

Pierre Elliot Trudeau & the demise of liberal Canadian nationalism

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The death of Pierre Elliot Trudeau has precipitated a flood of media commentary, much of it aimed at consecrating the former prime minister as an icon of Canadian patriotism and statesmanship. A subsequent *WSWS* article will consider the political significance of the Canadian establishment's attempt to transform Trudeau into a Canadian hero and the extent to which this endeavour has found public support.

But our first order of business must be to make an objective assessment of Trudeau's political career.

Undoubtedly, Trudeau was the most significant Canadian bourgeois political leader in the latter half of the twentieth century. He served as Liberal prime minister from April 1968 to May 1979 and then again from February 1980 to June 1984.

Trudeau's 15 years in office coincided with a period of storm and stress for world capitalism. In the late 1960s the postwar boom unraveled, giving way to a series of economic gyrations—inflation, slump, then stagflation and slump again. Initially, the world economic crisis fueled a wave of mass struggles, many of them, like the 1968 French general strike and the 1974 British miners' strike, of an incipient insurrectionary character. But beginning in the mid-1970s, and especially after the coming to power of Thatcher in 1979 and Reagan in 1980, the international bourgeoisie mounted a counteroffensive aimed at increasing capital's share of social wealth by depressing wages, slashing social and public services, speeding up production and eliminating labor regulations and other constraints on big business.

This shift underpinned the evolution of Trudeau's politics and that of the four Liberal governments he headed. By the time Trudeau retired from public life in 1984 his liberal Canadian nationalism was in tatters. A civil libertarian, he had invoked the War Measures Act, suspending basic democratic rights for six months in 1970-71, on the spurious grounds that two kidnappings by the *Front de libération du Québec* had plunged Quebec into a state of apprehended insurrection. An avowed opponent of social inequality, he had attacked the trade unions and begun the dismantling of the welfare state.

Trudeau's first two governments (1968-72 and 1972-74) did establish several new social programs and significantly increase public spending, but these reforms failed to mollify an increasingly combative working class. Meanwhile, the cuts Trudeau made to corporate and personal income taxes, at the bequest of big business, were placing an increasing strain on the federal treasury.

Trudeau won a landslide election victory in 1974, by claiming to oppose the Tories' plans to introduce wage and price controls for 90-days. But a little more than a year later he imposed wage controls for three years in order to break a rising wave of militant trade union struggles. Then in 1978, when postal workers defied strike-breaking legislation, his government, in a foreshadowing of Reagan's action against the 1981 air traffic controllers strike, threatened mass firings. Also in 1978, Trudeau ordered an emergency \$2 billion program of public spending cuts.

In 1980, Trudeau again won election denouncing right-wing Tory

policies, only to implement them himself. This time, he and the Liberals posed as opponents of a major increase in regressive gasoline taxes, but ultimately, albeit somewhat more slowly, the last Trudeau government (1980-84) implemented similar increases. In conjunction with the provinces, the Liberals also re-imposed wage controls, although this time only on public sector workers.

More importantly, mimicking the high interest rate policy pursued by US Federal Reserve Board Chairman Paul Volcker, the last Trudeau government deliberately drove up unemployment so as to bolster the corporate drive to slash wages. In December 1982 the official jobless rate reached 12.9 percent. The high interest rate policy also caused the cost of servicing government debt to soar. Under the combined impact of high interest rates and slump, the annual federal deficit rose in 1984 to \$39 billion. Trudeau had been elected in 1968 on the pledge to establish a Just Society. But when he left office, cities across Canada were dotted with food banks for the first time since the Great Depression, and governments across Canada, most notably in Quebec and British Columbia, were slashing public services.

Crises and sharp fluctuations in popular support characterized the Trudeau regime. This political volatility was rooted in the ever-widening gap between the Liberals' reformist pretensions and their increasingly right-wing actions. Under Trudeau, the Liberals formed three majority governments: 1968-72, 1974-79 and 1980-84. Between 1972 and 1974 they were able to hold onto power in a minority Parliament only because they enjoyed the support of the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP).

