

**The Leadership Arts of Pierre Trudeau:
A Contrarian Perspective**

**By
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Introduction

It is not a controversial statement to say the Liberal Party of Canada is the natural governing party in Canada, having been in party for over two thirds of the 152 years as a federation, even more so when the long reign of John A. Macdonald's, Canada's best prime minister is put aside. Indeed, it is events like today's conference that the canonization process of Liberal leaders is on display, particularly when the first leader, Alexander Mackenzie is easily expunged from the record. I am fully aware that anything I might contribute to these proceedings might be quickly dismissed. After all, it is one thing to say I don't believe in God, but quite another if I said the same thing as Archbishop of Canterbury. In fact, just before the French Revolution, when France was having trouble keeping a Finance Minister, the appointment by the King of Etienne Charles de Brienne, as a replacement was also a candidate to be Archbishop of Paris. Louis XVI protested, saying "We must have an Archbishop who believes in God."

So the succession of accolades at today's conference will add to the historical record of Pierre Trudeau's legacy and I may be seen as an outlier, knowing historical narratives and myths form a legacy of prime ministers. It might be an overstatement to say the history is written by the victors, but Napoleon did have a point when he remarked that 'what is history but a fable agreed upon'. In the post-war case, in the years following the long reign of Mackenzie King, dating back to 1910 to his retirement in 1948, only two prime ministers have fundamentally changed the mind-set of Canadians.

Looking at Canada's 23 prime ministers, the Liberal narrative puts Laurier at the top, conveniently putting aside the first Liberal leader, Alexander Mackenzie, whom the Governor General largely dismissed, a PM "with the narrowness and want of lofty generosity in a semi-educated man." His time in office, after the CP railway scandal, was a time for John A.'s rebirth, yet one of Mackenzie's ill-fated legacies was the Indian Act, 1876, which is still the framework for Canada's Aboriginal policy, with his Minister in charge, David Laird, from Charlottetown.

Historians rank King highly in the packing order of Canadian prime ministers, especially his dexterous moves during wartime to maintain Canadian unity, notably on conscription, seen by the military as a necessity, by English Canada as a duty, by French Canada as an intrusion. The perilous threat of Nazism in the

1930s allows King's personal legacy of deep White Anglo-Saxon racism to mar his wartime record of accomplishment. His views were well known, because King kept a diary. In his only visit to the Far East, for a six-months tour starting in December 1908, King travelled first to London, then to Egypt by train and by ship to Cairo, before heading to Delhi. The formal part of his trip was to attend the Joint International Opium Commission in Shanghai, but the real task was to restrict Asians coming to Canada. In his diary note on departing Delhi, he expressed his real sentiments: 'It is impossible to describe how refreshing it is to be again with people of one's own color. One becomes very tired of the black races after living among them. It is clear the two were never intended to intermix freely.' In power, imbued with the White Anglo-Saxon sentiments of the American and British political elite, Ottawa introduced the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act, and in 1928, limited Japanese immigration to 150 per year.

In the post-war period, only two prime ministers have changed the fundamental mindset of Canadians, Pierre Elliot Trudeau and Martin Brian Mulroney. Canada today is no longer the prudish, bigoted, and even hypocritical society of the WASP establishment, and the empirical data laid out by John Porter's masterful, *The Vertical Mosaic*, with huge social barriers against women, French Canadians, immigrants, and the LGBT community have given way to a multicultural, bilingual society where social mobility exceeds the United States (and their myth of the American Dream), and Canada stands out with a clear acceptance of immigrants as a leading contributor to Canada as an open society.

In a similar way, Brian Mulroney turned the national policy of John A. Macdonald, with its three part strategy of defensive nationalism – tariff protection of Canada's manufacturing base, build an east-west railway to populate the West, and retain the British connection and Commonwealth ties to keep American influence at bay. Every prime minister followed Macdonald's national policy, including Pierre Trudeau, who brought in a series of policies, including ownership rules on foreign corporations, his National Energy Policy, and his Foreign Investment Review Act, to give the federal Cabinet a tool to block foreign takeovers. The US-Canada free trade agreement, and Mulroney's competitive agenda – on energy, regional development, science and technology policy, privatization, financial services reform, tax reform and trade promotion – was a deeply disruptive change in Canadian society.

