

Den Tandt: Young Pierre Trudeau and the creeping decay of Canadian democracy.

BY MICHAEL DEN TANDT, POSTMEDIA NEWS JULY 8, 2012



Pierre Elliott Trudeau at the 1968 Liberal leadership convention.

Photograph by: Montreal Star, .

Pierre Elliott Trudeau, it has often been noted, was indifferent to economics. How did he manage to get away with this, let alone govern Canada for the better part of 16 years, becoming in the process a "modern father of Confederation"? The pragmatic necessities of the marketplace, we take for granted now, rule our political choices. Prime Minister Stephen Harper speaks of economics incessantly. Have things changed so much?

It seems a worthwhile question to ask, with the elder Trudeau's legacy front and centre in the emerging Liberal leadership race. Is Justin Trudeau in any way his father's son, apart from their mutual charisma? Is anyone in the Liberal fold, constitutional lawyer Deborah Coyne perhaps, the intellectual heir of Trudeau the elder?

Before we can begin to answer these questions, we should examine P.E.T.'s thought, perhaps. The philosopher king, he was once nicknamed. Was he even a philosopher? And, if he were alive today,

what would he make of the state of our democracy, and of Canada?

No one can say for certain, obviously. But we can guess, and perhaps do better than that. A series of twenty short essays that Trudeau wrote for Jacques Hebert's journal *Vrai*, between Feb. 5 and July 5, 1958, at the onset of the Quiet Revolution, offer some tantalizing hints. Trudeau was 39 at the time — a year younger than Justin is today.

For one thing, it becomes immediately clear in reading these essays why Pierre Trudeau may have been more concerned with questions of liberty than of economics. To his eyes liberty was fundamental, and under immediate siege. Trudeau the journalist, a decade before he became prime minister, was indeed the real deal. He was an angry, icy, cutting writer, on the warpath against Maurice Duplessis' Union Nationale, which he believed was flirting with fascism.

Trudeau appears to have been both contemptuous, and deeply resentful, of politicians. "We absent-mindedly bestow these absolute powers over our lives and welfare on a handful of men," he wrote, "in elections dominated by fanaticism and gangsterism, generally without asking of them the smallest guarantee of intelligence or of elementary honesty. Should one of them happen to overstep the bounds, we allow him to be made a judge, or a legislator for life in one of our upper houses."

So that much, at least, hasn't changed. But what would this outraged young analyst make of his party today? And what would he say about Ottawa, the House of Commons, and the people who occupy it?

Three ideas emerge again and again in those early essays, collected in 1970 in a book entitled *Pierre Trudeau, Approaches to Politics*. The first is that the state and all its authorities have no right to exist, other than to create the conditions in which the greatest possible number of individuals can reach their fullest potential, as human beings. The second is that all human beings should be equal under the law. The third is that the core institutions of democracy — including the right to free speech, freedom of association, a fair and impartial judiciary, and a free, fair, representative parliament — are the very fabric of society, without which we lapse into tyranny.

Trudeau the elder, when he was younger, was no nanny-stater, in other words. The 21st Century Liberal party, which seems to want to smother every social ill in an eiderdown quilt of government programs, would have appeared deeply intrusive to him. "In fact," he wrote, "if we were to extend the powers of the state without having multiplied our means of controlling its policy and limiting its methods of acting, we would tend to increase our enslavement."

Repeatedly in these essays, also, Trudeau writes about the easy but corrosive compromises made for the sake of expediency — the toxic ease of playing along to get along, in a society governed by a regime contemptuous of democratic institutions. He was speaking of his foes in the Duplessis regime, and their hangers-on: "It is a serious matter when the government attacks our inalienable rights, whether by laws or by executive action," he wrote. "it is still more serious when citizens, through cowardice or stupidity, relinquish their rights even when not required by law to do so."

See where I'm headed, here? In 2009 in Canada, a prime minister prorogued Parliament to avoid a

motion of non-confidence. In 2011, this same prime minister based an election campaign — successfully — on the notion that a coalition of "losing parties" holding a majority of seats in the House of Commons would lack the legitimacy to govern. This was, simply, a lie. In 2012 this prime minister, having once argued forcefully against the legitimacy of omnibus bills, forced one through himself, in the process changing more than 70 laws. This summer, Canadians are expected to forget all this, and more, because we live in uncertain economic times. Europe, you know. We go along, to get along.

Stephen Harper is not Maurice Duplessis. But the call to overlook abuses of democracy, for the sake of economic expediency — which is a never-ending murmur, beneath every move the Harper government now makes — is insidious. It's not tyranny, nor should it be called that. But some days, you can see tyranny from here.

[Twitter.com/mdentandt](https://twitter.com/mdentandt)

© Copyright (c) Postmedia News