In the May 1979 election, the Liberals were defeated, but Joe Clark's minority Tory government soon collapsed. In 1984, shortly after Trudeau handed over the prime ministership to John Turner, the Liberals suffered their worst defeat in history, winning just 40 seats as opposed to 211 for the Tories. Thus each successive Trudeau majority government produced greater public disaffection. Under the impact of intensifying capitalist crisis and class struggle the social basis and electoral support for liberal reformism steadily eroded, then collapsed.

Several factors contributed to Trudeau's capacity to occupy the center stage for so long and during a period characterized both domestically and internationally by sharp turns and the rapid shattering of political careers.

For a combination of reasons—his Québécois origins, his role in promoting French language rights and articulating a more assertive and ostensibly progressive Canadian nationalism, his political sangfroid, and his fierce opposition to Quebec nationalism—Trudeau came to be viewed by the ruling class as the politician best able to counter the threat of Quebec separatism.

The labor bureaucracy came to Trudeau's aid, by containing the explosive movement of the working class in the late 1960s and 1970s, channeling it in into trade union struggles, parliamentary reformism and, in Quebec, separatism.

Luck also played a role. Seven months after losing the May 1979

election, Trudeau resigned as Opposition leader in Parliament and quit his House of Commons seat, thus signaling the end of his political career. But just three weeks later the Clark Tory government unexpectedly lost a non-confidence motion. This allowed a coterie of Trudeau die-hards in the top echelons of the Liberal Party to maneuver his return to the leadership, much to the chagrin of several of his former top ministers who had their own designs on the Liberal Party leadership.

Still, to give Trudeau his due, he was a political leader of some acumen and mettle. Certainly, he was a cut above his domestic contemporaries and most of those then active on the international stage.

He combined a keen intellect, honed at several of the world's most prestigious universities, with great self-assurance and a capacity for ruthlessness. This latter quality was exemplified by his notorious reply of "Just watch me," when a reporter troubled by the appearance of soldiers on Parliament Hill during the 1970 FLQ crisis, asked how far he was prepared to go in suppressing civil liberties. Three days later, Trudeau invoked the War Measures Act.

Trudeau's privileged and bilingual family background undoubtedly shaped his personality. The son of a prominent French-Canadian capitalist and Canadian-Scottish mother, Trudeau was both part of Montreal's small French-Canadian elite and set apart from it. He had the financial means to defy authority and appears from an early age to have taken delight in scandalizing, and being seen to scandalize, authority. As a politician, Trudeau cultivated celebrity status, while poking fun at official decorum—a practice that no doubt appealed to the rebellious spirit of the late 1960s.

But Trudeau was more than a showman. A child of the bourgeoisie, he gained the intellectual independence and courage to defy, if necessary, the consensus opinion of the ruling class to pursue a policy that better served its long-term interests.

Before entering party politics, Trudeau had read and traveled widely—including visiting the USSR and China at the height of the Cold War. Moreover, he had been a leading intellectual opponent of the domination of *Québécois* social and political life by the Catholic Church and the right-wing nationalist, semi-authoritarian regime of Maurice Duplessis. Under the banner of "modernizing" and "democratizing" Quebec, Trudeau collaborated in the 1950s with the trade unions, the social-democrats of the CCF (later the NDP) and many of those who later became prominent figures in the Quebec *indépendantiste* movement, most notably Parti Québécois founder René Lévesque. The 1956 volume Trudeau edited on the 1949 Quebec asbestos strike, *La grève de l'amiante*, exposed the intimate ties between the Catholic Church, the Duplessis regime and big business and is considered to have helped prepare the intellectual-political climate for the secularization of French-Canadian society, a process that has come to be known as the Quiet Revolution.

Trudeau, however, soon found himself at odds with the Quiet Revolution's focus on using the powers of the Quebec state (whether as a province of Canada or an independent nation-state) to promote the expansion of the French-Canadian bourgeoisie and managerial class. Capitalist development had always been central to Trudeau's conception of how *le retard du Québec* (Quebec's backwardness) could be overcome. But he feared that Quebec nationalism, notwithstanding its break with Catholicism and the political right, remained rooted in an appeal to ethnicity, and if not offset by Quebec's participation in a federal state, would inevitably draw Quebec inward and toward national exclusiveness and authoritarianism.