Curiously, only the Liberal Party fully appreciated the changes in the electoral cycle after the era of Macdonald, which ended in 1896, when Laurier became Prime Minister. In retrospect, it was only a matter of the arithmetic of the electoral system. For 15 years, Laurier built the Liberal Party with support in all regions, including Western Canada, and he watched the Conservative Party and the efforts of Macdonald and George-Etienne Cartier, John A.'s preferred successor, morphed into a regional party with limited support in Quebec and the French speaking ridings elsewhere, especially in Ontario and New Brunswick. The fact that the Liberal Party after Laurier started a tradition of alternating leaders from English Canada and French Canada put an electoral discipline in the Liberal party structure, not only in the elected Caucus, the Senate, but at party headquarters. In the post-war period, following King's retirement in 1948, a period of 71 years, the Liberals have been in government for forty-five, essentially by cultivated their electoral base in Ontario and Quebec. Put differently, the Conservative Party faces a huge electoral burden not only to gain power, but to stay in office beyond a single majority mandate, which occurred only once after Macdonald's electoral success in 1878, by Brian Mulroney in 1988.

For every generation, it seems, the politics of Canada faces a sea change in the electoral map. Just before the Charlottetown Conference of 1864, John A. Macdonald and George-Étienne Cartier developed a new political alliance between Canada East *bleus* and John A.'s Tories in Canada West, and that pact brought them government power for a generation. Wilfrid Laurier broke the back of the Conservatives in his electoral victory of 1896, setting the Liberal Party as the true governing party for the 20th century, one of the most successful political machines in the democratic world. Despite ups and downs, Mackenzie King continued Laurier's coalition of Francophones and strong regional ministers and power brokers in each province, the pattern of every postwar Liberal prime minister from St. Laurent, Pierre Trudeau, Jean Chrétien, Paul Martin and Justin Trudeau, helped hugely by governing experience, incumbency, and feeding the Liberal patronage machine without scruples.

Pierre Trudeau ran five elections, four as Prime Minister, one as Leader of the Opposition, returning Lazarus-like after his resignation as leader in November 1979 to defeat Joe Clark in December 1980, welcoming his victory with a telling motto, "Welcome to the 1980s!" His electoral record – three majorities, two minorities, including a loss in 1979 – disguised his electoral dependency on seats

in Quebec, 56 in '68 and '72, 60 in '74, 67 in '79, and 74 in 1980, meaning outside Quebec, only once, in 1974, did he get 50 per cent of the votes, only 37 in 1968, 20 per cent in 1972 against Stanfield, 18 per cent in 1979, and 25 per cent in 1980, against Joe Clark. In fact, the legacy of Trudeau's opposition to Meech Lake, a Mulroney initiative to get Quebec's signature on the constitutional accord, as a means to address Western Canada obsession in regional representation and Senate reform made his Liberal successors – Jean Chretien and Paul Martin – weakened electorally in Quebec, 19 seats in '93, 26 in '97, 36 in 2000.

For all intents and purposes, Pierre Trudeau was his own Minister of External Affairs, while his five cabinet colleagues – Sharp, MacEachern, Jamieson, MacGuigan, Chretien - managed the bureaucracy, attended state funerals, and largely accepted Trudeau's goals and priorities, which were amazingly shallow, abstract, and academic. He inherited in 1968 a world economic order based on a multilateral system, with NATO and NORAD as the core defense features, under the American nuclear umbrella; a rules-based trade system under GATT (and later the WTO), and participation in forums such as the Commonwealth, the United Nations, and groups like the North-South to pursue Canada-made solutions and recommendations. But starting in 1971, Trudeau failed to appreciate that America was facing the problems of imperial overstrength, with the war in Vietnam, heavy defense and space spending, while many US industrial sectors were facing competitive threats – from Japan, Europe, and even the Third World. Under four Presidents, Nixon, Ford, Carter and Reagan, he made few friends in the White House, and while they appreciated his intellect, his global view, and the importance of Canada as an economic partner and ally, their quiet reaction was much indulgence as close friendship. The diplomatic realists in the major capitals appreciated the 19th century saying, 'providence is always on the side of the big battalions.'

