

A Passing Interest: The Foreign Policy of Pierre Trudeau 1968-1984

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Over the past decade the Liberal Party of Canada has worked hard to foster the notion that its past prime ministers have together contributed to a coherent foreign policy tradition in Canada. Such a sentiment, however, ultimately fails to account for the marked differences in the foreign policies of several Liberal prime ministers, in particular that of Pierre Elliot Trudeau. The content of this paper will provide an overview of the Trudeau government's foreign policy during his fifteen years in power, with a particular focus on the policies which fell near the beginning and end of his prime ministerial career. After outlining Trudeau's background in foreign policy and the degree to which he fell within the any Liberal "tradition," the paper will analyze the departmental review that Trudeau conducted at External Affairs during his first term as prime minister. Finally, the position Trudeau adopted toward the United States during the 1970s will be considered before examining the fundamental shift in Trudeau's approach to foreign policy during his final term in office. This paper's purpose is not to pronounce Trudeau's foreign policy as either an outright success or failure, but rather to assess its position within the broader development of Canadian foreign policy. To this end, the argument will be advanced that in terms of its longevity and overall effectiveness that the legacy of Trudeau's foreign policy can best be described as unexceptional and incoherent.

The Liberal foreign policy tradition (as it is currently mythologized) derives primarily from the policies of Lester B. Pearson, both during his tenure as prime minister and in the decades prior when he worked as a senior diplomat the Department of External Affairs. Pearson's

foreign policy positions were primarily characterized by the eras in which they originated. Following the end of the Second World War, Canada and the United States were virtually the only western states that emerged economically stronger than they were at the start of the conflict. This, coupled with the rapid deterioration of relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the subsequent rise of a world divided along an East-West axis, allowed Canada to exert more influence in international affairs than what would normally be expected for a country of its size.¹ From External Affairs and later the Prime Minister's Office, Pearson repeatedly pushed for Canada to bolster its presence within multilateral forums such as the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. As part of this policy, Pearson had taken a leading role at the United Nations in 1956 in proposing a joint Emergency Force to respond to the Suez Canal Crisis in Egypt. The success of the mission (for which Pearson won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957) went on to serve as the foundation for Canada's much-touted peacekeeping campaigns over the course of the next decade.

Any support Trudeau had shown for Pearson's foreign policies could have been deemed tentative at best. Foreign policy had occupied only a minor position amongst Trudeau's various interests and pursuits prior to his political career, but he adopted several stances which clashed directly with those of Pearson. A dissenter of both the Second World War and the Korean War, Trudeau had been particularly vocal in his opposition toward Canada's position within NATO; in particular, its acceptance of nuclear weapons in 1963.² Nevertheless, after being elected as leader of the Liberal Party in 1968 (and consequently also prime minister) Trudeau, wishing to avoid any perception that his government was breaking away from any Pearsonian tradition, took con-

¹ Peter C. Dobell, *Canada's Search for New Roles: Foreign Policy in the Trudeau Era* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1972), 1-2.

² John English, *Just Watch Me: The Life of Pierre Elliot Trudeau, 1968-2000* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2009), 556.

siderable care to not completely repudiate his predecessor's policies. To this end, he proposed a sizeable review of Canada's foreign policy, one that would seek to reprioritize rather than replace the policies of Pearson.

This adjustment, however, should not be downplayed. Having previously flirted with Scandinavian neutrality, Trudeau's early foreign policy was largely defined by its rejection of Canada's role in the world as a so-called "helpful fixer."³ In some respects this move was unsurprising. As previously mentioned, Trudeau's primary political interests did not revolve around foreign policy, and as such the passing attention he gave to it while in office is to be expected. Canada, in Trudeau's judgment, was reaching a watershed moment in its history, with the country's longstanding tensions between its English and French communities coming to a head with the rise of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec.⁴ Any foreign policy which Canada undertook under Trudeau had to first look at Canada's interests before it concerned itself with the interests of other nations and multilateral bodies.

