

Massey College  
Friday 10 Jan 2020

Panel 1 : Liberal Internationalism -  
Is Pierre Trudeau's World View Obsolete ?

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen – welcome to the 20s !

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen **and** philosophers **and** divines.”

The first part of that quote is pretty commonplace, but few recall how it continued.

**Pierre Trudeau was no “little statesman.”** In fact, last week, the Association for Canadian Studies voted him the greatest Canadian Prime Minister of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. As necessary, he had the wisdom and courage to hold conflicting, sometimes contradictory views.

By any measure he was an exceptional man – brilliant, brave, visionary, forceful. From my perspective his reputation for greatness is multifaceted but in essence it stems from his willingness to risk all when he and many others believed the world was facing the very real prospect of a nuclear **Apocalypse**.

This morning I'll explore **selected aspects of Pierre Trudeau's world view**, and the actions he took as **one of the West's elder statesmen to make his world and our country better, safer places**.

My **comments cannot be comprehensive** – not in in the short time available. I will therefore **focus on his geo-strategic engagement** and spend much of my allotted time on his **Peace Initiative** as it encapsulates so much of who he was and how he saw the principal challenges to world order and stability.

I'll leave it to you to determine whether there would be much **room on today's international stage for such an audacious and creative visionary**, or, indeed, how he would have fared and what he would have done in the face of the miserable international circumstances in which we find ourselves.

**I will not discuss to any extent his approach to the development challenge**, as I assume my friend **Maureen O'Neill** will do that in her usual magistral fashion. **He did care**. He was among the early adopters of the need to articulate and close the gap between the First and Third worlds – the North and the South - **but I do not believe** that he and his Governments did enough to alleviate the plight of the bottom billions.

**Canada's best development assistance performance**, in terms of GDP per capita expenditure, **was achieved under his leadership, but 0.54% is hardly something to crow about**, and today's figure is only about half of that.

Similarly, while of particular interest to me, **I'll not dwell on his distant and often awkward relationship with Canada's defence establishment**, its un-met requirements and its diminishing place in the effective assurance of the security of our country and that of our friends.

Another time, perhaps.

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So, . . . as Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet for Foreign and Defence Policy, I served as Foreign Policy Advisor to Pierre Trudeau during his final term in office; that is **from March 1980 through June 1984.**

During those four years, **he spent a total of 203 days abroad (I've counted them !)** on official government business, showing the flag and making the case for a better, safer, fairer, and more harmonious world and establishing the personal relationships which makes those things possible.

**Mr. Trudeau was an exacting and exciting boss and an utter delight to work for, but never easy. He was a leader of vision and ideas. He was always principled but also pragmatic. He valued advice from every quarter but was very much his own man, taking full responsibility for his every action.**

When I moved from External Affairs over to the Privy Council Office in the Spring of 1980, **I was 36 and he was 60. And he knew a helluva lot more about foreign, defence or development policy than I did.**

He **didn't expect** to be Canada's Prime Minister in the 80s, but finding himself back in that position, he was **determined to lead Canada into a larger and more significant role in global affairs than ever before.**

**Sure, there had been Mike Pearson's pivotal role in de-fusing the Suez Crisis in the mid- 50s which, in the words of the CBC had led Canada into "Middle Power Respectability,"** but, a quarter century later, Mr. Trudeau was **adamant about taking nothing for granted; no**

**policy, no precedent. Every foreign policy commitment and shibboleth had to be questioned, scrutinized and validated.**

When he became Prime Minister, he set about re-examining everything: **NATO, the Commonwealth, even the UN** and, while he sought to **remove the state from the bedrooms of the nation**, he was **ever uncomfortable with sharing that bed with the elephant next door.**

I don't believe he **ever wanted Canada to leave NATO** (or the Commonwealth for that matter), but he was **troubled by the rigidity of Cold War thinking and sought from his foreign policy advisors original counsel rather than warmed over Cold War rhetoric.** Great Power dominance always grated; particularly, of course, as the United States assumed the mantle of the Greatest Power, and Canada's wagon became ever more inexorably attached there to.

The Trudeau I went to work for in March 1980 was **preoccupied by Canada's place in the world, and with projecting and protecting an image of Canada as an empathetic, engaged, fair-minded, just and unbiased nation, deeply committed to effective global management and to the protection and enhancement of human and civil rights.**

**Yes, we were members of alliances and organizations** of like-minded states, but he sought to assure the world **that we were more than that;** that we understood and cared about the issues and predicaments which concerned them.

He was always **deeply preoccupied by the dichotomies of theory and practice - of principle and pragmatism.**

I think Pierre Trudeau perceived that his predecessors as leaders of the Liberal Party – particularly post-WW II – **were overly willing to accept that ours must be a subservient relationship to the USA and UK**; an attitude he thought had **coloured our approaches to international issues**.

