Pierre Elliot Trudeau Essay, Research Paper

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Published in 1968, Federalism and the French Canadians is an

ideological anthology featuring a series of essays written by Pierre

Elliot Trudeau during his time spent with the Federal Liberal party of

Canada. The emphasis of the book deals with the problems and conflicts

facing the country during the Duplessis regime in Quebec. While

Trudeau stresses his adamant convictions on Anglophone/Francophone

relations and struggles for equality in a confederated land, he also

elaborates on his own ideological views pertaining to Federalism and

Nationalism. The reader is introduced to several essays that discuss

Provincial legislature and conflict (Quebec and the Constitutional

Problem, A Constitutional Declaration of Rights) while other

compositions deal with impending and contemporary Federal predicaments

(Federal Grants to Universities, The Practice and Theory of

Federalism, Separatist Counter-Revolutionaries). Throughout all these

documented personal accounts and critiques, the reader learns that

Trudeau is a sharp critic of contemporary Quebec nationalism and that

his prime political conviction (or thesis) is sporadically reflected

in each essay: Federalism is the only possible system of government

that breeds and sustains equality in a multicultural country such as

Canada.

Trudeau is fervent and stalwart in his opinions towards

Federalism and its ramifications on Canadian citizenry. Born and

raised in Quebec, he attended several prestigious institutions that

educated him about the political spectrum of the country. After his

time spent at the London School of Economics, Trudeau returned to

Quebec at a time when the province was experiencing vast differences

with its Federal overseer. The Union Nationale, a religious

nationalist movement rooted deep in the heart of Quebec culture, had

forced the Federal government to reconcile and mediate with them in

order to avoid civil disorder or unrest. The Premier of Quebec at the

time, Maurice Duplessis, found it almost impossible to appease the

needs of each diverse interest group and faction rising within the

province and ultimately buckled underneath the increasing pressure.

Many Francophones believed that they were being discriminated and

treated unfairly due to the British North American Act which failed to

recognize the unique nature of the province in its list of provisions.

Trudeau, with the aid of several colleagues, fought the imminent wave

of social chaos in Quebec with anti-clerical and communist visions he

obtained while in his adolescent years. However, as the nationalist

movement gained momentum against the Provincial government, Trudeau

came to the startling realization that Provincial autonomy would not

solidify Quebec’s future in the country (he believed that separatism

would soon follow) and unless Duplessis could successfully negotiate

(on the issue of a constitution) with the rest of Canada, the prospect

of self-sovereignty for Quebec would transpire.

His first essay (Quebec and the Constitutional Problem) explores

the trials and tribulations which occurred between the Provincial and

Federal governments during the ensuing constitutional problems in

Canada. Trudeau candidly lambastes and ridicules the Federal

Government’s inability to recognize the economic and linguistic

differences in Quebec. He defends the province by stating that

“The language provisions of the British North American Act are very

limited” and therefore believes that they continue to divide the

country and aid the nationalist movement in Quebec. Using an informal,

first person writing approach, Trudeau makes it clear that his words

are for reactionaries, not revolutionaries who are looking to destroy

the political fabric of the country. However, Trudeau considers

possible alternatives and implications in the second essay (A

Constitutional Declaration of Rights) and offers possible resolutions

to the everlasting cultural dilemma plaguing both parties involved.

One of his arguments is that the Federal government must take the

initiative and begin the constitutional sequence to modify and adapt

to the growing needs of all the provinces, not only Quebec. “One tends

to forget that constitutions must also be made by men and not by force

of brutal circumstance or blind disorder”, was his response to the

perpetual ignorance of the Federalist leaders who stalled and dodged

on the issue of equality and compromise throughout the country. At

this point in the essay, Trudeau relied on his central thesis for the

book and used it to prove his application of constitutional reform

using the Federal government as the catalyst. Trudeau had already

formulated his visions of the perfect constitution and how it would

include “A Bill of Rights that would guarantee the fundamental

freedoms of the citizen from intolerance, whether federal or

provincial”. Each and every one of his proposals demonstrated

innovative thought and pragmatic resolve for a striving politician who

believed in Democracy before Ideology. The emphasis he places on

equality and individualism is a testimonial to his character and

integrity as a politician. The next essay (The Practice and Theory of

Federalism) is the opening composition for Trudeau’s firm stance on

Federalism and how it can be applied to the current Executive system

of administration already in turmoil with its dominion. “Federalism is

by its very essence a compromise and a pact” is his comment on why the

Federal government of Canada has a responsibility to seek out the

general consensus of the people when dealing with constitutional

reform. This reinforces his central thesis for the book which is

mentioned in the opening paragraph of this critique; however, their is

a partial, obstructed observation made on Trudeau’s part when he

declines to mention the efforts of the contemporary Federal bureau

which had made attempts to negotiate with Quebec (although in vain).

