

Was Pierre Trudeau a disaster for Canada?

In March 2011, Trudeau biographer John English and National Post columnist David Frum participated in the Royal Ontario Museum's "History Wars" debating series on the subject: "Pierre Trudeau was a disaster for Canada." The following edited transcripts of their opening statements appeared in the National Post.

The man who saved Canada

John English, *National Post* · 25 March, 2011

Without Pierre Trudeau, we would not have, today, a Canada from coast to coast to coast. He was, for us, the essential leader, the indispensable leader during the greatest national crisis of my lifetime.

My case for Trudeau does not rest on his economic policies. Yet it must be said that Canada during the 1970s, at a time when the West's golden age came to an end, did remarkably well considering the circumstances. Canada did far better than Britain, whose pound collapsed to almost the equal of the American dollar, whose politicians proved unable to confront overly strong unions, and whose businesses were unable to compete with those of Europe after Britain entered the European Economic Community. For Germany and France, too, it was a disastrous decade, as these two countries responded haltingly to the oil crisis, the food crisis and increasing inflationary trends.

Then there was the United States. In his book about the 1970s, *How We Got Here: The Decade That Brought You Modern Life*, David Frum details how Richard Nixon's economic policies were a mess. Arthur Burns, the chairman of the Federal Reserve and a Republican pillar, bloated the money supply, blowing apart the Bretton Woods system of global monetary management, resulting in Washington's 1971 announcement of a 10% import tax, the creation of special zones for American exporters and the end of the link between the American dollar and gold.

America's trading partners were stunned. The Japanese called it the Nixon shokku. For Canada, the crisis epitomized the image Trudeau gave us: Canada is like a mouse sleeping with an elephant. Everything is fine until the elephant twitches. In 1971, the elephant rolled over and almost smothered us.

We were not alone. All of America's major trading partners scrambled to develop trade and economic policies that reflected the new reality. Sure, we became protectionist. What country

would not in those circumstances? Is it any wonder that we began seeking alternative trade partners, and tried to secure greater markets in China and Russia for our wheat?

Check the Hansard records from the time. The New Democrats who held a gun to the Liberals during the 1972-4 minority government wanted to nationalize most of our national resources. Even the Conservative opposition advocated national protectionist measures, as did many of the provincial premiers. When the Atlantic Richfield Company pulled out of the pioneering oilsands consortium in 1975, a move that threatened to end oil-sands development, it was the Conservative Ontario government of Bill Davis that took a 5% share in the ensuing bailout. Alberta took 10%, the federal government 15%. Without that deal, the oilsands would have remained yet another grand Canadian project that went unfulfilled.

On foreign policy, Trudeau himself declared that the subject was not his major interest -and it wasn't. (It seems odd because Trudeau was without doubt the most cosmopolitan of our prime ministers, speaking fluent English, French, Spanish, with passable Italian and German.) He entered politics to deal with domestic issues -specifically, the place of Quebec, and of French-speaking Canadians, in Canada.

He knew that the external face of Canada then did not have French features. No English Canadian PM could speak French -including its greatest diplomat, Lester Pearson. External Affairs and Defence were not bilingual departments. And nearly all French Canadians felt excluded from their inner ranks. Only 8% of Canadian public servants were francophones during the years of Louis St. Laurent, a time when 26% of the Canadian population was francophone.

Today, on the other hand, 27% of Canadian soldiers are Francophones, and all above the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel speak French. The Foreign Affairs department has a similar French presence. Our external face now reflects what we are -principally because of Pierre Trudeau.

Trudeau will not be judged in history by his economic policies or his foreign policy but rather by how he responded to what the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism rightly called, in February, 1965, "the greatest crisis in our history" -the challenge of Quebec nationalism and separatism.

Canada's dominant political leaders of the 1960s were two unilingual First World War veterans, John Diefenbaker and Lester Pearson, and the political atmosphere was foul and stale. By 1967, when their time ran out, their approval ratings were close to single digits. Canadian politics, in Peter Newman's words, had attained a profound "distemper."

Scandals dominated the news and politics. In May, 1966, Joseph Chartier carried a bomb into the Centre Block of Parliament, intending to throw it into the middle of the Commons chamber. Nature called, he went to a washroom, and the bomb exploded. I was working as a summer

student in the East Block at the time. An all-too-common refrain in the men's beverage rooms of the day was: It's a pity Charrier didn't get to throw it.