Trudeau's proposed foreign policy review formed one of the main planks of his platform in the 1968 federal election. Throughout the campaign, the prime minister gradually issued a series of announcements promising a full-scale review of both the Departments of Defence and External Affairs. "The basic pillars of [Canadian foreign policy] are not NATO, NORAD and the United Nations," Trudeau proclaimed in 1969. "They are disarmament, non-proliferation and the development of a special role in foreign aid and assistance, related both to our unique capacity and our special interests."⁵ In spite of the notable discomfort expressed by many at External Af-

³ Robert Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion: Canada and the World, 1945-1984* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 278.

⁴ J.L. Granastein and Robert Bothwell, *Pirouette: Pierre Trudeau and Canadian Foreign Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 6.

⁵ J.L. Granastein, *Canadian Foreign Policy Since 1945: Middle Power or Satellite?* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969), 197.

fairs toward these statements, the government moved ahead with its promised policy review following Trudeau's resounding victory in the June election. The result was a series of white papers entitled *Foreign Policy for Canadians*, published by External Affairs two years after the 1968 vote. The papers, six in total, outlined the government's general philosophy toward foreign policy, and specific policies regarding Europe, international development, Latin America, the Pacific Region, and the United Nations, respectively.⁶ Notable in their absence are any papers specifically addressing Canada's relationship with the United States or its role within NATO, keeping with Trudeau's earlier remarks of the need for Canada to foster a new "special role" related to its "special interests."⁷

Foreign Policy for Canadians continued Trudeau's earlier theme of Canadian foreign policy needing to ultimately benefit Canada and Canadians before it focused on the external circumstances of other states. To this end the white paper put forward three "basic national aids" which the government contended must be applied to all policy, whether domestic or foreign, before other factors could be taken into consideration: "that Canada will continue secure as an independent political entity; that Canada and all Canadians will enjoy enlarging prosperity in the widest possible sense; [and] that all Canadians will see in the life they have and the contribution they make to humanity something worthwhile preserving in identity and purpose."⁸ In defining "foreign policy in essence," the first of the white papers additionally claimed that

Canada, like other states, must act according to how it perceives its aims and interests. External activities should be directly related to national policies pursued within Canada, and serve the same objectives. Diplomatic relations ... have to be kept under review to ensure that they continue to serve Canada's objectives effectively. Those may change as both Canada and the world change. In essence, foreign policy is the result of the Gov-

⁶ Granastein and Gothwell, *Pirouette*, 15.

⁷ Bruce Thordarson, *Trudeau and Foreign Policy: A Study in Decision-Making* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1972), 198.

⁸ *Foreign Policy for Canadians*. Vol. 1. (Ottawa: Department of External Affairs, 1970), 10.

ernment's progressive definition and pursuit of national aims and interests in the international environment. It is the extension abroad of national policies.⁹

This final statement is revealing in several respects. First, it underscores that the Trudeau government did not view its foreign policy as being detached from its domestic policy; the former would ultimately follow the latter, and in some cases the two might be indistinguishable. Second, the relationship between foreign and domestic policy was by no means equal, with foreign policy, at least for Trudeau, always playing a subordinate role to his domestic priorities.¹⁰

Apart from defining the government's general approach to foreign policy, the white papers included several other key insights regarding the importance Trudeau placed on multilateral forums such as the United Nations and NATO. Although the second white paper acknowledged the advantage which large organizations such as the UN had in contributing to international development, it also emphasized that a "number of difficult problems ... continue to impede the ability of many of the international agencies to make the most effective use of [their] inherent advantages."¹¹ These statements reflected earlier comments made by Trudeau's Secretary of State for External Affairs, Mitchell Sharp, at the 24th Assembly of the United Nations in 1969, in which he intoned that "the United Nations [will] fail to reach its goals if it cannot come to grips with its own problems."¹² The advent of peacekeeping had allowed Canada to demonstrate notable sway at the UN throughout the 1950s and the early 1960s, but by the release of the white papers the assembly had been unable to approve any peacekeeping mission since 1965. The diminishing lustre of the UN contributed to Trudeau's waning confidence in the ability of the fo-

⁹ *Foreign Policy for Canadians*. Vol 1., 10.

