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# **The Constant Liberal**

Pierre Trudeau, Organized Labour, and  
the Canadian Social Democratic Left



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# Introduction

## Trudeau's Liberal Quest

Pierre Elliott Trudeau (1919–2000) remains one of Canada's most controversial prime ministers, simultaneously loved and reviled by millions of Canadians to this day. Much has been written on him, going back at least as far as his ascendancy to power in 1968. Early works on Trudeau, written while he was still governing, delved into his systems, policies, affiliations, controversies, and public image. Works written from his retirement to his passing gained a greater historical focus yet lacked sufficient distance from Trudeau and his times. Lacking too was access to his deep and meticulous archival papers. Since his death in 2000, numerous works have made excellent use of his papers, looking at personal expressions of Trudeau not just while he was serving as prime minister but also from his early adolescence onward.

So why, if so much has been written about Trudeau, do we need yet another book about this well-studied statesman? The answer lies in how my interpretation of his thought, action, and legacy differs from other analyses of him, how it focuses on his relationship with Canada's labour and left movements, and how it showcases the broad interplay between liberalism and democratic socialism that defined much of his life.

Given this, the historical impact of Trudeau can be understood only through a consistent frame of reference oriented to the labour and left movements with which he interacted, both as an ally from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s and as an adversary while in government from 1968 to 1984. This

perspective is essential to ascertain just how Trudeau the liberal could embrace numerous aspects of democratic socialism and find among its adherents key influences and friendships. In addition, this style of biography tries to eschew the “great man” narrative of history by demonstrating that, however much Trudeau influenced the world around him, he was equally the product of societal forces, intellectual currents, and personal relationships.<sup>1</sup>

In the broadest of terms, my interpretation is that Trudeau’s leftist activity was less a call for a postcapitalist – or even social democratic – Canada and more a warning flare to his fellow liberals about the dangers that a lack of reformism would mean in terms of preserving liberal-capitalist social relations. Trudeau saw it as his responsibility – through various forms of public pedagogy undertaken in and out of government – to ensure a modern, stable, and peaceful liberal order, first in Maurice Duplessis’s Quebec, then during the Quiet Revolution, and subsequently across Canada as a whole.

I suggest that, even though Trudeau found in the fight for liberal freedoms practical alliances with workers and democratic socialists, there existed a fundamentally different world view between his liberalism on the one hand and the labour-left traditions on the other.<sup>2</sup> Although such distinctions might be blurrier today, the labour-left throughout Trudeau’s life had a different vision of society, justice, and democracy. This basic distinction underpins the project, both in its layout and in its theoretical approach.

At the core, the difference between liberalism and socialism revolves around concepts of liberty, property, and equality.<sup>3</sup> Liberals envision society structured by liberty, property, and equality all placed in a systematic hierarchy. Whereas socialists rank liberty and especially equality above property, liberals place the right of private property at the pinnacle and equality at the bottom. So, while socialists often see private property as a barrier to a free and democratic society, liberals place constraints on private property only insofar as they act to preserve it as an institution. By placing controls on property to allow measures of equality and liberty, conventional liberal capitalism would establish a much more solid foundation because it would have broader popular support. In other words, the only way that the masses would accept an inegalitarian and undemocratic system of property relations would be if they could be persuaded that private ownership of production and distribution defines rather than limits a free society.

Convincing the populace, most of whom will hold insignificant amounts of private property, that this institution is of value to all demands the construction and defence of a political and cultural hegemony, under which the portrayal of one’s interests becomes synonymous with the aggregate

interests of society – put another way, the capitalist class holds power primarily by painting the capitalist mode of production and distribution as beneficial to all. Examples include the belief that capitalists' wealth and investment lead to trickle-down prosperity and that trade unions, public ownership, and redistribution hamper such altruistic pursuits.