This was the situation when Pierre Trudeau came to Ottawa. Geoffrey Stevens, *The Globe and Mail's* Ottawa correspondent, the biographer of Trudeau's opponent Robert Stanfield, and a strong critic of Trudeau, later recalled what Trudeau meant in those times: "He did what no politician before or since has done. He touched the dreams of an entire generation of Canadians. He made them excited about politics and public affairs. He caused them to believe they could actually change the country and even the world. He inspired them to get personally involved in the life of their nation and community. He changed their lives. He set them off along paths they might not otherwise have taken."

Very simply, Trudeau changed the character and atmosphere of Canadian politics. Journalists abandoned objectivity in embracing that change. Academics stepped down from the ivory tower and embraced Trudeau. One of them, Ramsay Cook, took it upon himself to prove to Trudeau that he must run for the Liberal leadership. He got four leading journalists -June Callwood, Trent Frayne, Peter Gzowski and Barbara Frum -to sign a scrap of paper encouraging Trudeau to become prime minister. (It said simply: "Pierre Trudeau is a good s--t. Merde.")

Ultimately, Trudeau came to Ottawa in 1965 with Pearson because he knew Canada was in serious trouble. Quebec's Quiet Revolution, which began with the election of the provincial Liberal government of Jean Lesage in 1960, was no longer quiet. It was punctuated by bomb explosions in 1963 -which continued, at the average rate of about one every 10 days, until 1969.

Foreign observers reported on the extraordinary internal dynamic in Quebec. Charles de Gaulle sent emissaries, including his minister of culture André Malraux, to determine whether Quebec could become independent. They reported that it could and likely would. He told his cabinet that Quebec would become free by necessity and that it was his duty to advance that cause. He gave the process a historic shove with his famous declaration on the balcony of Montreal's Hotel de Ville in 1967: "Vive le Quebec libre." It was truly a call to arms.

Meanwhile, the federal Liberal government was drifting; and the Conservatives had moved ahead in the polls with Stanfield as their leader. Pearson resigned in December 1967, and candidates lined up to replace him. It appeared the Liberal leader would be Paul Hellyer or Bob Winters, both unilingual businessmen. .

Trudeau barely won the leadership. The close runnerup was Winters. Had he won, Canada's 1968 federal election would have been contested by two unilingual Maritimers, neither of whom could have talked directly to Quebec.

The timing would have been atrocious. The voice of separatism had become much stronger with the formation of the Parti Québécois under the leadership of René Lévesque in the summer of 1967. Only Trudeau could have matched Lévesque's eloquence, intelligence and passionate commitment. And he did.

Separatism has become an anachronism these days. But it was far from anachronistic in 1976, when the PQ took office, and Trudeau and Lévesque began the battle for Canada. The PQ leader promised a referendum but he knew Trudeau was too strong an opponent. He waited for Trudeau to depart, which he did after an election loss in May, 1979 to Joe Clark, who announced he would not participate in the Referendum that Lévesque has announced as soon as Trudeau was gone. In the Quebec national assembly, Lévesque demolished Liberal leader Claude Ryan's defence of federalism.

But then Clark inexplicably decided to take on Trudeau again, and was trounced. Trudeau returned to office on the eve of the referendum. He won 74 of 75 seats in Quebec and an astonishing 68% of the popular vote in the province. Separatism began to stumble and, in the referendum of 1980, it was defeated by almost 20 points.

Claude Charron, Lévesque's favourite minister, later said that Lévesque was the greatest Quebec politician of his generation -the most eloquent and passionate, and the great hope for an independent Quebec. But, Charron added, he confronted the only leader who could defeat him: Pierre Trudeau.

Trudeau left his lasting mark following the Referendum by pushing through, by sheer determination, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Charter has its critics, on both right and left, but it has been a rare source of common agreement among Canadians east and west, north and south, English and French. Approval of it has remained consistent at the 90% level over the last two decades. It has become a symbol of Trudeau's vision of Canada.

In that vision, individual Canadians possess defined rights, and no province or region has a special status. In this bilingual, pluralist Canada, it would not all turn on Newfoundland's cod, Alberta's oil, or, most decisively, Quebec's language. We would be masters in our house, but our own house would be all of Canada.

