

# His Legacy

Pierre Elliott Trudeau 1919-2000

by Johan D.Tangelder

Pierre Elliott Trudeau was an allusive and formidable politician, who made his personal agenda Canada's agenda. He was greatly admired for his intellect, anti-establishment character, quick wit, and antics. Little was known about him and his agenda until he suddenly arrived on the national scene in the early sixties and successfully sought the leadership of the federal Liberals.

Many hailed him as the nation's savior. Yet, his record reveals the opposite. In 1968 he succeeded Lester B. Pearson as Prime Minister. When he decided to retire after his famous walk in the snow in February 1984, the Liberal party had slipped to its lowest levels of popularity, stigmatized by budgets that failed to reduce unemployment, and by a nation increasingly cynical of its leader. At his death, the media revived Trudeaumania and canonized him. But some didn't succumb to the hype and had a more realistic assessment of Trudeau's legacy. On the one hand, Michael Bliss, the author and professor of history at the University of Toronto, observed in a commemorative *Time* magazine (Oct.9, 2000) article that Canada should consider itself lucky to have been saved and shaped by Trudeau. He noted that "Trudeau glittered and flashed with clarity and conviction and determination. No one in public life came close to being his equal." On the other hand, Diane Francis opined in the *Financial Post* (Oct. 14, 2000) that "Trudeau was a terrible manager. With the exception of his beneficial Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Trudeau's tenure was an unmitigated disaster of third-world style market intervention, cynicism and statism."

## The Media

It is safe to say that to a large extent the media was responsible for the build-up of Trudeau in

the 1960s. They were mesmerized by the new political star, focusing on his unconventional behavior. Trudeau looked good on television. It served him well in his campaign for the leadership of the federal Liberal party and the 1968 election campaign that followed. Newspapers and magazines heralded the arrival of Trudeau with great fanfare and built up what came to be known as Trudeaumania. As his sister, Suzette Rouleau, expressed it, “My goodness, Pierre is like a Beatle!” Trudeau was the great beneficiary of this uncritical and adulating reporting. Trudeau was co-founder of the left-wing magazine *Cite Libre*, which had an impact far greater than its tiny circulation and irregular publishing schedule would suggest. His writings advocated a complete revamping of Canada’s political process. But to their shame, the media failed the public by not explaining his radical views.

## **Religion**

Trudeau’s religious beliefs were impacted by his Roman Catholic upbringing and his enchantment with Eastern mysticism. He had grown up in Quebec when the Roman Catholic church was at the pinnacle of its power. The church hierarchy dominated the lives of French Canadians from the cradle to the grave. The church was also inseparable from the political system. When he traveled in Europe, the Middle East and Asia in 1948-49, he became attracted to Eastern religions. He saw them as religions of love “rather than ethics or morals or obligations or principle.” He said, “I don’t like religions that make people do things because the Commandments say to do them, I would like religion to be the inner thing which commands you.” His reaction to entrenched Roman Catholicism in Quebec and his enchantment with Eastern mysticism impacted his political philosophy. His perspectives on authority and government were not founded on divine law and natural law. He explicitly rejected the traditional basis of authority: God, church, and nature. He claimed that “there are no absolute truths in politics.”

Trudeau divorced Christianity from public life. He believed that the Christian faith is a private relationship between God and human beings. Religion has no place in the public square. Fr. de Valk observed, “It has been Trudeau’s contribution to Canadian political life to articulate the view of secular political liberalism that, in modern times, God and religion have nothing to do with public and political

life.” But it was one thing for Trudeau to say, “the state has no business in the bedroom of the nation.” It was quite another to say that God has no place in public life.

## **Democratic Socialism**

Trudeau was not a liberal but a socialist. According to him, the future belonged to international socialism. In 1947-48, Trudeau met the renowned leftist-socialist professor Harold Laski at the London school of economics. The latter claimed in his celebrated work, *A Grammar of Politics*, that “there cannot, in a word, be democracy, unless there is socialism.” Trudeau described Laski as a “most stimulating and powerful” influence. In 1956, Trudeau was active in the short-lived group of leftist radicals known as the Rassemblement. The goal of the organization was to build “a movement of education and democratic action.” In 1963 Trudeau promised to campaign for the NDP and defeat “Pope Pearson.” He was also concerned about “the anti-democratic reflexes of the spineless Liberal herd” who followed Pearson “with the elegance of animals heading for the trough.” Political strategy and expediency led to Trudeau’s decision to work from within the Liberal Party. This was possible, as Christina Newman commented, because “Canadian liberalism is an ideology as malleable as Silly Putty.” Having switched his support from the NDP to the Liberals, he was elected to the House of Commons in 1966.