Finally, the last essay (Federalism, Nationalism and Reason) is a

creative piece of literature in which Trudeau exonerates the

possibility of state manipulation and exploitation in dealing with the

masses (the socialist tendencies of Trudeau are quite blatant through

his immense historical knowledge and political shrewdness). Although

he brings up the possible implications of a rejected Federalist state,

he seems to scorn and laugh at the idea; “Separatism a revolution? My

eye. A counter-revolution; the national socialist counter-revolution”.

Such passages are indicative of the attitude Trudeau held towards the

political disorder of his own country and magnifies his disgust

towards the sluggish and immobile Duplessis regime. Throughout all

these radical and riveting compositions, the reader is faced with an

extremely unorthodox writing style which consists of both formal and

informal essay techniques.

Federalism and the French Canadians presents the reader with a

superlative ideological perspective of “how” and “why” the executive

branch of the country should be functioning in the eyes of Pierre

Trudeau. Although recognized as nothing more than a political activist

at the time of the ongoing political/social crisis in Canada, Trudeau

served as an adviser to the Privy Council Office in 1950 and

subsequently became a professor of Law at the University of Montreal

in 1960. His inauguration into the Federal Liberal Party in 1965 as

well as his future involvement with the Federal government

(Constitutional Lawyer, Minister of Justice, Prime Minister of Canada)

would bolster his credibility in this book. Not only does he stress

the importance and validity of the Canadian political scope when

dealing with his theories, but his historical and economical

evaluation of the world in general serves as a competent and impartial

method of comparing analogies. Trudeau had always been labelled as a

radical or socialist, but upon reading his anthology, the reader

accepts the notion that he was an advocate of liberalism and

democracy. I would consider his interpretations of Federalism and

Quebec heritage as being substantially valid even in the acrimonious

way in which Trudeau addresses the issues; “Without equality, one has

a dictatorship” (such indiscriminate assessments of the Canadian

government magnify the strength AND weaknesses of each essay) . The

only visible weakness in his analysis would be the position in which

he views the Provincial government under Duplessis (weak, subordinate,

naive) and this perhaps taints most of his bi-partisan observations

towards how the Federal government would treat Francophones under a

unilateral constitution. Otherwise, each and every proposition

presented to the reader is heavily supported and reinforced by the

central theme in the book which, in effect, could be viewed as a

strength; he supports the majority of his Federalist arguments with

quotes from noted dignitaries and political leaders from the past and

present such as Lord Acton (while defending Federalism in Canada), Mao

Tse-Tung (when referring to Quebec’s hostile and intolerance with

Canada), Aristotle (when discussing the perfect democratic union with

Quebec) and Nikita Khrushchev (in support of constitutional reform and

the possible effects of Dictatorships). Several of his essays had also

been published in Montreal and Toronto during the late 1960’s and his

address to the Canadian Bar Association on September 4th, 1967 is

featured in its entirety in his book (Trudeau used these facts to

strengthen and reinforce his expertise and experience in the field).

The material featured in Federalism and the French Canadians is

excessively difficult to digest and should be read by a student who is

familiar with the historical and political dilemmas presented in the

compositions. Although efficiently organized (dealing with Quebec and

social bedlam followed by solutions offered by Federalism), the book

is a challenge to understand in respects to how Trudeau plunges into

each scenario and issue with enormous furor and enthusiasm. He

generally expects the reader to have a large degree of background

knowledge on the subject of Federalism and Quebec. Without being

informed beforehand on the domestic difficulties of the country, this

particular reader surely would have been drowned in a sea of political

jargon and complex narrative insight. Nevertheless, Pierre Trudeau

captivated my imagination with his perspective of life in Canada and

the future of the country without a stable government. “My political

action; or my theory – insomuch as I can be said to have one – can be

expressed very simply: create counter-weights”, is how Trudeau

described the rationale behind his ideological thinking and how he

downplayed the stagnant political situation in Canada that suppressed

its greatest strength; representation and unity by a multicultural

society…a government that enshrined the rights and liberties of its

people and distributed the freedom and respect accordingly regardless

of ethnic or cultural discrepancies. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this

complex and unprecedented book; it provided a concise and insightful

portrait of the role that Federalism plays in Quebec’s backyard

during the middle of the 20th century. For a student who finds

himself caught up in 21st century politics, it is both a shock and a

pleasant surprise to climb back into history and discover the

productive and ideological perspective of a man who would eventually

rise to the occasion and become Prime Minister of Canada. Material

such as this should be featured on the curriculum for all students to

gaze upon, let alone only be recommended by critics who have studied

the works of Trudeau. Such monumental beliefs embodied into one man is

reason enough for a student in University or High School to open

Federalism and the French Canadians and learn more about Pierre Elliot

Trudeau.