But hegemonic forces are often subject to crises during times of social and economic strife, when those who rule a society, and their underpinning philosophies, lose the confidence of those they rule. The economic collapse of 2008, and especially the Great Depression, were flashpoints in which the ruling class had difficulties convincing subordinate classes that their interests were common. Since 2008, likewise, more people have become cognizant of their identity as 99 percenters and have more readily critiqued trickle-down economics and financial deregulation.

Where does Trudeau and his multigenerational relationship with the Canadian labour-left tie in with these theories of hegemonic crisis, property, and democracy? The answer lies in the fact that, as an activist, intellectual, and G7 leader, he faced crises in capitalism that forced liberals like him to modify it without abandoning foundational precepts, to alter the ways in which the state interacted with citizens, corporations, and labour while quelling demands for a new form of property relations. Liberals like Trudeau were thus vital in bolstering liberal capitalism by absorbing leftist programs and refashioning them as showcases of a benevolent liberalism. He also acted as a key defender of Canadian capitalism in his ability to lower the bargaining power and expectations of regular Canadians.

This book endeavours to disperse its many relevant historiographic debates across the chapters, but it is chiefly on this front that my project is in discordance with most sustained studies of Trudeau. It challenges two key interpretations: that he was a socialist bent on destroying Canadian capitalism and that he was a pragmatic leftist who looked for ways to contain the negative aspects of capitalism toward his goal of founding a modern and progressive Canada.

Rather, from 1945 onward, Trudeau would urge the reformation of Canadian society, not to attack or even constrain capitalism, but to make it stronger, nimbler, and resistant to critique. In some cases, as in Duplessis's Quebec, the path toward a more resilient capitalism came through alliances with labour and the CCF, which served as harbingers of a modern and democratic province. However, as prime minister, Trudeau responded to crises in postwar capitalism by empowering capitalists, weakening labour and left voices, and furthering an individualistic conception of rights and

freedoms. None of this is to say that he was entrenched in an overly rigid political frame of reference. What makes Trudeauvian liberalism so worthy of study is that, though it was a consistent aspect of his adult world view, how it manifested varied substantially based upon his temporal, geographic, and strategic contexts. This is why his liberalism could be rationalized into alliances, both with the labour-left against capitalists and right-wing governments, or into the inverse. More importantly, this is why a long-range analysis of his positions is so imperative: it allows one to demonstrate that, even in an ideologically consistent man, one can find different positions and orientations to serve that ideology, based upon both his goals and the surrounding limitations, whether as an individual or as the head of a middle power capitalist state enmeshed within a globalized economy. It is thus the case that, throughout each key stage of Trudeau's life, analyses of socialism, liberalism, and crises in capitalism help us to understand his relationships and motivations.

For instance, Trudeau's relationships with the CCF and labour respectively in the period 1945–58 were based primarily upon the promotion and preservation of liberal economics, politics, and class relations. No one can deny the effort and passion that Trudeau expended on these labour and leftist causes, but the rationale and limit of such support foreshadowed his antilabour and procapital policies as prime minister.

However, by the mid-1950s, Trudeau rejected the CCF because he deemed liberalism to be the unifying force against Maurice Duplessis, first in the educational movement known as *le Rassemblement*, and then as a party in *l'Union des forces démocratiques*. The second, and more definitive, turning point came in 1965 when Trudeau joined the Liberal Party, rationalized by the NDP's weakness in Quebec, its supposed capitulation to separatists, and his feeling of betrayal over the earlier rejection of his *Rassemblement* and UFD. From 1956 onward, Trudeau had distanced himself from the idea that the left and labour movements were the core progenitors of social change in Quebec.

In Trudeau's prime ministerial years, the first major issue was that of his "Just Society," with a specific focus on the Guaranteed Annual Income and tax reform. Although his rhetorical Just Society emphasized equality, the policy thrusts signalled commitment to a status quo that preserved an age-old liberal distrust of the "idle poor" more than a universal guarantee of human dignity. Here the NDP and labour critiqued incongruities between the Just Society's lofty ideals and Trudeau's actions, countering with a more egalitarian vision. As always, the liberal and socialist conceptions of social

justice, equality, and opportunity illuminate the distinction between Trudeau and his erstwhile left allies, especially how Trudeau saw social programs as discretionary palliatives to the side effects of capitalism, whereas the labour-left saw them as an emergent human right.

