

TRUDEAU, QUÉBEC AND IMAGINED GRIEVANCES

Richard Nielsen

Pierre Trudeau's greatest achievements—bilingualism, multiculturalism and the Charter—aimed in large part at redressing imagined grievances, that is, harm done, not to us, but to others with whom we identify. Because people claiming such grievances can never truly be appeased, it may have been a mistake to try. It has certainly encouraged the syndrome, which is now pervasive.

Les plus grandes réalisations de Pierre Trudeau—le bilinguisme, le multiculturalisme et la Charte des droits—visaient en grande partie à réparer des torts ou des abus imaginaires : c'est-à-dire des torts subis non pas par nous, mais par d'autres personnes avec lesquelles nous nous identifions. Mais, comme il n'y a jamais moyen de satisfaire pleinement les plaignants dans ces affaires, on a peut-être eu tort d'essayer. Chose certaine, on a encouragé un syndrome qui est devenu envahissant.

For many Canadians, the days that immediately followed Pierre Trudeau's death led to a reaffirmation of and rededication to the policies of bilingualism and multiculturalism that he helped bequeath to the nation. There was also unstinting praise for his third "great" achievement—the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. It is clearer now that his true legacy was of a piece, not a series of separate, distinct initiatives, as they might have seemed to be when originally introduced.

Trudeau's economic policies were not generally celebrated, perhaps because they lacked similar coherence, even in retrospect. The one economic initiative that seemed purposeful, the National Energy Policy, was designed to give Quebec and Ontario—chiefly Quebec—a cheaper and more reliable supply of energy and so to provide Quebecers with an added reason for staying in Canada.

I do not propose to analyze any of these initiatives which have received such lavish praise only with his death. In the public mind, they now represent "a vision" to be celebrated, though some scholars and political opponents (and some friends, too) regard them as failures—very cost-

ly failures. The details and particularities of the success or failure of the policies he initiated are better left to others.

I make television programs: public affairs TV programs mostly, a task which involves assessing the success of social and political initiatives in real-life, every-day situations. Judged by that standard, what have bilingualism, multiculturalism and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*—the latter, subject as it is, to augmentation by the courts—done for us, or to us?

It's obviously difficult to isolate one cause of change from all others. But it seems to me undeniable that bilingualism and biculturalism taught Canadians to cultivate our alternative identities, nurse our grievances, and probe our individual and collective psyches for any injuries we might have forgotten or neglected. We learned also to treat grievances committed against people long dead as though they had happened to us. Instead of inheriting the wind, we now inherit the wrongs.

Whole groups, classes, tribes and nations claim redress from wrongs committed against only a few of their number. Our courts have proved to be marvellously flexible in

accommodating them. A person alive today can seek redress (in the form of land, money or lobster) for a wrong done to a group a long time ago, while, in perfect reflexivity, a group can claim redress for harm done in the past to one, or two, or ten individuals.

The courts have legitimized and therefore encouraged this retroactive search for justice, recognizing claims based on treaties negotiated and signed long before Canada became a nation, and accepting as fact unsupported accusations of abuse and neglect. Living in Canada is a little like finding one's way in a car using only the rear-view mirror. It's a dangerous way to proceed, not only because of the harm it does—and threatens to do—to our political, social and economic life, but because of what it does to our character.

Laurens van der Post, the South African writer and philosopher, once observed that his father, who actually fought the British, had been able to forgive them, while those Afrikaners who came later and had personally suffered nothing, could not. He concluded that it was difficult, if not impossible, to forgive imagined injuries—that is, suffering that had happened not to us, but to somebody else. Note that what van der Post is talking about is “imagined” grievances, not “imaginary” ones. Imagined grievances may well have happened, but they didn't happen to us, they happened to those with whom we have identified. He added: “Let us recognize that there are people and nations who create with a submerged deliberation a sense of suffering and of grievance.” Has that not become the chief task of the leaders of our minorities, from the Premier of the Province of Quebec, to the Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, to the National Action Committee On the Status of Women, on down?

These various groups' demands for redress cause difficulty for the few remaining Canadians who cannot claim to be members of an aggrieved minority and must therefore pay up, but in fact van der Post believes the worst effect is on those who have chosen an imagined past. “It enables them to evade aspects of reality that do not minister to their self-importance, personal pride or convenience. These imagined ills enable them to avoid the proper burden life places on all of us.”

René Lévesque, in the year before he formally embraced separatism, was the host of the weekly television show I produced and we dis-

cussed this phenomenon as it applied to the Québécois. He contended that it was a “political immaturity” resulting from their status, and that it would pass when they became masters in their own house. He would shortly come to the conclusion—if he hadn't already—that such mastery would require separation. But van der Post did not think of history as a boil to be lanced, and his reasons touched on something utterly scorned in modern thought, in particular among those devoted to redressing the wrongs of the past.

