Reason over passion?
Just watch Trudeau


Review by Susan Delacourt

In 1968, inspired by the air of possibility around new prime minister Pierre Trudeau, artist Joyce Wieland expressed her appreciation with needle and thread. She produced a multicoloured quilt, appliquéd with Trudeau’s evocation to the nation: “Reason over passion.”

Almost a decade later, during a particularly tempestuous time in the Trudeau’s crumbling marriage, and with the Wieland piece close at hand, Margaret Trudeau ripped the letters off the quilt and hurled them down the stairs of 24 Sussex at her perplexed husband.

The gesture tells us much about the stormy personal life of Canada’s 15th prime minister, but it also reveals the fundamental tension in the 16-year political reign of Pierre Trudeau, so vividly and expertly told in the second volume of John English’s sweeping biography — this one called Just Watch Me.

If the first volume was the back story, this is the main act. Here we learn of Trudeau’s life in elected politics, spanning the years 1968 to 1984 — from hippies and flower children to constitutional dramas and economic crises.

Through it all, we see a leader who pined for reason in public life, but who also actively or accidentally inflamed passions he couldn’t always contain. This is the theme that runs through English’s book, and it is not just a historical curiosity — it may well still be instructive for the politics of today. Does passion always trump reason in Canadian politics?

The early attempts to insert rationality into the Canadian political realm, at least as Trudeau and his advisers saw them back in their first years in power, seem almost endearingly naive, in light of today’s political cynicism.

English writes of the organizational strategy around 1972, for instance, this way: “Trudeau’s key advisers were deeply imbued with the belief that there could be a science of politics and public administration.” They were taken with systems and computers and “cybernetics,” believing that the public mood and passions could be arithmetically organized.

That kind of thinking led to the huge growth in the Prime Minister’s Office and the attendant organization around Trudeau’s administration — a structure that has only grown since then to its current, almost paralytic state under Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

And if the Trudeau-era belief in systematized politics sounds quaint, we might do well to remember that the ruling Conservative Party is awfully fond of its own polling metrics and its voter database. Some things never change; they just get more entrenched.

Over and over again in English’s book, we get the story of people hurling the reason-over-passion principle in Trudeau’s face. And it wasn’t just about the mechanics of government.

Trudeau’s relationship with his home province of Quebec is a significant part of the narrative in Just Watch Me. The hard, rational Pierre Trudeau stands steely-eyed before the tomato-hurling demonstrators at the St. Jean Baptiste parade in 1968, only to be weeping by the telephone at the news of Pierre Laporte’s murder by FLQ terrorists in 1970. His 1981 patriation of the Constitution over Quebec’s objections, using the Supreme Court as his rational bolster, whipped up passions that put a fault line through the nation and his legacy. His declaration of the War Measures Act was passion met with passion — “Just watch me,” the title of the book. That doesn’t sound like the response of a leader trying to reason through a crisis.

The economy, another ongoing theme in Trudeau’s rule, also challenged his bid to value reason over passion. He tried to enforce systems analysis over the global disorder of the 1970s, relying on the Club of Rome’s projections about the dangers of growth versus diminishing resources. The public service organized itself around the forecasts and discussion. But inflation skyrocketed; Canadians’ fortunes swooned. No amount of organizational response could meet the passion of the rollickingly fickle global market of the 1970s. No dry arguments about made-in-Canada pricing could cap the gusher of western antagonism over his National Energy Program.

“Trudeau’s education was Keynesian, his economic instincts were eclectic, his politics were egalitar-
ian, and for all his intelligence, his vision in this new dawn was often blurred,” English writes, summarily, about the ineffective response to the economic travails of that era.

So it was with foreign affairs. The rational Pierre Trudeau withheld his sympathies for Biafra and its starving people, even as Canadian children were told at every dinnertime to eat up and remember those less fortunate in that beleaguered breakaway African nation.