He sought to reduce these historical dependencies – actual and intellectual – and **move Canada’s voice and place in the world out from under what he deemed to be an unduly submissive or at best acquiescent posture vis-à-vis London and Paris and freer from the manifest destiny of our powerful neighbour**.

Pierre Trudeau had actively opposed **the Viet Nam war** and ensured that **Canada would welcome Americans fleeing the draft**.

He regretted American and British hard-heartedness (perhaps indifference would be a better word) toward the plight of the Third World, and he was impatient with the dismissiveness with which Third World issues, ideas and personalities were received within the international organizations so dominated by Western interests, which we Canadians had enthusiastically helped to build.

**Trudeau never accepted that ours was but to accommodate and acquiesce to US interests. The Americans knew that, and it annoyed them.**

Pearson **had** acquiesced, however reluctantly, in the 1963 acceptance of the basing of nuclear armed Bomarc missiles in Canada, causing him to be termed the **“Defrocked Pope of Peace”** by Pierre Trudeau.

Twenty years later Trudeau agreed that the Americans could test unarmed air-launched cruise missiles (ALCM) – designed to carry a nuclear warhead - in northern Alberta. Both Pearson and Trudeau defended their decisions on the basis of our mutual defence obligations as members of NORAD and NATO.

The wrenching cruise missile testing decision was, of course, further complicated by NATO's 1979 "Dual-track decision" (agreed by the Clark Government and then endorsed by Trudeau's Liberals) to deploy nuclear-armed, intermediate-ranged ground-launched cruise and Pershing II ballistic missiles in Europe. Thus, the "refuse-the-cruise" refrain in the streets had relevance across the Atlantic as well as the Alliance.

**Pierre Trudeau was a pragmatist.** Just as during the October Crisis, after having told his Clerk, Gordon Robertson, and then his wife, that **had they** been captured by terrorists, he would make no concession to win their freedom, **he then spun on a dime and did so**, providing the kidnapers of James Cross safe transport to the airport and a flight to Cuba.

In that case, **reality trumped theory, pragmatism trumped principle**, and he was **strong enough**, and **confident enough**, and **intelligent enough** to understand that **that made sense**.

**On the matter of cruise missile testing the same pragmatism prevailed**, he was well aware of a growing burden of fractious issues with the United States: disagreements with US policy in Central America – his insistence on rigorous screening of foreign investment - moves to increase Canadian control over the energy production and distribution dominated by American companies.

**He knew the ledger needed rebalancing.** He was aware that there was some inchoate point of imbalance in that vital relationship which, if reached, would inexorably bring unpleasant consequences for Canada over which he would have little control.

**The cruise testing decision re-balanced the ledger,** and - buoyed by the advocacy of the reinvigorated peace movement - he felt free to launch a campaign to solve what he deemed to be a clear and present existential crisis: the unconstrained nuclear arms race then spiralling out of control.

It was the **shooting down of KAL flight 007** by Soviet fighter planes over the Kamchatka peninsula (in which both Canadian and American lives were lost) in the late summer of 1983 which spurred him into action.

I agree with those who believe that in launching such a high-risk initiative, Mr. Trudeau was mindful of the fact that **his leadership of a mid-level but significant NATO country was coming to an end, and was determined to use his office, and the personal credibility he'd earned around the world, to seek a reduction in the nuclear brinksmanship which was threatening global annihilation** - rather than subsequently pontificating from a consequence and responsibility-free retirement, about what ought to have been done.

He'd always been a strong advocate of nuclear arms control and disarmament and **he chafed constantly over that position being at odds with NATO formally agreed defence strategy** anchored in the first-use of nuclear weapons – a conflict he never managed to resolve.

Brett Thompson, in an essay entitled “Pierre Elliott Trudeau’s Peace Initiative 25 years on,” notes that at Reagan’s Williamsburg Summit in May 1983, **Trudeau had admonished his G7 colleagues over**

**their lack of concern about rising east/west tensions, insisting that “we should be busting our asses for peace.”**

He doesn't, though, mention Maggie Thatcher's cheap shot reply, which was: **“Oh Pierre, you're such a comfort to the Kremlin.”**

Her objections notwithstanding, Trudeau succeeded in getting Summit leaders at Williamsburg to issue a statement the final paragraph of which read:

*“We commit ourselves to devote our full political resources to reducing the threat of war. We have a vision of a world in which the shadow of war has been lifted from all mankind, and we are determined to pursue that vision.”*

In a toast to Prime Minister Thatcher in Toronto, during her September '83 visit to Canada, Trudeau, said, **“...the influence of nuclear accountants and technical experts has grown too strong. Politicians need to reassert political control and end ‘megaphone diplomacy,’ between the superpowers.”**

A couple of weeks later, at the University of Guelph, in October 1983, our Prime Minister spoke of an **“ominous rhythm of crisis”** and asserted that **“the relationship between the superpowers may have become too charged with animosity for east-west relations to be trusted to them alone.”**

Well of course **NATO leaders didn't think much of the suggestion that they could be no longer trusted to lead responsibly.**

Reagan and, above all, Thatcher, were obdurate. Our continental **European allies were overwhelmed by massive protests in their streets** against the siting of new generations of nuclear weapons across Europe. The Soviet leadership was in dangerous, unpredictable flux.



