

## PIERRE TRUDEAU AS GOVERNMENT LEADER AND PRIME MINISTER

My remarks this afternoon come from someone who has had a unique experience within the Liberal Party. I was lucky to be a Young Liberal in University, a member of a Liberal constituency executive, a Liberal Party staff member, an MP and Minister. For this reason, I may overlap with earlier sessions and I take the liberty of paraphrasing statements made by Pierre Trudeau.

I have long held the view that the Liberal Party at any given time reflects the personality of the Leader. This is particularly so when we hold government and was the case with Pierre Trudeau. There are others here more insightful about Pierre Trudeau the man, but few can dispute his extraordinary intellect, his analytical ability, his respect for innovative thinking and his passion for a united Canada. He approached issues from a rational rather than emotional point of view. He was more preoccupied with a concept, an idea or a policy prescription rather than with the machinery of government or bureaucratic process. He would never have described himself as a manager. In fact, more than once in caucus he challenged MP's to pursue a vision or social good rather than be preoccupied with administration. "If we are elected as a government just to manage the economy or make the trains run on time, important as it may be, then somebody else can do that. I want us to effect change in society that puts us on the right side of history. "

As a party organizer I was often told that the National Liberal Caucus is the most important regular meeting in the Liberal Party. Until 2015 it was a unique institution where elected MP's and appointed Senators met for a couple of hours in total confidence, with the Cabinet and most important, the Prime Minister, who held the joint roles of the Party Leader and Government Leader. There were no note takers or PMO staff, only a functionary from the Whips office, sworn to secrecy who basically delivered and received messages from those present, including the PM. In effect, it was a group of like-minded individuals, dedicated to Party and country, bound by the constitutional duty of being a legislator and in the case of cabinet, being part of the executive branch of government. Despite disagreements, which were frequent and sometimes acrimonious, caucus was a bonding of equals, charged for a limited time with advising, directing and leading, the duly elected Government of Canada.

With Pierre Trudeau present, sitting in caucus, week after week, was akin to attending a never-ending post graduate seminar in philosophy and logic, reflecting Pierre's own academic training and approach to life. Reason before passion and sound argument prevailed. Such was the respect held for him by caucus, interventions were generally of high quality, even on routine party or government business. The meeting featured reports from regional caucuses and then interventions from individual MP's and Senators on any item of public business. While there was discussion from time to time about Liberal Party matters, invariably questions dealt with the big public policy issues of the day, especially government strategy and tactics. Sometimes these interventions became spirited. The Constitutional debate of 1980-82 was one of the momentous, where we were in a running battle for the hearts and minds of Canadians as we attempted to implement the radical change of Patriation with an entrenched Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Week after week we would come to caucus weary and bloodied in our constituencies by the battle at hand. Week after week we would give our views and week after week Pierre Trudeau would lift us to great heights with his wisdom and passion. He said if Patriation was worth doing then we had to do it first class. We left the room united and exhilarated, ready to continue the fight which was being played out in just about every home in the country.

Ministers and their departments were often criticized for not being sensitive to constituents or the public mood. Sometimes the Prime Minister himself was rebuked. One could always tell how Prime Ministerial criticism was being received. If Pierre thought you were making a succinct argument, his laser eyes were fixed upon you. If you were cutting too close to the bone in criticizing him or his ministers, he would look at the ceiling. In that case, while you had the satisfaction of making your point, you knew it was at great cost, since you had irritated the Leader. Yet I never got any indication that Pierre held grudges. In fact, Pierre subscribed to the Keith Davey dictum that to be successful in politics “always do a favour and never hold a grudge.” Personally, I found the second exhortation tough to follow!

Throughout the entire caucus, Pierre Trudeau listened and never spoke, until the end when the Chair would give him the floor. The Prime Minister would rise, to great applause, and then perform something that has not received much scholarly attention, because caucus meetings were secret, or at least more secret than in recent times. Pierre brought the threads of discussion together in a coherent summation and in doing so would acknowledge points made by individual members. Those so recognized would straighten with pride in their seats. Those whose arguments were not accepted, were not disconsolate, because they knew they had at least had the opportunity to make their point. A successful leader of government must ensure those reporting to him or her are nurtured to feel commitment to the cause. Pierre’s caucus summations did much to achieve that goal as did other actions. Whether replying to notes sent to him in Question Period, meeting with key constituents outside the Prime Minister’s office after QP, taking a half dozen backbenchers to lunch at 24 Sussex or sending congratulatory letters on the birth of a child or the death of a loved one, Pierre was able to build solidarity with caucus.

In late 1983 as the polls dived and Caucus was becoming anxious, the Chair, to our surprise, called as the first item of discussion, the current state of the government’s unpopularity. There was a small group who wanted the PM to retire and they were organized to lead the charge for change. MP after MP, and the odd Senator, came to the microphone lamenting our standing with the public. In effect thirteen members of caucus were calling for the PM’s resignation to his face. It seemed a coup was in the making which was a shock for most of us. But as the discussion proceeded, other members who thought this revolt to be a shameful rebuke against an outstanding leader, took the floor in a spontaneous show of support, reminding all assembled of our achievements as a government under nearly sixteen years with Pierre Trudeau at the helm. The mood swung in his favour but the wound to his integrity and pride had been opened. When the PM finally rose to speak, he spoke from his heart and with utmost conviction. Here, I paraphrase his words: “The debate today was honest, if not entirely welcome. You know, I hadn’t been involved in party politics before I ran for Parliament, but after nearly twenty years I have come to love and respect the Liberal Party and its members. I want you to know that I would do nothing to hurt the Party’s prospects and when it comes to my future, I will do what is in the best interest of the Party and the country. But I will say one thing, never again will I sit here and be humiliated as I have been this morning.” He forcefully closed his signing book and left the room to a standing ovation. The malcontents quickly slipped out of the room.