¹⁰ Thordarson, *Trudeau and Foreign Policy*, 83.

¹¹ *Foreign Policy for Canadians: International Development*. Vol. 3. (Ottawa: Department of External Affairs, 1970), 17.

¹² Dobell, *Canada's Search for New Roles*, 133.

rum to be a useful vehicle for foreign policy, with the government conceding in 1970 that “effective peacekeeping activities now appears more modest than it did earlier.”¹³

Foreign Policy for Canadians was a case study in political inconsistency. At times it seemed as if the Trudeau government wanted to have it both ways, simultaneously adopting an inwardly-focused foreign policy while maintaining Canada’s standing in the multilateral forums which had been so crucial during the Pearson years.¹⁴ Paying lip service to Canada’s role at the UN, the government espoused the continuation of Canada’s membership in NATO insofar as it furthered “the interests of Canada’s national security” and “the values Canada upholds.”¹⁵ In particular, the white paper pointed to Canada’s seat on NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group as a pragmatic solution toward the controlled international use of nuclear weapons. Yet in spite of its official commitment to NATO as a multilateral forum, the Trudeau government had declined to release a white paper specifically addressing NATO or, perhaps more to the point, the United States, Canada’s premier North Atlantic ally. The significance of this latter absence should not be dismissed, and is indicative of the general attitude that Trudeau displayed toward Canada’s southern neighbour.

There are several identifiable factors that led to the shift in Canadian-American relations during the Trudeau years. Among the more obvious is the election of Richard Nixon as president of the United States in 1969. The ideological disparity between Trudeau and Nixon (the former a left-leaning intellectual and political novice, the latter a staunch conservative veteran) certainly contributed to a cooling of bilateral relations between Canada and the United States during this

¹³ Dobell, *Canada’s Search for New Roles*, 133-135; Elizabeth Riddell-Dixon, “Canada at the United Nations, 1945-1989,” *International Journal* 62.1 (2006/2007): 145-160.

¹⁴ Granastein and Gothwell, *Pirouette*, 39. For his part Lester. B Pearson had been very disappointed with *Foreign Policy for Canadians*, although he kept his opinions private for fear of upstaging the new prime minister.

¹⁵ *Foreign Policy for Canadians: Europe*. Vol. 2. (Ottawa: Department of External Affairs, 1970), 24; Arthur E. Blanchette, ed. *Canadian Foreign Policy, 1945-2000: Major Documents and Speeches*, (Kemptville,: Golden Dog, 2000), 59.

period.¹⁶ However, this shift was ultimately more the result of broader geopolitical trends than it was of a personal resentment between both country's respective heads of government. Following the Second World War there had been hope that Canada would be able to move beyond the supporting role it had played to Great Britain in the decades prior, but the threat of nuclear war had continually forced Canada to adopt foreign policy positions which aligned with those of the United States.¹⁷ As the early 1970s saw a continued stabilization of American-Soviet relations, the Trudeau government found itself better situated to develop foreign policy which looked beyond its American ally. The Third Option policy to pursue new trade avenues outside of North America, although widely regarded as ineffective, was emblematic of Trudeau's willingness to assign a lesser role to the United States in Canada's foreign policy considerations.¹⁸

Following his initial reviews of Canada's foreign policy, which could hardly have been described as comprehensive, given their disregard for the United States and NATO, the remainder of the 1970s saw the issue take on a declining importance for Trudeau.¹⁹ This can be attributed to the multitude of domestic issues which frequently demanded the prime minister's attention, the most obvious being the election of separatist premier René Lévesque in Quebec in 1976, the subsequent 1980 Quebec referendum on sovereignty, and the repatriation of the Canadian constitution in 1982.²⁰ However, the fleeting interest Trudeau demonstrated toward foreign policy for most of his prime ministerial career should not come as a surprise; *Foreign Policy for Canadians* had made very clear that Trudeau's primary concern was the furtherance of Canada's national

¹⁶ Jeremy Kinsman, "Who Is My Neighbour? Trudeau and Foreign Policy." *International Journal* 57.1 (2002): 57-77; English, *Just Watch Me*, 168-171.