It is this vision that makes Pierre Trudeau an irreplaceable leader for his times.

The disastrous legacy of Pierre Trudeau

David Frum, *National Post* · 25 March 2011

I could win this debate with just two words: plaid suits.

Canada elected Pierre Trudeau on the understanding that Trudeau would continue to wear his 1960s skinny lapels and skinny ties. Trudeau reneged, and in 1972 his career was appropriately very nearly terminated.

The only thing that saved him: Trudeau's opponent wore plaid suits too.

Under the strict rules of debate, my opponent Professor English can win if he proves that Trudeau was something less than a disaster for Canada: a disappointment or even a misfortune perhaps. I hope you will hold him – and Trudeau – and Canada to a higher standard. I hope you will require him to prove that Pierre Trudeau was affirmatively a good thing for Canada, a successful prime minister.

A few years ago, I took my children to visit battlefields of the First World War. All bloomed peaceful and benign in the summer sunshine. You'd never know that a century before, human beings had crouched in terror in these trenches, that here bullets had shattered human heads, doctors had amputated human limbs, bomb blasts had buried human beings alive, and that rats had feasted on human bodies.

When we look back on the past from a distance, everything fades and blurs. It was all so long ago. The dead would be dead by now anyway. Wasn't the situation really very complicated? We are here and warm and comfortable. No point wasting time in futile regrets. Off we wander to view the next sight.

But if we are to understand history, we have to understand it as it was lived.

Canada today is a very successful country. It has suffered less from the global economic crisis than any other major economy.

So Canadians may be tempted to be philosophical about disasters in their own past. Hasn't all come out right in the end? Of course you could say the same about the invasions of Ghengis Khan.

I don't draw any personal comparison between Pierre Trudeau and Ghengis Khan, obviously. But I want to stress: Canada's achievement overcoming Trudeau's disastrous legacy should not inure Canadians to how disastrous that legacy was.

Three subsequent important prime ministers – Brian Mulroney, Jean Chretien and Stephen Harper – invested their energies cleaning up the wreckage left by Pierre Trudeau. The work has

taken almost 30 years. Finally and at long last, nobody speculates any more about Canada defaulting on its debt, or splitting apart, or being isolated from all its major allies.

Yet through most of the adult lives of most people in this room, people in Canada and outside Canada did worry about those things.

And as you enjoy the peace, stability and comparative prosperity of Canada in the 2010s just consider – this is how Canadians felt in the middle 1960s. Now imagine a political leader coming along and out of ignorance and arrogance despoiling all this success. Not because the leader faced some overwhelming crisis where it was hard to see the right answer. But utterly unnecessarily. Out of a clear blue sky. Like a malicious child on the beach stomping on the sand castle somebody else had worked all morning to build.

That was the political record of Pierre Trudeau.

I want to examine the Trudeau record in 3 dimensions: What Trudeau did to the Canadian economy, what Trudeau did to Canada's standing in the world, and what Trudeau did to Canadian political stability.

I'll conclude by offering some thoughts about the personal and intellectual traits that animated Trudeau's destructive career. And I hope you'll agree with me at the end that Trudeau deserves at least this much credit: There was nothing small-scale or parochial about him. As a political wrecker, he was truly world class.

Pierre Trudeau inherited a strong, growing and diversified Canadian economy.

When Trudeau at last left office for good in 1984, Canadians were still feeling the effects of Canada's worst recession since the Great Depression. Eight years later, the country would tumble into another and even worse recession.

The two recessions 1981-82 and 1992-93 can both fairly be laid at Trudeau's door.

Pierre Trudeau took office at a moment when commodity prices were rising worldwide. Then as now, rising commodity prices buoyed the Canadian economy. Good policymakers recognize that commodity prices fall as well as rise. A wise government does not make permanent commitments based on temporary revenues. Yet between 1969 and 1979 – through two majority governments and one minority – Trudeau tripled federal spending.

Nemesis followed hubris. Commodity prices dropped. Predictably, Canada tumbled into recession and the worst federal budget deficits in peacetime history.