Trudeau expounded his socialist views through his writings. In *The Practice and Theory of Federalism*, an article in *Social Purpose for Canada* (U of T Press, 1961), Trudeau revealed that he was a true socialist, humanist and a democrat with a revolutionary, radical socialist agenda. After stating that “radicalism can more easily be introduced in a federal society than in a unitary one,” he continued “In consequence it should follow that Canadian socialists must consider federalism as a positive asset, rather than as an inevitable handicap....I should like to see socialists feeling free to espouse whatever political trends or to use whatever constitutional tools happen to fit each particular problem at each particular time.” And “socialists, rather than water down their socialism, must constantly seek ways of adapting it to a bicultural society governed under a federal constitution.” Even after Trudeau joined the Liberals, he never deviated from the revolutionary ideology espoused in his earlier writings.

Trudeau's revolutionary ideology led to some strange friendships. It may be instructive to note that one of the honorary pallbearers walking behind Trudeau's casket was the Cuban dictator Fidel Castro. Castro and Trudeau had a long-standing friendship. Trudeau's admiration for Castro's leadership dated back to at least the early sixties. He favorably quoted the Frenchman, Michel Drancourt's recommendation: "To combat 'American imperialism', a few countries, and France in particular would engage in a kind of enlightened 'Castroism.'" When in 1976 Castro dispatched Cuban troops to Angola to support the Marxist-Leninist Popular Liberation Movement, Trudeau told reporters that he was impressed with Castro's great knowledge of Africa and understood that Castro had committed his troops in a distant civil war only "after a great deal of thought." Trudeau aided this Soviet backed intervention by letting Cuban transports refuel in Newfoundland. The Trudeau government gave Cuba \$4 million in grants and \$10 million in loans, at 3 percent over 30 years, with repayments starting in 1982. In other words, Canadian taxpayers' money was used to prop up a communist dictatorship at incredible low interest rates, while Canadians had to pay four times as much for their loans. In the early sixties, the Cubans were operating schools for guerilla warfare in Quebec, and in 1976 they ran a school for spies. Castro is no friend of democracy. He persecutes Christians and jails dissidents. Tens of thousands have fled his country.

Trudeau also embraced other Communist despots. On his four visits to China between 1960 and 1979, he played the role of appeaser and apologist. In his *The Practice and Theory of Federalism*, Trudeau appeared favorably impressed by Mao Tse Tung's version of Marxism. In 1973, he even defended Mao's destructive policies in Canada's Parliament.

## **Parliament**

Trudeau was no lover of Parliament (the House of Commons). His reforms fundamentally transformed it. Representative democracy was shoved aside in favor of "participatory democracy." The latter means that people are able to take direct action in industrial, educational, and governmental decisions. It turns a representative body into a direct "people's democracy," but without decision-making power. But, as Philip C. Bom observes in *Trudeau's Canada: Truth and Consequences*,

