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JOHN DEMONT: Spotlight comes back to haunt Trudeau amid blackface furor

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"Maybe this is just a man who, when he sees a spotlight, simply must step into it, like a moth drawn to a street lamp, who needs to be at the centre of things just as he is in every one of those (blackface) photos." - File

There was so much to take in when casting an eye over Justin Trudeau's blockbuster black-and-brown-faced photos: all that they seem to imply about the prime minister's core values; the jaw-dropping lack of judgment by someone who grew up in the public spotlight and even at 30 had to harbour political ambitions.

But there was also something else I felt as he stared back at the camera: the nagging feeling that maybe he just couldn't help himself.

I don't mean with the casual racism, although I personally don't believe Trudeau is a racist in the classic way that the dictionary defines it — someone who shows or feels discrimination or prejudice against people of other races, or who believes that one race is superior to another.

Instead, maybe this is just a man who, when he sees a spotlight, simply must step into it, like a moth drawn to a street lamp, who needs to be at the centre of things just as he is in every one of those photos.

I know, I know: bargain-basement Freud. But the signs, let us be honest, are unmistakable: The shirtless selfies; the admittedly impressive public physical feats (pummelling a Tory Senator in the boxing ring, balancing with only his wrists in the peacock yoga pose on the edge of a desk at a meeting); the attention-seeking socks.

Even the apparent joy he gets from surprising ordinary folks out hiking in the backwoods, or taking outdoor wedding photos, in the way that Bill Murray, the actor, gate-crashes random parties and washes the dinner dishes of complete strangers, before whispering in their ear "they'll never believe you" and disappearing into the night.

Now I have to tell you that I loved the playful nature of those Trudeau escapades. Then a friend the other day told me about a pair of pictures that a niece of his had taken with the PM earlier this year.

The context is unknown, as in who asked whom for the selfie.

In one picture she has her hair up. In the other it is down.

At a different moment in the news cycle I'd probably say now isn't that great that the prime minister let this young woman look her best for the photo.

But her uncle and I are both seeing things a little differently this week. Here is the leader of our country, we both thought, spending an extra 30 seconds burnishing his image as a good guy, a man of the people, while still as cool as Bill Murray.

Nothing, on the face of it, wrong with that. Yet I have to admit it gave me pause.

Trudeau, at 47, might be too old to be a millennial, but he's undeniably got some of the perceived traits of those folks born between 1980 and 1994, that Time Magazine a few years back labelled the "Me Me Me Generation."

The ease with social media. The "look at me" quality that manifests itself in so many ways.

Simon Sherry, a practising clinical psychologist and professor in Dalhousie University's psychiatry department, has no intention of psychoanalyzing a political candidate during an election.

But when we spoke Tuesday he said that, in a general way, something as simple as a picture can tell you loads about a person, in the same way that their actions on social media does.

He also informed me that the most self-centred people — and research shows that millennials exhibit more of this trait than previous generations — in some ways don't have much say in the matter.

"It is the social culture in which they grow up," Sherry said. "But there are also inherited traits."

So, and this is my observation not his, it is worth nothing that when Justin Trudeau came to the political fore selfie culture was also, assuredly, a thing.

But he also grew up in a house with a father who pirouetted behind the Queen, dated movie stars and wore a rose in his lapel, who jumped on a trampoline while the cameras clicked, and said "Just watch me" as the nation drew its collective breath.

His mother, Margaret Trudeau, has lived a public life too. The progeny of parents like that is unlikely to hide in the shadows. In fact, from childhood Trudeau has grown up before our very eyes.

The camera, therefore, is an old friend. He's drawn to it, always has been, even when he should know better.