Persons who have really suffered at the hands of others do not find it difficult to forgive, nor even to understand the people who caused their suffering. They do not find it difficult to forgive because out of suffering and sorrow truly endured, comes an instructive sense of privilege. Recognition of the creative truth comes in a flash; forgiveness for others, as for ourselves, for we do not what we do.

Van der Post knew such suffering first hand, having spent much of the war in a Japanese prison camp. It was as a result of that suffering that he first made the observation we repeat here. The war crimes officers who had neither suffered internment under the Japanese, nor even fought them, “...were more revengeful and bitter about our treatment and our suffering in prison than we were ourselves.”

The same syndrome is observable today in the lack of true dialogue between those who are suffering from imagined wrongs and those who interview them in the press and on television. People who complain of imagined injuries committed against others of the same race, nationality, class or gender are only empathized with, never challenged. It is as though a CRTC rule decreed that they must not be questioned, either as to the facts or to the link between the facts and their supposed effects. Even worse, interviewers invariably treat the victims of historic grievances with more tender regard than they do those suffering from some present injury. Van der Post says this perpetuation of historic grievances:

...is an evil, dishonest and unreal thing. It is something which cannot be described adequately in the customary economic, political and historic clichés. The language that seems far more appropriate is the language of a pathologist describing cancer, or the language of a psychologist describing a deep-seated, complex or obsessional neurosis.

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Pierre Trudeau himself—in life and in death—was a victim of the obsessional neurosis that helps fuel Quebec nationalism. Trudeau’s sin, in the eyes of the nationalists—is that he abandoned fortress Quebec for a wider field of activity, namely, Ottawa, thereby casting doubt on the conviction that such forays could lead nowhere, and might even weaken the imagined fiction of past oppression that keeps their anger hot and the fortress secure. All Quebec federalists meet the same fate with the Québécois elite, and for the same reason.

I began work in a factory at the age of sixteen, in wartime, and immediately encountered all sorts of real and present grievances, which quickly made me a staunch trade unionist. But I didn’t succumb to the Marxist analysis of my plight, nor did very many of the workers around me. The reason was that the Marxists active in our midst insisted that it was not our grievances, but those of the past or those being experienced in far-off places that would justify the hate required of us in the coming class struggle. It was even argued that humane bosses and successful trade unions were dangerous because they blunted our wrath and encouraged the illusion that conditions in a capitalist system could evolve or improve.

But just as a large wage settlement would not have satisfied the communists in the steel plant where I worked, natives grieving for the suffering of their fathers and mothers in residential schools that they themselves never attended will not be satisfied by any amount of money.

The search for justice and retroactive redress, which our courts and affirmative action programs encourage, is characterized by something van der Post called “a diabolical absence of good.” With our softer perceptions, we would probably use the word “goodwill,” as in “a diabolical absence of goodwill.” But van der Post was talking about evil and the despairing wish to make every situation worse. (That’s the moral bind of separatists elected to the House of Commons: The more they improve the country, the weaker their case becomes) After 30 years of calculated appeasement by English Canadians responding to a largely imagined past of suffering and oppression, the majority of the Québécois will not be satisfied with anything less than total victory. Because only total victory, even if it leaves them poorer and weaker, at least punishes English Canada, which is responsible at some level for their pain, including the pain accumulated from dreams of liberation so fre-

quently postponed both because of us and because of our Québécois agents, like Chrétien and Trudeau.

I do not imagine Pierre Trudeau anticipated that those with “a diabolical absence of good” would be mollified by the implementation of his vision, any more than he would endorse retroactive equity payments reaching back 14 years to a small and privileged minority of women in the civil service, as has just happened. Nor could he have expected the imminent bankruptcy of some of our churches for having committed “cultural genocide” by sharing with their Native students an understanding of God’s intentions transmitted to them by His Son, just as they, Anglo-Saxons, had been the victims of an identical act of “cultural genocide” at the hands of the Romans many centuries before. Nevertheless, what we are, and are becoming, owes a great deal to the impractical nature of the remedies Trudeau proposed and championed, and to which we are now urged to rededicate ourselves.

I met Trudeau before he entered politics, when he had identified himself with labour as part of the movement working to defeat Duplessis. People have said he was regarded as a dilettante in this period. I think that term is too dismissive. Those of us in the labour movement though he was very bright and very courageous, but unlikely to have ideas that would be of real practical value.

That estimate, I think, accords with his legacy. His ideas were appealing, his defence of them was formidable and courageous, but they turned out to be of little practical value. In fact, they made matters worse by pretending, naively, that ideas could matter when what was needed, as van der Post points out, was a change of heart. His message was enthusiastically received by English Canada because it suggested to us that the solution was in our hands, that we could, simply by goodwill, end Quebec’s estrangement. At the same time, his policies had little or no effect on the French culture from which he came. Canada would, I believe, have been better served if Trudeau had set his sights on changing Quebec, and Levesque, pragmatist that he was, had gone to Ottawa.

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