“The introduction of participatory democracy through Parliament means the inevitable end of Parliament as a liberal representative body and a meaningful institution for decision making.” Bom points out that Trudeau did not really believe in a liberal democracy, in which ordinary citizens through their MPs lead the nation. Bom comments that Trudeau “acted more like an extra-parliamentary figure who considered himself under no obligation to respect the wishes of the people, or their elected officials.” The reforming of rules which Trudeau proposed went to the heart of Canada’s parliamentary system of government, in particular the proposals to change the Question Period and the timetable to debate legislation. Walter Stewart observes in *Shrug: Trudeau in Power* that Trudeau considered the Commons a place where, on occasion, the government may be required to explain its actions to the people, but mainly as a place where the nation can keep score until the next election. Opposition MPs may criticize the government but they may not block it or deflect it from its purpose. As Ivan Head, Trudeau’s legislative assistant said, “The opposition may criticize us all they like, but we must be allowed to get our legislation through.” Stewart notes that Trudeau believed that he had been elected to rule as best he could for a period of five years, or until he called an election. And Stewart adds, “What that implies is not parliamentary democracy, but an **elected dictatorship** of limited duration.” In a sneering attack on the critics who opposed the will of his government, Trudeau said, “I think we should encourage members of the Opposition to leave. Every time they do, the I.Q. of this House rises considerably. The best place in which to talk, if they want a forum, is of course Parliament. When they get home, when they get out of Parliament, when they are fifty yards from Parliament Hill, they are no longer Hon. Members - **they are just nobodies**, Mr. Speaker.” Trudeau’s public disrespect for Parliament was manifested by calling the representatives of the people not only “nobodies,” but also “idiots” and his own Liberal backbenchers were referred to as “trained donkeys.” Walter Stewart charges that these remarks reflect “the careless contempt shown by the Prime Minister for the institution of Parliament, its tradition and rules.” Trudeau believed that participatory democracy involved the concept of “leadership democracy.” He believed in consultation of the people, but planned policy and presented decisions from the top and then educated the public to accept them. His government concentrated political power in the hands of a small elite “supergroup,” in and around the Prime Minister’s Office, of which only some were actually elected. In other words, Canada was no longer run by Parliament, or the cabinet, or even the party in power; it

was run by the Prime Minister and his own personal power bloc. And Robert Fulford observed in the *National Post* (Sept.29, 2000) that Trudeau “kept his own cabinet on a short leash and made free discussions of issues a punishable offense. More importantly, he withdrew most of the power of the ministers and centralized all authority in his office and the Privy Council office.” No wonder that, in the winter of 1977, a joint Commons-Senate Committee said that Parliament had lost power over decision-making.

## **Trudeau’s Legacy**

How is Trudeau to be remembered? Trudeau’s policies left Canada more divided than ever, weighed down by a crushing national debt, and with a highly centralized government. He managed to alienate the West with his wheat and oil policies. In 1968, he remarked in an incautious opening statement at a Liberal Party gathering in Winnipeg, “Well, why should I sell the Canadian farmers’ wheat?” The Trudeau government’s National Energy Program further alienated the West. Many Albertans argued that while the federal Liberals did not need their votes, they were able to buy Eastern votes with Alberta oil, which they priced well below world oil prices. Because of the policy of controlled oil prices and special federal taxes during the 1970s and 1980s, the loss of revenue to Alberta was approximately \$60 billion.

Many Canadian hailed the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* as Trudeau’s greatest achievement. I beg to differ. In my article, *The Disunity Charter (Reformed Perspective, June 1996)*, I pointed out that Canadians have never been asked what they think of the charter. It was forced upon them. It became the property of unelected judges rather than of the people’s democratically elected representatives. It became the supreme law of the land, superior to parliament, and a lawyer’s delight. Trudeau’s legacy also includes the momentous effect abortion has had on our nation, the dreadful loss of millions of unborn citizens, the on-going decline of respect of life in Canada. When Trudeau was Justice Minister he urged reforms in criminal law, including liberalized abortion. In 1969 abortion became legal. Afterwards, Trudeau did not tolerate opposition to it in his cabinet or even from the public. He even hailed the abortionist Dr. Henry Morgentaler as a “good friend, a fine humanitarian and a true

humanist.” In 1970, the first full year of legalized abortion in Canada, 11,000 abortions were performed. By 1980 abortion on demand was the reality in most metropolitan hospitals. In 1988, due to a Supreme Court of Canada decision, Canada no longer had an abortion law. Canada now stands alone among civilized nations in having no legal protection whatsoever for the unborn.

Trudeau dreamed of creating a Cite Libre (Free City), a socialist utopia, through political action. But Trudeau was on the wrong side of history. The future lies with the City of God and not with Trudeau’s vision of a Cite Libre. Kingdom citizens don’t expect a new paradise here on earth. They actively wait for the coming of the City of God. Although they are not of the world they still want to be its salt and light in every sphere of life.