Despite his predisposition to reason and logic, Pierre could be passionate, especially as it related to unshakable commitment to a united Canada and Quebec’s place in the federation. He also was passionate in defending the rights of individuals. He once remarked to our Liberal friend Bruce Powe that as a youth he was obsessed with liberty but when he entered politics that obsession shifted to equality of opportunity. In my dealings with him there was no question that his belief in the equality of

individuals had origins in his youth, particularly from his frequent world travels where he met people of all national and racial backgrounds. He believed everyone had a right to make one's case and be accorded the respect of a fair hearing. For me, he was one of the most honest and decent people I have ever met in politics, a trade often replete with treachery and deceit. Yet, Pierre was human. He could be flippant when pressured unfairly and for many he sometimes appeared arrogant or uncaring. However, this so-called arrogance was mis-labelled and often was a product of a private, introspective, even shy personality.

As the years pass, there are few of us left who can proudly say they served in Pierre Trudeau's cabinet as ministers or Principal Secretary, like Tom. In August 1983 the Prime Minister called to say he was doing a cabinet shuffle and wanted to shuffle me in. This began a fascinating year of observing Pierre Trudeau more closely as the Leader of the government.

In conversation with Macleans, June 1st, 1969 Pierre replied to the question he was often asked as to which of his official duties he enjoyed most. "The answer is two, each almost equally. One is chairing a good cabinet meeting and the other is sitting in the House of Commons either when specific legislation is being debated or during question period." He actually preferred the parliamentary stage where, "at two o'clock there was a sense of exhilaration. But a good cabinet meeting on a good subject is also very interesting. There you see strong men with great experience in politics or in other fields debating a question and arriving at a conclusion." Of course, the reference was telling, there were no women in his first government and the minister responsible for the Status of Women was Bob Andras!

Pierre Trudeau loved to chair Cabinet meetings which were well organized. Every Friday we got cabinet documents for the following week's meeting, usually on a Thursday. This was supposed to give ministers time to read the Memoranda to Cabinet, often adding up to 100 pages of detailed argument and recommendations. Yet, most ministers only delved into the detail of MC's that related to their mandate or political interest. Legend has it, that he not only read the executive summary prepared by PCO, but he read every MC. He encouraged discussion and, reflecting his Cartesian thinking, often interjected to cast doubt on a proposition, in the hope that the sponsoring minister would demonstrate the soundness of what was being proposed. It was difficult to argue with someone so impeccably informed, but such was his fundamental belief in the need for thoughtful deliberation, all entreaties were welcome, and this created problems in time management. Debate was frequently heated on many issues despite the horse trading and cajoling that had gone on between ministers before Cabinet. Pierre loved to hear his ministers engage in crossfire and he was loath to cut anyone off so frequently the appointed adjournment time of twelve thirty would approach without an end in sight. He would say "we had better return after Question Period so we can reach a decision." There were often groans, especially for some with a stake in the issue being discussed. WE all had other things scheduled like departmental or stakeholder meetings. Even more frustrating, some would have flights scheduled to discharge official business or Party commitments somewhere across the country. One minister adept at prolonging debate to try to inconvenience opponents to his item for discussion, was Eugene Whelan. We knew when he was given the floor we were in for a long presentation. Sometimes this was even too much for the PM and he tried to cut Gene off, but Gene would continue, because he had deliberately removed his hearing aid, anticipating Pierre's move!

There is little time to discuss Pierre Trudeau, the statesman but there is no doubt in my mind that arguably, Pierre Trudeau did more as Prime Minister by his actions and by his policies to shape the perception of Canada on the world stage than any leader in our history. He took Canada beyond a nation with a rich indigenous people's heritage with two official languages to mold us as a welcoming home for people around the world with his policy of multiculturalism. As one of his ministers to serve in the multiculturalism portfolio I came to appreciate his genuine commitment to the policy which he demonstrated at home and abroad. I remember at my very first caucus meeting after the 1974 election, there was discussion on the backlash towards the government's 1967 immigration policy which permitted large numbers of people from non-traditional source countries to make Canada their home. The views of some Members, reflecting what they had heard at the door, shocked many of us, offering an analysis which some today would decry as a well disguised dog whistle. A heated debate ensued and towards the end of caucus the dog whistle was silenced when Senator David Croll, Canada's first Jewish MP, who represented Toronto Spadina, rose and electrified all assembled with a passionate defence of a non-discriminatory immigration policy and the benefits of multiculturalism. Again, I paraphrase. "We have the second largest land mass on earth, and we need people. It's in our interest to see our population grow and if we don't welcome others they will come and take it from us. We must share our bountiful position with others." Pierre fixed his eyes on Croll for who he had a genuine affection and a smile crossed his face. Croll received a standing ovation, led by the PM. In his summation Pierre thanked all caucus members for their interventions but ended with respectful praise for Croll who had effectively summed up the values of inclusion that were a cornerstone of the Liberal government. This summed up Pierre Trudeau in government, thoughtful, well prepared, fair, visionary and progressive.