In 1965, Trudeau entered the ranks of the federal Liberal Party. Many Liberals were aghast, for they considered Trudeau a socialist, if not a communist. But Prime Minister Pearson was intent on recruiting Jean Marchand, the president of the Quebec-based Confederation of National Trade Unions, and Marchand said he would join the Liberals and come to Ottawa only if accompanied by Trudeau.

Trudeau is often described as an opponent of nationalism. In fact he counterposed to Quebec nationalism a fervent Canadian nationalism—a political viewpoint that in the final analysis is no less reactionary and alien to the interests of working people.

Trudeau, to be sure, helped provide Canadian nationalism with a new, more progressive veneer, not unlike the reworking Lévesque made of the Quebec nationalist political tradition.

In a break with pre-World War II ruling class ideology, which held Canada to be one of the White Dominions of the British Empire, Trudeau redefined the northern tier of North America as a bilingual, multicultural, middle power, that was tied to the US through NATO and NORAD, but nonetheless sought to play the role of peacekeeper and honest broker in world affairs.

This neo-Canadian nationalism served first and foremost in the struggle against Quebec nationalism. But it was also directed at appealing to anti-big business and, within the context of the Vietnam War, even anti-imperialist sentiment, the better to channel it in directions favorable to Canadian capital. A strong federal state was posited as the pivot of a liberal-reformist agenda.

When Trudeau first came to office there were grave concerns in the Canadian elite over the country's increasing dependence on the US market and the increasing dominance of US multinationals within the Canadian economy. These concerns were heightened when Britain joined the EEC and the US, in the aftermath of Nixon's decision to remove the dollar from the gold standard, threatened to cancel the North American Auto Pact. The Trudeau government, particularly during the 1972-74 period when it was sustained in office by the NDP, introduced a number of measures to curb US investment and bolster Canadian ownership in the oil industry and other key sectors of the economy. During the 1970s, the Canadian government also pursued a policy, termed the Third Option, to boost Canadian trade with Europe and Asia.

Ultimately, this economic nationalist agenda fell victim, just as did Trudeau's liberal-reformist policies, to the development of an increasingly globalized capitalist economy and the emergence of regional economic blocs. Having failed to reduce Canada's dependence on the US, the Liberals were driven in 1984 to propose sectoral free trade agreements with Washington. Most spectacular was the collapse of the Liberals' National Energy Program, which sought to bolster the manufacturing interests based in Ontario and Quebec by providing a "made-in Canada" oil price. Introduced in 1981, the NEP was withdrawn in stages, after coming under bitter attack from the US, Canada's western-based oil industry and the Alberta government.

After leaving office in 1984, Trudeau maintained a studied and increasingly sullen silence on political issues. According to his biographer he was alarmed by the growth of social inequality and the increasingly overt subordination of all political questions to big business's bottom-line. But never did he publicly question the actions of the current Liberal government, although it has gone much further even than the Tory government of Brian Mulroney in slashing social spending and public services. Clearly, Trudeau was humbled by the palpable collapse of his own liberal-reformist agenda.

Twice, however, Trudeau did break his silence to rally opposition to proposed changes to the Canadian constitution, which he argued weakened the federal state. His interventions are believed to have been pivotal in the defeat of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Constitutional Accords. Significantly, given his public record of opposition to ethnic nationalism, Trudeau did not object to the Chretien Liberal government's flirtation with the movement to partition Quebec, in the event of a majority vote for Quebec's secession. However, partition, which has no support outside Quebec's minority Anglophone and aboriginal enclaves, is a call in all but name for the ethnic partition of Quebec.

It is a truism that the bourgeoisie long ago abandoned the

socioeconomic policies identified with Trudeau. (Indeed, so far removed is the bourgeoisie from the Trudeau era that most of the commentary on his record reveals a total blindness to the social unrest his policies were, at least in part, meant to appease.) What the ruling class celebrates in Trudeau is his legacy of a strong federal government upholding the “national” interest of the most powerful sections of the bourgeoisie, and shorn, as it has been over the past two decades, of all its liberal-reformist pretensions.



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