dodged upper cuts from premiers across the country, Ford remained the odd man out — not just out of sight, but out of the fight ahead of the Sept. 20 election.

It is a sign of the times — and the passage of time.

With the coming of COVID-19, the two erstwhile enemies joined hands as an Ottawa-Ontario tag team, lavishing praise upon one another. "You wonder why I'm always up here praising him? Because he did an incredible job as prime minister," Ford gushed at a joint appearance last year.

To be sure, there were bumps along the way: Ford demanded the federal government make our borders less porous in mid-pandemic, and Trudeau countered that Ontario had best catch up on vaccination certification.

But they are staying out of each other's way for now. Not least because they will have to come together again should Trudeau still be prime minister after election day.

There is unfinished business between them.

COVID-19 aside — or arguably as a consequence of it — child care is at the top of the Liberal agenda. At our meeting Friday, Trudeau rattled off a growing list of provinces that have signed bilateral agreements with Ottawa to bankroll its ambitious \$10-a-day child care plan.

Yet Ontario remains conspicuously absent from that list. Sources tell me there were good faith efforts to seal the deal before the election call, but Canada's most populous province is also one of the most complex — child-care spaces in high-cost Toronto would be costly to subsidize, and Ottawa must credit Ontario for what it spends on all-day kindergarten.

The two sides have been remarkably — constructively — circumspect about negotiations that came to naught or, more precisely, ran out of time. Whether Ottawa and Queen's Park can pick up where they left off depends, of course, on whether Trudeau prevails or his rival, Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole, takes power — and takes back the cash.

All that said, all the child care money in the world can't buy peace among provincial premiers.

The federal government signed off on a massive \$6-billion deal to compensate Quebec for its existing child-care system, winning plaudits from Premier François Legault prior to the campaign. But this week, Trudeau got the back of the hand from his Quebec counterpart, who signalled that the Tories were a safer bet in other areas — despite O'Toole's plan to kill the bilateral deal.

Trudeau has been taking potshots of his own at Alberta Premier Jason Kenney and Saskatchewan's Scott Moe in recent days, while leaving Ford unscathed. Part of the calculation is that there isn't as much percentage this time in roughing up an Ontario premier whose popularity has recovered from its pre-COVID-19 lows.

Ontario has the biggest share of ridings in the House of Commons and has a history of political loyalties crossing party lines across federal and provincial jurisdictions. The federal Liberals and provincial Progressive Conservatives share an estimated 15 per cent of the electorate

— voters with dual loyalties.

A poll released Friday by Campaign Research showed the federal Liberals in the lead with 37 per cent of Ontario voters, the Conservatives close behind at 33 per cent, the NDP at 22 per cent and, in a virtual tie, the Greens at four per cent and the People's Party of Canada at three per cent — the latter potentially siphoning votes from the Tories in a close race. (The online survey of 3,011 eligible voters has a comparative margin of error of two percentage points, 19 times out of 20).

The stakes are high. Trudeau's Liberals won 79 of Ontario's 121 ridings in 2019, with the Tories capturing only 36 seats and the NDP a mere six.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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