Trudeau's decision to "take it to the people" over the heads of their elected representatives, was audacious in the extreme, and – as he knew well – it would win him few friends and supporters among his NATO colleagues.

That was not, however, the case at home and on our North American streets. Thompson noted that at the time, "One poll suggested that nearly half of American high school students feared the world "would be annihilated by nuclear war during their lifetime."

**It must be difficult** – particularly for those of you under 50 – to fully appreciate the extent of the angst and downright fear with which we witnessed the geo-political antics and aggressive military posturing which permeated those times; perhaps not that difficult given today's circumstances !

Suffice it to say, it was impossible to follow the news without a pervading sense of dread and helplessness. **Trudeau felt he had to do whatever it took to lift that spectre of doom.**

There are those who still believe the Peace Initiative was, on the one hand, but a craven political ploy to burnish the Liberal Party's fading electoral prospects. On the other hand, among the Prime Minister's political advisors and Cabinet colleagues, there were those who worried about the negative political implications of their boss' romp across 15 countries "in search of peace."

However, in all those strategy sessions in Ottawa and throughout those foreign travels, **I never heard from Pierre Trudeau the slightest hint of an ulterior political motive.**

Yes, there was disgruntlement in External Affairs and from its Minister, the redoubtable Allan J. MacEachen, because this Canada-defining foreign policy initiative was not-made-there, and also because it was clear that the Americans wouldn't and didn't like it.

**Trudeau's priorities, though, were clear and different.** He made known from the outset that, in his words, **"The prevention of nuclear war is more important than Canada-US relations."**

After the Guelph speech, Trudeau embarked on a tour of central and Western European capitals. He also met the Pope and the UN Secretary General, and he traveled to Beijing to meet Deng Xiaoping, the remaining Nuclear power.

In a press conference at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Delhi, Trudeau made his own pitch very succinctly, **"To say 'No' to annihilation is not sufficient to make statesmen of us. We must also provide the alternatives."**

The Continental European leaders remained essentially passive, mildly supportive but skeptical, and were preoccupied by the toxic atmosphere which prevailed on their streets.

**It was always about Washington and London Moscow.**

Through November and December, a meeting with the ailing Andropov had been impossible to nail down. Early in the new year, we were finally able to meet with Andropov's successor, Konstantin Chernenko, at the former's funeral, but Trudeau was told unequivocally by the Soviets that the responsibility for bringing about any kind of change in the poisonous confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact lay squarely in the West's court.

In Beijing he met with Deng in late November. What I remember most about that meeting is Deng saying, “I can take 500 million casualties, how many can you in the West absorb?”

On 9 February 1984 Trudeau drew the initiative to a close with a speech in the House of Commons which he concluded **by stating that Canada “saw the crisis, acted, took risks, was loyal and open, and did what we could to lift the shadow of war.”**

He announced his retirement after his famous walk-in-the-snow on 29 February 1984.

There is endless debate as to whether Trudeau’s meeting with Reagan in Washington in December had a significant effect.

**I was there. It did.**

**He got to Reagan, by assuring the President that although much loved and admired at home and abroad, in these difficult times, people needed to hear that the President was also ‘a man of peace,’ and this should inform an important part of his legacy.**

**Trudeau did not, though, change the hostile attitude of Reagan’s officials** who, of course, were responsible for the President’s previous bellicose posturing and, more germane, the subsequent spin on the meeting. The last thing they wanted to transmit was that Trudeau changed the President’s perspective.

**But change he did.** Reagan’s rhetoric softened. He became open to a different relationship with Moscow, more sympathetic to the turmoil in Europe. Tensions between East and West were progressively, and publicly reduced.

Indeed, two years later Reagan met with yet another Soviet leader, **Mikhail Gorbachev, in Reykjavik** to discuss nuclear arms

reduction. They failed to reach agreement in Iceland, but a **year later they signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty** which banned all short and intermediate range land-based missiles, which were removed from Europe.

**Within five more years, the historic SALT I and II agreements were signed, drastically reducing American and Russian nuclear arsenals by 80%.**

Pierre Trudeau's **Peace Initiative** was, as he knew well, imperfect and, yes, hastily conceived, but it had to be. **Neither he nor the world had, he believed, the time or the opportunity to do it differently.**

The bottom line was that **he saw the world spiraling towards disaster and a pressing need for action. He moved decisively to lift the shadow of war using the extraordinary global credibility he had amassed over nearly 16 years in office, risking his own and Canada's reputation to change, perceptibly, the course of history.**

His was the brave and noble act of a great man to whose memory and accomplishments I am honored to pay homage today.

Thank you