



REUTERS/CHRIS WATTIE

Justin Trudeau

The Canadian prime minister talks with street papers about ending homelessness, legalizing cannabis, immigration reform and other issues (that don't involve colluding with Russia)

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Editor's note: Three reporter-vendors from Street Roots' sister newspaper L'Itinéraire in Montreal were given the opportunity to interview Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Their questions and conversation spanned issues both local and global, many of which will resonate with street paper vendors and people experiencing homelessness across the world.

As the head of Canada's Liberal government, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has a lot riding on his party's revamped plan to end homelessness. Its boasts a lofty promise incomparable to the U.S. – to cut homelessness by 50 percent in 10 years, with more than \$2 billion in spending and loosening restrictions on local initiatives.

The prime minister acknowledged that the realities faced by people who are

homeless or in insecure housing vary throughout the country. "The needs and the solutions are different from one region to another, from one city to another, and even sometimes from one neighbourhood to another," Trudeau said.

Because of this diversity, the prime minister said he wanted to keep "listening to" and "working with" local organizations addressing homelessness. "The experts are the ones who are on the ground, who are doing the work and who know their environment," he said.

Trudeau prefers not to endorse the idea of a uniform national homelessness program. "Solutions generated in Ottawa and applied in the rest of the country, without fully consulting and involving community organizations, are not real solutions at all."

The prime minister had high praise for the work of organizations that support people in need through the social economy.

Housing assistance will be one of the centerpieces of the federal homelessness strategy, according to the prime minister. As Ministry of Parliament for the Montreal

district of Papineau, Trudeau says he is aware of the "endless wait" for social housing. "We're working on speeding up that process," he said.

Three vendors with Street Roots' sister paper L'Itinéraire recently spoke with Trudeau about his agenda around homelessness and an array of issues.

Jean-Claude Nault: *Your national housing strategy includes several elements – maintaining existing housing units, shelter allowance payments and construction of affordable housing units. In Montreal alone, 24,000 households are on the waiting list for affordable housing. My question is simple – how many affordable housing units will be built or under construction in Montreal before the October 2019 federal election?*

Justin Trudeau: Let me tell you that as MP for Papineau, I've had many conversations with people who are stuck on endless waiting lists for affordable housing. We know how much pressure there is. That's why our investments are going toward a real national housing strategy.

Under (Stephen) Harper's previous government, the federal government had moved away from that.

We know that new affordable housing units need to be built, but we need to leave enough money to invest in improving existing housing stock. Again, we will ensure that (the funding) is fairly distributed and proportional across the country. We've made significant investments since we've been in power. With the housing strategy, of course it's going to take some time to build all those buildings and apartments, but we're working on it now.

Isabelle Raymond: *Some of our vendors who have experienced homelessness have transitioned from soft drugs to hard drugs. Cannabis can have devastating effects on people who suffer from psychosis. I've already had psychosis myself. After legalizing cannabis, what will you do to make young people and vulnerable people aware of the risks?*

J.T.: First of all, the awareness-raising work won't be done after legalization, but here and now. We're working on an awareness campaign and investing to bring about a better understanding of the impact of cannabis and the harmful effects it can have on individuals and society.

We've observed that the current approach isn't working. It's too easy for a young person to have access to cannabis as it stands now, and all the profits are going to organized crime. We want to be able to regulate and control cannabis so that the profits from cannabis sales are invested in our health system and in advertising campaigns that discourage people from using it.

There's one other element that will radically change. We see that, for a number of people, cannabis is a gateway that can lead to other substances. Why? Because when you buy cannabis from someone who has, in their other pocket, harder drugs that they're potentially going to try to sell you, that can lead to other drugs.

But if cannabis is sold in a controlled and regulated environment, where nothing else is being sold, the salespeople won't sell you crack or crystal meth or anything else, and it won't be a gateway toward worse things.

Mostapha Lotfi: *Last year, you committed to advancing the right to housing for all Canadians. Internationally, Canada is a signatory of the International Covenant on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights, which enshrines the right to adequate housing. Why are you hesitant to make the right to housing part of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms?*

J.T.: We're advocating for a human rights-based approach to housing, and that's not the same as recognizing a human right to housing. I could say to you that yes, you have a right to housing, but if your housing is in northern Saskatchewan ... if we make the right to housing too prescriptive, it can lead to unintended consequences that aren't necessarily positive.

Our approach is different. It's an approach that has been praised by the United Nations. We're putting human rights, the right to dignity, to freedom of choice, to

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