Putting reason over passion, Trudeau could not endorse a state seeking independence while he was fighting his own war with Quebec secessionists. Yet the images of starving children incited far more passion than Trudeau’s reason could rebut. His indifference to Africa is provocatively probed in English’s biography, especially as it contrasts with the genuine attachment to that region’s problems by Trudeau’s successors, Brian Mulroney, Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin.

Similarly, Trudeau wanted Canada to be a voice of dry neutrality in the Cold War, ignoring the huge cultural effect of the United States on the political, passionate feelings of Canadians, who were being bombarded daily by the American consumerist revolution.

English offers example after example of passion prevailing over reason in Trudeau’s rule. As early as 1973, the man himself confessed that rationality didn’t always work. Losing his temper in the Commons, lashing out at English-Canadian “bigots” in an outburst he later rued, Trudeau reflected on reason alone as inadequate for the political fray over bilingualism. “If they want blood and guts, I’ll give them blood and guts.”

He could smack Canadians in the gut for issues significant and trivial. When Trudeau wanted a pool installed at 24 Sussex, for instance, his aides cast about to find a reason for the expensive installation, even trying to solicit doctors’ recommendations.

It didn’t work. That pool stood as an entitlement in that era and beyond. Laureen Harper, in press reports, still feels compelled to apologize for her family’s enjoyment of the Trudeau pool, telling journalists, in aw-shucks fashion, that it’s a lucky step up from the outdoor camping and swimming of her more modest Alberta background.

English, an historian and academic, who served one term as a member of Parliament for the Waterloo, Ontario, riding from 1993 to 1997, has obviously had his own immersion course in the lessons of passion trumping reason. Politics attracts so many decent, scholarly people such as English, who arrive in Ottawa to find that policy debates always take a back seat to high emotion. Like English, they often leave, choosing a more sane way to make a living. And yet the two can coexist. This reviewer — full disclosure — spent many evenings in English’s company while he was an MP; the conversation veered back and forth from policy to politics to passion, and he always had a bracing grip on the difference between them all. Only someone steeped in the abstract and the reality of politics could have written Trudeau’s biography properly, where others have fallen short. By others, I mean Trudeau himself, whose Memoirs (1993) was a huge disappointment.

Just Watch Me, in contrast, is a sweeping, fair-minded, detailed and disciplined account of Trudeau and his times. It stands with Trudeau and His Times, the two-volume work by Christina McCall and Stephen Clarkson, as a defining work about the man — with English’s version supplemented with exclusive access to Trudeau’s papers.

So what was Trudeau’s legacy — passion or reason? Passion, not reason, fuelled “Trudeaumania,” which got him elected in the heady 1960s. Passion, not reason, impelled thousands of Canadians to mark his death in 2000 with long lineups to view his coffin at Parliament Hill and to throw roses in the fountain at the Eternal Flame. The first flurry of news reports on English’s book focused on Trudeau’s many passionate relationships with women, and their influence on his governance. All that isn’t an accident — for all Trudeau’s avowed preference for reason, he actively cultivated much of the passion, good and bad, that he provoked.

And that, not just the man, “haunts us still,” in the memorable phrase of McCall and Clarkson. As recently as November this year, National Post columnist John Ivison was lavishing praise on Stephen Harper...)
for understanding that feelings are more important than logic in federal politics. “Conservatives understand that an approach based on logic and policy is doomed — they know voters make their decisions based on feelings, such as whether the party cares about them and their values,” Ivison writes.

Joyce Wieland later regretted her quilted tribute to Trudeau, English writes. Judging him in retrospect, the artist found him too cold and too rational to handle the passions he inspired. But English's chronicle of Trudeau's time in power gives us a complex insight into the daily struggle of reason versus passion. It's not a black-and-white, either-or proposition, and politics needs a healthy dose of both. This is the overarching wisdom within English's book — a lesson that applies not just to the Trudeau era, but in the politics of today as well.


Pierre Trudeau in full oratorical flight at the Université de Montréal in 1977, the year after the election of the Parti Québécois. He advocated reason over passion, but the unity file was the one issue that never failed to stir the passions of his heart.