Trudeau initiatives like the Law of the Sea, and diplomatic recognition of China, and his warnings about the North-South divide and nuclear arms were welcomed in Washington and European capitals, but there were signs his welcome mat in other forums was wearing thin, including France's refusal to make Canada a member of the G5. His 1983-'84 peace mission was accepted and tolerated as a departing leader's indulgence, because NATO and the White House were only too aware that the Kremlin, led by Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko, were

hardliners in the cold war struggle, shown by imposing military rule in Catholic Poland and shooting down a Korean Airlines plane in 1983. Thanks to the Soviet Ambassador in Ottawa, then an outcast in Kremlin intrigue, Trudeau had a chance to meet Mikhail Gorbachev at close quarters, but it was Margaret Thatcher, not Trudeau, who exploited the opening towards Soviet détente.

Mulroney learned much from the Trudeau experience, but much of his foreign policy successes were based on his close personal relations with G7 leaders, starting with Ronald Reagan, two Irishmen who could communicate as equals and allow Mulroney to be a friend and advisor on many issues not directly related to Canada, such as German unification, to a arrange of bilateral issues – acid rain, free trade, and Arctic sovereignty.

Like a Shakespearean play, Trudeau's sixteen years in office has three acts – his first term, where machinery and process marred his social justice achievements, his five year term from 1974 where drift, indecision, and internal conflict led to his defeat in May 1979, and his remarkable comeback, after excoriating reviews when he resigned in November, only to fight the Quebec Referendum and repatriate the BNA Act with the Charter in 1982. It is a telling reminder that the two biggest legacies of Pearson and Trudeau, Medicare for the first, the constitutional file for Trudeau, both required support from the Ontario Premier, both Conservatives. Yet when Brian Mulroney advanced the Meech Lake Accord, having far more support initially, with eight provinces, and 92 per cent of the population, including some in Trudeau's cabinet, Trudeau and his party refused any support, leaving a legacy that lasts to this day, including on Monday's election results.

Perceptions by Canadians of their leaders and their leadership qualities vary over time, and form part of their legacy. Among post-war prime ministers, only Trudeau and Mulroney truly changed the mindset of Canadians, and faced vitriolic and uncompromising criticism from certain quarters, but they serve as benchmarks for future governments and prime ministers. Governments and prime ministers always build on past achievements, with steady and incremental improvements on policy outcomes. Only Trudeau and Mulroney changed Canadian society in fundamental ways by pioneering new approaches and policies, whether at home or on the global stage. Unsparingly they use their

political capital with an annoyance factor, audaciously advancing new policies that went beyond conventional tinkering, and incremental change. From very different personal experience and on different issues, they extolled a largeness of vision which at the time created excitable reactions and often personal vitriol, only to see their forward-looking outlook now acceptable, and even conventional.

Biographical Note: Charles McMillan

Charles J. McMillan, Professor of Strategic Management, York University, the author of nine books, including the *Japanese Industrial System*, and a new work, *The Age of Consequence*, a focus on public policy in Canada over the past 50 years. He has published more than 100 articles in such prestigious academic journals as *McGill Law Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Canadian Public Policy*, *California Management Review*, *Journal of Business Strategy*, *Journal of Management History*, as well as in such publications as *The New York Times*, *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, *the Central Asia Post*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Financial Times*, and *The Toronto Star*.

Active in Public Affairs, he has served as Senior Policy Advisor to the Prime Minister of Canada, working on trade agreements, regional development, Pacific Rim strategies, energy policy, science and technology, and foreign investment legislation. He now consults widely to governments, multinationals, and international organizations. Active in voluntary organizations, including board membership in the National Ballet School, and past-Chair of Canada World Youth. In 2007, he was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship at Brandeis University in Boston. One of his books, now in third printing, *Eminent Islanders* received an award from the Heritage Foundation of Prince Edward Island.