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Trudeau takes a crash course in politics

VANCOUVER

A few hours before Prime Minister Trudeau arrived in Kamloops last Friday, a local open-line radio show was running a feature entitled, "What would you like to ask the Prime Minister?"

A group of local Liberals were listening to the show when a teenage caller said, "I would like to ask the Prime Minister: What was your first job?"

"Prime Minister!" answered one of the locals with a huge guffaw.

There was enough truth in that exaggeration about Pierre Trudeau's political career to make it sting.

It took him only three years after 1965 to graduate from backbencher to Prime Minister. When he moved into the leadership of his party and nation, his knowledge and vision of Canada were matched by his almost total ignorance of the party apparatus.

That didn't matter in 1968, when the elixir of Trudeaumania invigorated the

party as it swept the country. But by last October's election, the Prime Minister's remoteness from the party helped isolate his own campaign from the real political concerns of many Canadians.

Between 1968 and 1972, the party tried to compensate for Trudeau's lack of experience with a complex series of internal structures. There were regular meetings of the "political cabinet" to bring party officials into frequent contact with Trudeau and his ministers. In every province, party officials and elected members shared positions at the top of the organizational pyramid.

Despite these structures, the important decisions about the campaign were made within the cabinet and the Prime Minister's office.

As one senior party official said to the Prime Minister toward the end of the campaign, when signs of disaster were beginning to penetrate the system, "We've been talking but no one has been listening."

This is what Trudeau has been trying to remedy since the election.

It has been a crash course, as one of his advisers put it, "in getting the feel of the party" for the first time in his life.

The format has been roughly the same in Winnipeg and Regina, at a series of meetings in Ontario, and in Vancouver this past weekend. Toronto will be next, at the end of this week. Public appearances are kept to a minimum while the main part of the Prime Minister's schedule is devoted to closed sessions with party officials and members from all levels.

For many of these people, it is the first time that they have had a chance to talk directly with the Prime Minister.

In Vancouver on Saturday, for instance, during a morning meeting with the provincial executive, he was reminded in so many words that this was the first time he had held such a session despite the fact that both polit-

ical and family activities bring him to this city frequently.

There has also been a careful effort to expose the Prime Minister to dissident opinion within the party. In Vancouver, the session with the party hierarchy in the morning was followed by a lunch at which a selected ginger group of young Liberal lawyers and businessmen were invited to tell the Prime Minister exactly what they thought was wrong with the party in British Columbia.

The nucleus of the luncheon, attended by about 30 people, was the "Chowder Group" of volunteer organizers who started, about a month ago, to gather here every Friday for lunch and discussion of the next federal campaign. Members of the group were so critical of the organization of the Liberal campaign last October, as they spoke with the Prime Minister, that Trudeau had to be reassured that their existence didn't represent a threat to party unity in British Columbia.

Trudeau emerged from the two closed sessions to deliver, before about 2,000 Liberals, a more effective "campaign speech" than any he had given here in the last campaign.

The Vancouver process was the same as the one that had worked well two weeks earlier when the Prime Minister delivered his "in-for-keeps" speech to the Ontario Liberal convention in Ottawa. In both cases, after intensive contact with party members, the Prime Minister was given less than half an hour to prepare his own notes for an extemporaneous speech.

Both occasions lent weight to the prediction already being made by the Prime Minister's advisers in Ottawa: that his current "political education" at the hands of the party will produce a far more aggressive and politically conscious campaigner for the next election.

As Environment Minister Jack Davis said after the rousing Vancouver speech, "If this is what they mean by low profile, let's have more of it."