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# ANALYSIS | Let's give Margaret Trudeau the respect she deserves

The return to 24 Sussex Dr. can't be easy on a family whose early years were torn apart there

By Neil Macdonald, [CBC News](#) Posted: Oct 22, 2015 5:00 AM ET | Last Updated: Oct 22, 2015 5:23 PM ET



Justin Trudeau embraces his mother, Margaret, on election night in Montreal. (Justin Tang/CP)

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## About The Author



**Neil Macdonald**  
Senior Correspondent

Neil Macdonald is a

The most arresting image of the election was made in its final moments, as the prime minister-designate made his way to the podium. He stopped to embrace a beautiful older woman.

In the shot, Margaret Trudeau cradles her son's cheeks and gazes into his eyes. After all these years, she still opens her face in public, cameras be damned.

And while it may just have been a quirk of lighting, there seemed to be more in that photo than a mother's love and pride.

Apprehension, perhaps. Her eldest son is, after all, heading back to 24 Sussex, the place she still calls "the crown jewel of the federal penitentiary system."

It is the place where, in Justin Trudeau's own words, his family was torn apart.

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Margaret Trudeau is now several times a grandmother; a retiring figure not terribly well known anymore to most Canadians.

There was a time, though, when she was one of the most famous women

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Senior Correspondent for CBC News, currently based in Ottawa. Prior to that he was the CBC's Washington correspondent for 12 years, and before that he spent five years reporting from the Middle East. He also had a previous career in newspapers, and speaks English and French fluently, and some Arabic.

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alive. Not just national fame, but consuming, global, Angelina Jolie fame.

Few Canadians had ever attained that sort of recognition. And in those more provincial days, Canadians seemed to resent it. We made her pay for it, too, I am ashamed to say.

Maggie, as the Ottawa press condescendingly called her, didn't have a malicious bone in her body.

She was guileless, and we were predatory. Our stories were full of snide references to the "flower girl" our Jesuitical prime minister had brought home.

We behaved like Hollywood paparazzi. When she ran off to party with the Rolling Stones (who of us wouldn't have if we'd had the chance?) we became night crawlers.

We hounded her. We would call every big hotel in Toronto, trying to imagine pseudonyms she might be using, using pseudonyms ourselves.

She landed a role in a film, *Kings and Desperate Men*. It was never released. We grinned.

She turned up dancing at Studio 54 (a place we'd never have been allowed near, let alone inside). We sneered.

She decided to become a photographer. We snarked. King Hussein of Jordan presented her with a full collection of Nikon equipment. We demanded to know if she'd paid tax on it.

## Wait in the kitchen

After she enrolled in a photography course at Algonquin College, I was dispatched to the school by the Ottawa Citizen to scare up some gossip.

We wound up in an elevator together. I asked, stupidly, why she'd enrolled, and she said, reasonably, that she wanted to learn about photography, and I raced back to the newsroom with my I-spotted-Maggie scooplet.

To his enormous credit, Charley Gordon, my first city editor, spiked that story.

We are going to leave this woman alone, he ruled. I know for a fact that that decision eventually helped cost him his job.

Anyway, Margaret — I really should call her Mrs. Trudeau — did stay friendly with news photographers. They were a tight, closed bunch, and their contempt for wannabees was legendary, but they let her in.

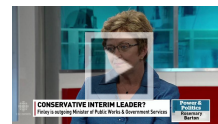
Lynn Ball, an old Citizen colleague, remembers knocking on the door of 24 Sussex in 1974 with Fred Chartrand of Canadian Press, after Trudeau won a majority. (Anybody could knock on that door back then).



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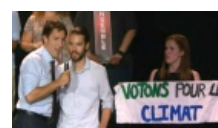
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The cover of Time magazine in 1974 when Pierre Trudeau won his majority back. Photographer Lynn Ball of the Ottawa Citizen took the shot after knocking on the door of 24 Sussex that night. (Courtesy Lynn Ball)

The staff opened the door, and the pair waited for Canada's first couple to return, and then they all spent awhile on the back porch talking about the victory, and then the PM said it was time to leave.

"Margaret tugged on his arm, and smiled, and told him sort of seductively: 'We have things to do, Pierre,'" remembers Ball.

Reflexively, Ball lifted his Hasselblad and his bare-bulb flash and hit the button. The picture made the cover of Time magazine.

Rod MacIvor of the UPI met her in 1975. He was in the line at a press reception, and she asked him for photo lessons.

A few weeks later, his pager rang, and it was her, and she wanted a lesson, and she wanted it immediately.

"The butler showed me to an upstairs room, and I didn't know it then, but she'd decided to make it her private room, and she'd locked it to the world. She didn't even want the staff there; a friend of hers brought her a picnic lunch while we talked."

## Her business

MacIvor showed her how to use a news camera — she knew nothing — and lent her his spare, a Nikkormat SLR. Then his pager went off again.

Get over to Rideau Hall, he was told. The governor-general, Jules Leger, was appearing before cameras to show he'd recovered from a stroke.

"She said she wanted to come with me and try out what she'd learned," MacIvor says. "Which was against all protocol, but what was I supposed to say, no?"

MacIvor went downstairs to wait (Pierre Trudeau asked him to sit in the kitchen).

Then, having changed into work boots and a bandana, she showed up with his camera slung around her neck, and as she followed him across the street to Rideau Hall, he snapped a picture that went into his private

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Turned out she was a pretty good photographer herself.

"She took very romantic images," says MacIvor. "She'd write something, like a poem, then throw the pen down on it, or a rose, and take a picture of it. She had a feeling for a picture."

A few months later, MacIvor got a phone message: "I won't be able to make it to our lesson, Rod. They're locking me up."

"I called her and said 'Margaret, don't do this to me. I work for a news agency. Are they locking you up against your will?' She said no, I have to do this. The doctors agree."

Margaret Trudeau was being treated for mental illness. It would have been huge news, but MacIvor kept it to himself. Her business, he figured.

### 'Half-crazy'

Of course, Margaret Trudeau has since talked publicly about her bipolar disorder, and the way she lived her life back in those days.

On CBC's *As It Happens* the other night, she laughed that glassy laugh of hers, and said she can get away with anything, because "I'm half-crazy, or half-demented."

It was self-effacing, and it was utterly charming. Except our new prime minister lived all this, and must have obsessed over it. I know I would have.

He grew up watching his mother patronized, and chased, and mocked. Even in the past few years, garbage-mouth media types on the political right have scolded her self-righteously.

Justin Trudeau seems to carry no grudge, though. He actually defended a reporter against hecklers in the campaign's final days.

But MacIvor, who went on to document Pierre and Maggie and their kids to an extent few other Canadian journalists could even dream of, says the pain lingers.

"I asked him to come to one of my exhibits [of Trudeau pictures] after his father died," he says. "And he said 'I just can't, man. Maybe someday, but not now.'"

"I wish he could have, but I understand. I mean, that was his family album up on the wall."



A young Margaret Trudeau joins the press corps for a day at a news conference at Rideau Hall. 'She had a feeling for a picture,' says former UPI photographer Rod MacIvor. (Courtesy Rod MacIvor)





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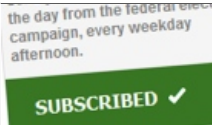

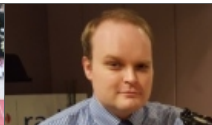




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