

Trudeau visits rural; why it matters

By Sarah Sobanski

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau touched down just out of arm's reach last week. He stopped in Napanee, Belleville and Peterborough over Jan. 12 and 13 on his cross-country tour to meet regular Canadians just like you and me. The goal of the tour, it seemed, was to re-establish and strengthen Ottawa's connection with rural people's needs and ideas.

According to a release by Hasting-Lennox and Addington MP Mike Bossio, Trudeau was met at Ellena's Café in Napanee by a few hundred people – one of the many stops on the first day of his tour. The release goes on to say that Trudeau took questions on assistance in dying, indigenous and veterans' issues, marijuana, the Phoenix pay system, electoral reform and much more.

It all seemed very picturesque.

If you were on social media you might have seen the influx of selfies with the prime minister – something of a phenomenon really when it comes to trends. Trudeau was out being a regular guy – as much as any man who might be required to shake hands, kiss babies and arrive by motorcade.

Word on the wire however, was critical of Trudeau's tour. Unlike the Bossio team, and the thousands of Canadians who were and are excited to meet Trudeau in the flesh as he travels across the country, some conceded that he might have better uses for his time.

Critics were curious why the Trudeau tour wasn't regimented. There were many promises made last election. Why was or is the tour not being used to speak about policy, or an update on promises made that haven't yet been fulfilled? Is the tour a distraction technique to boost federal Liberal popularity?

‘People say to me, ‘Jeez, you know, why is he stopping in Napanee?’’ explained Bossio when I spoke with him about why the prime minister's visits to rural areas mattered. ‘Yes, it's great you're accessible but people will say to me, ‘You know, you're a little over the top.’ I'm going no, I want to represent my constituents in Ottawa, not represent Ottawa to my constituents. How do I do that if I don't know what they're thinking? The only way I can find out what they think is by meeting them. The prime minister is exactly the same way. He's probably the most successful prime minister, leader, this country has ever had and maybe any country has ever had.’

Bossio has been up close and personal with Trudeau since he was elected. Speak to him about the prime minister and there seems to be a touch of awe in his voice – and why shouldn't there be? Bossio celebrated his first year anniversary of being in parliament late in 2016 – his first term as an MP. While Bossio makes it look easy, the learning curve has to be steep. He's made a lot happen for rural communities as chair of the National Rural Caucus – spearheading rural issues such as infrastructure funding, broadband Internet access and making rural concerns a larger focus point in federal platforms – but still the prime minister is the prime minister.

‘But Mike,’ I asked, ‘How much can one person from Napanee impact the prime minister?’

‘Because he listens, it actually has a big impact. The greater the voice, of course, the louder the message as far as numbers,’ Bossio replied. ‘I've had an issue and I've walked up to the prime minister and I've been blown away that it was dealt with. Yeah, OK, I'm an MP, but I'm still just one person.’

He added, ‘I can't emphasize enough how for me it means so much to know that I've got a prime minister that I can walk up to any time with an idea or an issue or a concern. He's literally stopped in his tracks and said, ‘Sure Mike, what's up? What's on your mind?’’

This tour seems to be about keeping Trudeau tangible. Maybe that's all it has to be about.

In a world where Donald Trump was sworn in as president Jan. 20, among a never-ending list of crazier things that shouldn't have happened but did, maybe a common man being able to talk to the most important face in Canada is what we need. I'll go out on a limb and suggest that we might need a whole hell of a lot more than that; but it's a start.

Food for thought if Bossio manages to get Trudeau to Bancroft.

‘Would I love to get him to Bancroft? Absolutely. [I'd say] you need to make a swing through the north too and not just through the south.’