Trudeau's Conservative successor Brian Mulroney balanced Canada's operating budget after 1984. But to squeeze out Trudeau-era inflation, the Bank of Canada had raised real interest rates very high. Mulroney could not keep up with the debt payments. The debt compounded, the deficits grew, the Bank hiked rates again – and Canada toppled into an even worse recession in 1992. By 1993, default on Trudeau's debt loomed as a real possibility. Trudeau's next successors, Liberals this time, squeezed even tighter, raising taxes, and leaving Canadians through the 1990s working harder and harder with no real increase in their standard of living.

Do Canadians understand how many of their difficulties of the 1990s originated in the 1970s? They should.

To repay Trudeau's debt, federal governments reduced transfers to provinces. Provinces restrained spending. And these restraints had real consequences for real people: more months in pain for heart patients, more months of immobility for patients awaiting hip replacements.

If Canada's health system delivers better results today than 15 years ago, it's not because it operates more efficiently. Canada's health system delivers better results because the reduction of Trudeau's debt burden has freed more funds for healthcare spending. The Canadian socialist Tommy Douglas anticipated the Trudeau disaster when he said that the great enemy of progressive government was unsound finance.

Pierre Trudeau was a spending fool. He was not alone in that, in the 1970s. But here's where he was alone. No contemporary leader of an advanced industrial economy – not even the German Social Democrat Helmut Schmidt or the British socialist James Callaghan – had so little understanding as Pierre Trudeau of the private market economy. “Little understanding?” I should have said: “active animosity.”

Trudeau believed in a state-led economy, and the longer he lasted in office, the more statist he became. The Foreign Investment Review Agency was succeeded by Petro-Canada. Petro-Canada was succeeded by wage and price controls. Wage and price controls were succeeded by the single worst economic decision of Canada's 20th century: the National Energy Program.

The NEP tried to fix two different prices of oil, one inside Canada, one outside. The NEP expropriated foreign oil interests without compensation. The NEP sought to shoulder aside the historic role of the provinces as the owner and manager of natural resources. I'll return in a moment to the consequences of the NEP for Canada's political stability. Let's focus for now on the economic effects.

Most other Western countries redirected themselves toward more fiscal restraint after 1979. Counting on abundant revenues from oil, the Trudeau government kept spending. Other Western governments began to worry more about attracting international investment. Canada repelled investors with arbitrary confiscations. Other Western governments recovered from the stagflation of the 1970s by turning toward freer markets. Under the National Energy Policy, Canada was up-regulating as the US, Britain, and West Germany deregulated. All of these mistakes together contributed to the extreme severity of the 1982 recession. Every one of them was Pierre Trudeau's fault.

Pierre Trudeau had little taste for the alliances and relationships he inherited in 1968. Canada had taken a lead role in creating the institutions of the postwar world, from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to the General Organization for Tariffs and Trade. Those institutions were intended in great part to contain the aggressive totalitarian regimes in the Soviet Union and China. In 1968, Canada remained a considerable military power and an important voice in the councils of the West.

Trudeau repudiated that inheritance. His spending spree did not include the military. He cut air and naval capabilities, pulled troops home from Europe, and embarked on morale-destroying reorganizations of the military services. In 1968, Canada was a serious second-tier non-nuclear military power, like Sweden or Israel. By 1984, Canada had lost its war-fighting capability: a loss made vivid when Canada had to opt out of ground combat operations in the first Gulf War of 1990-91.

Something more was going on here than a left-of-center preference for butter over guns. Throughout his life – now better known than ever thanks to John English – Pierre Trudeau showed remarkable indifference to the struggle against totalitarianism that defined the geopolitics of the 20th century.

Indifference may be too polite a word.

Pierre Trudeau opted not to serve in World War II, although of age and in good health. He traveled to Josef Stalin's Soviet Union to participate in regime-sponsored propaganda activities. He wrote in praise of Mao's murderous regime in China. Trudeau lavishly admired Fidel Castro, Julius Nyere, and other Third World dictators. The Soviet dissident Andrei Amalrik scathingly recalled Trudeau's 1971 prime ministerial visit: Trudeau visited the Siberian city of Norilsk and lamented that Canada had never succeeded in building so large a city so far north – unaware, or unconcerned, that Norilsk had been built by slave labor.

As prime minister, Trudeau to the extent he could tried to reorient Canada away from the great democratic alliance.

It's telling I think that Trudeau came to the edge of endorsing the communist coup against Solidarity in Poland in December 1981. Hours after the coup, Pierre Trudeau said: "If martial law is a way to avoid civil war and Soviet intervention, then I cannot say it is all bad." He added "Hopefully the military regime will be able to keep Solidarity from excessive demands."