¹⁷ Dale C. Thomson and Roger F. Swanson, *Canadian Foreign Policy: Options and Perspectives*, (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1971), 127.

¹⁸ Kinsman, "Who is my Neighbour," 67; Robert W. Cox, "A Canadian Dilemma: The United States or the World," *International Journal* 60.3 (2005): 684.

¹⁹ Granastein and Bothwell, *Pirouette*, 378.

²⁰ Adam Bromke and Kim Richard Nossal, "Tensions in Canada's Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 62.2 (1984): 343.

interests. Having curtailed the externally focused policies of his predecessor, the prime minister was free to divert his energies toward the country's schismatic domestic issues.

Nevertheless, once the threat of Quebec separatism subsided, Trudeau began to again take an interest in the role Canada played in world affairs. Having been unceremoniously ousted from power in 1979 by an upstart Progressive Conservative Party led by the relatively unknown Joe Clark, Trudeau mounted an impressive political comeback in the following year's February election after Clark's minority Conservatives were defeated on a non-confidence motion in the House of Commons.²¹ Perhaps Trudeau, having received that rare second chance which so few prime ministers are offered, understood that this was likely the final opportunity he would have to leave his mark on Canadian foreign policy.

It was during these final four years of his prime ministerial career that Trudeau's foreign policy began to seemingly readopt the "helpful fixer" role that defined the Pearson years. Throughout this period, the constant theme which Trudeau returned to was one of peace and disarmament in the face of a renewed nuclear threat, a movement which he believed Canada was suited to lead. In his address to the Second United Nations Special Session on Disarmament in 1982, Trudeau lectured that "the [United Nations] Charter is international law. In adopting it, each and every one of our countries has made it part of our national law. The Charter lays down, as a prime requisite of world order, that 'all members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force' in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations."²² Over a year later, in a speech made at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal, the prime minister similarly warned that "there is a habit of aggression which is gaining ground: an abdica-

²¹ English, *Just Watch Me*, 432, 442-443.

²² Pierre Elliot Trudeau. *Technological Momentum the Fuel that Feeds the Nuclear Arms Race - Address by the Right Honourable Pierre Elliot Trudeau, Prime Minister, to the Second United Nations Special Session on Disarmament, New York, June 18, 1982*, (Ottawa: Department of External Affairs, 1982), 1.

tion of the political process in deference to military solutions; a course element of belligerence, of menacing rhetoric, of governments which rise and fall at gun-point. The trend is global - and it is gathering speed.”²³

This latter speech was presented as part of a series of addresses promoting what is arguably the most important component of Trudeau’s later foreign policy, the 1983 Peace Initiative. In the fall of 1983 Trudeau, “deeply disturbed by the animosity between Washington and Moscow,” tasked his advisors with developing a policy aimed at calming East-West relations, and impeding the global proliferation of nuclear weapons.²⁴ The initiative saw Trudeau embark on a series of official state visits abroad, during which he met with senior government leaders to outline his concerns over the state of relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. The prime minister, who was particularly troubled by what he considered to be the overly-hostile rhetoric of American president Ronald Reagan towards Moscow, concluded his tour in Washington after having to cancel his meeting with Soviet general secretary Yuri Andropov due to the latter’s poor health. Although Reagan received Trudeau with the civility customarily afforded to a foreign head of government, Trudeau’s admonition of the president’s rhetoric appeared to have left little impact at the White House.²⁵

In spite of the indifference which Reagan had shown toward the Peace Initiative, the United States adopted a new stance toward the Soviet Union almost immediately following Trudeau’s visit. On January 16, not one month after his conversation with Trudeau, Reagan delivered an address on American-Soviet relations which constituted a near complete about-face from

²³ Pierre Elliot Trudeau, *A Global Initiative to Improve the Prospects for Peace - Address by the Right Honourable Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Prime Minister, Queen Elizabeth Hotel, Montreal, November 13, 1983*, (Ottawa: Department of External Affairs, 1983), 1.