Along a similar front was Trudeau's analysis of increased foreign economic control, along with volatile energy supplies and prices, which led to the creation of the Foreign Investment Review Agency and the National Energy Program. The former was cast as a moderate intervention that welcomed investment provided it had a net benefit for Canadians. The latter combined taxation, subsidization, and nationalization to secure Canadian energy supplies, institute a pan-Canadian regime of revenue sharing, and provide lower energy prices to oil-dependent industries. Although the NDP and labour largely decried the NEP and FIRA's limitations, they begrudgingly supported Trudeau's efforts because they partially correlated with interests of the industrial working class and because the NDP itself had pushed for the adoption of FIRA and NEP-like programs: too strident an opposition would be akin to attacking one's own policy book. Still, the chapter notes substantive differences in how economic democracy and nationalism were approached by the two sides. Whereas Trudeau saw intervention – even if in opposition to the letter of liberal law – as the best tool to incubate Canadian capitalist endeavours, the labour-left saw it as a plank toward an economy in which major sectors would be owned and operated in the public interest.

However, while much of this was happening, the spectre of inflation was ever-present. Trudeau saw inflation as both a cause and a consequence of Canadians' excessive expectations, leading to Canadian workers being overpaid compared with their American and Third World competitors. Inflation was also a symbol of class strife, societal distrust, and individual irresponsibility that arose from workers' selfishness. The answers to such social ills were wage and price controls. Applied to major firms and nearly every unionized workplace, controls would be psychological medicine for citizens, training them to desist from their narrow and anti-Canadian pursuit of self-interest. Although Trudeau portrayed controls as protecting the vulnerable while laying down a framework for stable growth, labour and the NDP believed that they unfairly restricted wages while leaving an abundance of loopholes with respect to prices. In their view, controls would take away collective bargaining rights in an effort to increase profit margins and labour flexibility. The question of liberalism here is highly intriguing because, though individual pursuits and expectations were central to Trudeau's ideal society, those



motivations, when held by working-class Canadians, became threats to the ultimate viability of capitalism. As with the energy question, liberalism was modified by Trudeau to preserve faith in capitalism.

However, out of the direct discussions on wage and price controls themselves came larger questions regarding labour rights, relations, and freedoms in a postcontrols world termed the “new society.” Trudeau sought here to supersede combative industrial relations by creating tri- and multipartite bodies in which the government would work with labour and capital to keep inflation low, prevent strikes, and streamline bargaining. Trudeau thus saw a role for unions in the new society: as a subservient force that would inculcate members with the belief that prosperity came not through socialism but via the trickle-down wealth generated by low wages, precarity, and reduced labour rights. At least in part, Trudeau was advocating for a form of corporatism that was, if only partially, part of Duplessis’s era of governance in Quebec. Also important here is the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which Trudeau put forward as a pedagogical device whereby Canadians would be taught to embrace the rights that he considered integral to a democratic society. Conspicuous by their absence were labour and social rights. The NDP and labour would largely oppose Trudeau’s tripartism, believing that it robbed workers of their rights and independence. Yet they lacked the same decisiveness when it came to the Charter, perhaps because of the pressure that resulted from potentially being left out of such an important political formation or based upon the difficulty of applying socialist ideology to distinct policy.

Even after Trudeau had said goodbye to formal political life in the mid-1980s, his continued writings, speeches, and reflections gave us invaluable insights into his legacy, the continuing contradictions of capitalism, and the rise of neoliberal politics in the post-Soviet world. Although much has happened since Trudeau’s passing in 2000, his late-in-life thoughts and actions shed light on our own times, which include the recent ascendancy of his son Justin to the office of prime minister.

All of this goes to show how the senior Trudeau, who held a more or less consistent ideological vision, could be driven in so many different directions based upon numerous factors.

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