

TRUDEAU AS A POLITICAL THINKER

Trudeau's mind was extraordinary; his mind was a sublime one. Preternaturally intelligent he was inordinately curious. He read avidly, sometimes a book a day. As well as his expertise in federalism and bills of rights, he was expert on many things from jazz to modern art to poetry. He travelled far and wide and he was bold and adventurous in his political speculations. Allied to these gifts he possessed a razor sharp interrogative method and a remarkable facility for critical and polemical debate.

Consequently it is easy to see him as a supercharged intellectual with his academic head in the clouds dreaming impossible arguments. Some commentators fell for this view of him. Larry Zolf saw the coming of Trudeau as the emergence of a philosopher king after the long night of Mackenzie King. And who can forget the endless drumbeat of other commentators who insist on presenting Trudeau as preaching the importance of reason over passion?

In fact, though a brilliant mind, Trudeau was not interested in simply exercising it in ever more refined academic directions. From the outset, even before his liberal democratic turn after 1944, it was as if he followed the famous dictum of Karl Marx that hitherto philosophers had only interpreted the world but his goal was to change it. Trudeau was fundamentally a pragmatist and a realist. Perhaps not accidentally, he selected as his major essay topic at Harvard in January 1945 to write about 'A Theory of Political Violence' in which he explored the eternal political conundrum of the relationship of means to ends. The test of political success, he said, was the effectiveness of action. Politics, he continued, was a practical activity in which there was no a priori understanding of what would be effective. No one book or system of thought could provide a blueprint. Politics was always a venture into the unknown.

Trudeau's religious disposition evinced the same grounding in reality and praxis. Impressed by the intellectual atmosphere of post-war existentialism and phenomenology, Trudeau believed himself thrown into the world, immersed in circumstance and contingency. What he admired, he said, in religious believers was their rootedness in love and brotherhood rather than their articulation of particular doctrinal beliefs. Humans were embodied creatures, inhabiting not just actual bodies but a particular time and place. Human beings did not choose their situational predicament but they were bound to act within it. As he once said: living comes first and philosophy comes later.

This 'materialism', if we can call it that, also determined his orientation to society. Here his purpose was to discover what was primary and fundamental about the sociology of his time. And so his analysis of Quebec in the 1950s was grounded in the belief that it was actually an industrial and urban one and not a rural and hinterland society which he believed was the idealist perspective of conservative nationalists and the Church.

If, then, Trudeau was a rationalist, it was as an advocate of practical reason. Oriented to practice his world view was necessarily anti-utopian. He was if anything convinced of the limits of rational thought rather than its boundless possibilities.

But means-ends calculations were incomplete without a sense of ends or goals. What were these for Trudeau? He drew on an encyclopedia of sources to construct his moral perspective. The recurring names are those of Mounier, Maritain, Laski and Berdyaev. But there were many more: Friedrich, Wheare, Delos, Acton, Keynes, the authors of the Federalist Papers, Catholic theologians like Congar, Chenu, and de Chardin, and many others. Before he entered parliament Trudeau attended many lectures and he listened attentively in conversation. Even before 1965 he was engaged in actual politics in Quebec through his membership in the CCF and through his participation in the Rassemblement and the Union des forces democratiques.

So what moral horizon emerged from his universe of influences? It was a type of liberal democracy necessarily embedded in the urban, industrial, technological and cybernetic world of the time. Abroad it was an account that sought to transcend the polarizations of the Cold War. Hovering over all of Trudeau's thinking about the world after 1945 was the malign possibility of atomic war and the need to avoid it. His positions were neutralist and supportive of détente and he was averse to American hegemony.

The school of thought known as personalism provided him with his fundamental orientation towards the liberal democratic state. We are all persons, it claimed, created in the image of God, possessed of conscience and necessarily we must exercise our conscience in freedom. The state must respect human rights and find its legitimacy in consent. Trudeau joined to this a social democratic perspective of commitment to the welfare state, equality of opportunity and a universal minimum of economic well-being. He embraced the insights of John Maynard Keynes about the necessity of counter-cyclical economic policies by government. And he postulated an important role in the modern state for planning of different kinds. Trudeau was never a socialist in the sense of believing in the necessity of the public ownership of the means of production but he was suspicious of free enterprise and big business. He was a social democrat.

After personalism another foundational priority for Trudeau was pluralism. The modern state, he believed, democratic or otherwise, had fallen for the delusion of nationalism, that every state must be founded on one nation. Not so according to Trudeau. Wherever one looked the citizens of modern societies were willy nilly plural and multiple in their identities. The common good required that minorities must be respected as much as majorities. Out of this came Trudeau's abiding advocacy of federalism and a charter of rights.

Trudeau was always ambitious for his world view. Holding in focus the full corpus of his speeches and writings and the full extent of his actions in government we can see it as an impressive instance of a profound and morally serious mind grappling with the daunting perplexities of governing the modern state. Faced with over-arching challenges on every hand it might be presumed that even Trudeau might have found it impossible to get the balance of ends and means right in every case. Sometimes Trudeau slipped into his own utopianisms and sometimes he veered in the direction of overly pragmatic compromise. For the political pragmatist decision-making is situational and driven by context. How can any individual know everything about every complex situation? In 1970 how could Trudeau know how competent or otherwise were the police in Quebec? And in ways I do not understand how could he have offered pre-emptively such fulsome praise of Mao Zedong during the Great Leap Forward in China in 1961 when we now know that as many as 40 million Chinese were eventually to die as a consequence of Mao's policies?

Nonetheless Trudeau's political thought is a rich archive of speculation that I believe is still enlightening. But now 35 years after his retirement from political office how relevant is it? Is he not the inevitable victim of all pragmatisms, namely that the world has moved on and the new context and new contingencies are different from the old? Certainly Trudeau did not have to confront the question of climate change, for example. But the rise of the new populism finds him being supremely relevant. After all, once he had absorbed the significance of the Second World War, he had much to say about the tendencies of late capitalism to veer into authoritarianism and fascism. And let me say that in his stunning account of nationalism Trudeau speaks powerfully to us still. The self-determining nation, he says, has an inherent tendency to define itself invidiously against other nations; the trajectory of the nation is inherently discriminatory; unless care is taken nationalism results in persecution and worse. Liberals and social democrats, then, should be careful about encouraging or adopting the language of the nation.

Again within the ambit of his discussion of nationalism, consider the pertinence of his perceptive definition of 'self-determination' as being in its political disposition introverted, emotive, narcissistic and passionate, in contrast to the values of 'self-government' with its intelligent, rational and universalistic properties.

Trudeau's relevance? Let me end by quoting from the young Pierre Trudeau and maybe we can see his relevance in the context of the present day Bill 21 in Quebec: "It is the glory of democracy that it strives to apply these principles (of dignity of the person) to the political city. The conscience of the citizen is its constant reference point; it is referred to periodically at the ballot box and in the meantime one seeks by every means to discover and follow its dictates:

from it flow freedom of the press, of assembly, of speech, religious tolerance and equality before the law." He speaks to us still, if we will listen.