²⁴ Beth A. Fischer, "The Trudeau Peace Initiative and the End of the Cold War: Catalyst or Coincidence?," *International Journal* 49.3 (1994): 614.

²⁵ Granastein and Bothwell, *Pirouette*, 372.

his earlier talking points. The president urged for greater cooperation and conciliation between the two superpowers, barely mentioning the strength of the Soviet military and instead calling for a global effort to reduce nuclear armaments.²⁶ For his part, Trudeau seemed to think that the Peace Initiative had played a positive role in the change in Washington's relations with the Soviet Union.²⁷ Yet the argument that Trudeau's actions had a meaningful influence on Reagan or American foreign policy ultimately amounts to a *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* analysis. Indeed, nearly a month before Trudeau's arrival Reagan had already instructed his top aides and the State Department to begin drafting a new policy toward the Kremlin, with the long term goal of reestablishing constructive bilateral ties with the Soviet Union.²⁸

Prior to his political career, Pierre Trudeau had exhibited a limited interest in international affairs and little affinity for the foreign policy positions of Liberal Prime Minister, Lester B. Pearson. After being elected leader of the Liberal Party, however, Trudeau appeared to show a newfound enthusiasm for Canada's role in world affairs. Trudeau campaigned on a promise to conduct a substantial review of Canada's foreign policy in the 1968 election, and thereafter undertook what was perhaps the most significant revision in Canada's foreign policy since the Second World War. All policy, be it foreign or domestic, must ultimately serve Canada's national interests first, Trudeau declared. Whereas previous governments had promoted Canada role as a "helpful fixer" in an increasingly volatile world, Trudeau scaled back Canada's contributions to multilateral forums, and took steps to further divorce Canada's foreign policy from that of the United States. Yet despite the considerable attention which Trudeau devoted to External Affairs during his first term as prime minister, the significance which he afforded to the department

²⁶ Fischer, "Catalyst or Coincidence?," 619-620.

²⁷ J.L. Granastein and Robert Bothwell, "Pierre Trudeau on His Foreign Policy: A Conversation in 1988," *International Journal* 66.1 (2011): 176.

²⁸ Fischer, "Catalyst or Coincidence?," 625.

dwindled as domestic issues concerning national unity mushroomed during the late 1970s. It would not be until his final term that foreign policy would again become one of Trudeau's key priorities, although the effectiveness (if not the sincerity) of this revived interest left much to be desired.

Given that Pearson had built his political career on foreign policy, Trudeau's early concern with such matters should not come as a shock. Cast beneath Pearson's shadow, Trudeau undoubtedly felt pressure during his first term to continue the emphasis on foreign policy that defined the Liberal Party during the 1950s and 60s; even if his approach marked a clear departure from his predecessors. Likewise, the prime minister's renewed interest in world affairs during his final years in office, and his subsequent shift toward a more Pearsonian vision of Canada as a global advocate for peace suggests a desire on Trudeau's part to impart a legacy that could stand alongside that of the Nobel laureate's. Nevertheless, none of this conceals the reality that for most of his career, foreign policy rarely amounted to more than a passing interest for Trudeau. As a result of his own indifference, Trudeau's foreign policy was largely dismissed while he was in office and forgotten by the time he had left. In some ways it is thus fitting that after nearly a decade and a half of Trudeau's incoherence that he should be followed by a prime minister so unequivocally pro-American that he had scarcely been sworn in before he declared to an American audience that Canada was once again "open for business."²⁹

²⁹ Jamie Muprhy, "Canada: Hanging Out the Welcome Sign," *TIME* 24 Dec. 1984.

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