Trudeau's neutralism negated Canada's former influence. Probably few remember now his farcical "peace initiative" of 1982. Convinced that Ronald Reagan was leading the world toward nuclear war, Trudeau shuttled between Western capitals to appeal for some kind of concession to soothe the Soviets. Results? Unconcealed disdain from the Americans, unconcealed boredom from the Soviets.

Canada had often before played an important go-between role. Not this time. Canada's most important geopolitical asset is its unique relationship with the US. Trudeau had squandered that asset, and with it, his own influence.

Obviously, Canada and the United States will disagree sometimes. Canadians of different points of view will favor a more or less intimate relationship with the United States. But even the most US-skeptical Canadian nationalist would agree: it's reckless and foolish to offend the Americans gratuitously. In fact, the more nationalist the Canadian prime minister, and therefore the more likely to conflict with the Americans on large issues – the more carefully you would expect that prime minister to avoid giving offense over inessentials.

Yet Trudeau made it clear to Presidents Nixon and Carter that he personally disliked them, and to President Reagan that he personally despised him. When it came to foreign affairs, there was always a deep strain of frivolity and irresponsibility in Pierre Trudeau.

What Trudeau did take seriously was our third ground of indictment: the stability and unity of the country. And it was here that he did perhaps his greatest harm.

Pierre Trudeau had a unique approach to national unity. He ascertained what each of Canada's regions most dearly wanted – and then he offered them the exact opposite.

Did Quebeckers want to live and work in French in Montreal? Trudeau said no to that – and instead promised that they could live and work in French in Vancouver.

Did Albertans want a less exploitive economic deal within Confederation? Trudeau said no – and instead offered a *more* exploitive economic deal within Confederation.

Unsurprisingly, Trudeau’s flip-them-the-finger approach to national unity did not yield positive results.

In fact, he nearly blew apart the country – and his own party.

At the beginning of the Trudeau years, separatism was a fringe, radical movement in Quebec. A decade later, Canada faced a referendum on “sovereignty-association.”

In 1968, Trudeau’s Liberals won 25 seats west of Ontario. In 1980, they won 2.

And in the end it was Trudeau’s own policies that destroyed his vision of the country. By dramatically increasing immigration, Trudeau made irrelevant his vision of a bilingual Canada. Lester Pearson famously expressed a hope that he would be Canada’s last unilingual prime minister. It’s very possible that sometime in the 2040s Canada will see its last bilingual prime minister, at least if the second language is French. On current trends, by the 2040s the proportion of French speakers in Canada will be lower than the proportion of Spanish speakers in the United States today.

Defenders of Trudeau’s disastrous governance habitually rally around one great accomplishment: the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Well, Herbert Hoover had some excellent wilderness conservation policies, but we don’t excuse the Great Depression on that account.

Would it really have been impossible to combine the adoption of the Charter with a less destructive economic policy, a less destructive foreign policy, a less destructive national unity policy?

Yet there is a sense in which the Charter of Rights and Freedoms is a very characteristic Trudeau project.

The Charter addressed a deficiency in Canadian constitutionalism: checking the powers of government. It’s possible to imagine a lot of solutions to that problem. The solution contained in the Charter is to give unelected judges the power to void acts of Parliament.

Unelected judges chosen by the prime minister at the prime minister’s sole discretion, unscrutinized by any elected body.

The Charter encapsulates the grand theme of Trudeau's political life: his lack of respect for the people who returned him to office again and again – his instinctive sympathy for power, the less accountable the better.

One story sums up the man best.

1979. Trudeau had lost that year's election. His career seemed finished. Reporters awaited in the driveway of 22 Sussex Drive as he stepped into his gull-winged vintage Mercedes to speed away into history.

One shouted: "Mr. Prime Minister – any regrets?"

Pierre Trudeau pondered. Perhaps he had planned, perhaps he remembered something that Richard Nixon had said after losing the California governor's race in 1962. In an instant Pierre Trudeau revised Nixon's words to his own very different purpose. "Yes," he said. "I regret I won't have you to kick around any more."

It's long past time that Canadians in turn resolved: no longer to be posthumously kicked by this bad man and disastrous prime minister.