The Laurier of our Time

Pierre Elliot Trudeau, 1919-2000

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To presidential biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin, who grew up in the US in the 1930's and 40's, Franklin Roosevelt so dominated the face of her country that she was certain his first name was 'president'.

Combien d'entre nous, de la soi-disant Génération X, se sont sentis de la même manière au sujet de Pierre Elliot Trudeau. Pendant seize ans son visage était celui du Canada. Durant ce temps, non seulement a-t-il défini ce pays à nos jeunes esprits, mais il lui a donné forme, et par le fait même nous a donné forme aussi. Comme Laurier l'a fait soixante-quinze ans plus tôt, Trudeau a définit le paysage politique et culturel de son temps. Et comme Laurier aussi, sa vision d'un pays uni lui a fait autant d'amis que d'ennemis. Les deux ont connu le succès et la défaite. Toujours comme Laurier, le courage personnel et la dignité de Trudeau subsisteront au dessus de ses échecs et resteront une partie de nous pour les années à venir.



The best and brightest of my generation not only avoid public service, but hold a thinly disguised contempt for it. How can one expect anything else from a group of young men and women who came of age in the materialism of the 'me first' years that closed the 20th century. Yet beneath the layer of inherited self-interest lies a disconnect of sorts. This generation, so misunderstood, does not embody the cynicism or disinterest with which others are so quick to charge it. Being detached, weary or skeptical is a world apart from an entrenched cynicism.

But if others see cynicism, so be it. While they judge, many Gen X'ers quietly search to repair their disconnect. For this is the unspoken truth that binds us — we are a generation of searchers. And while many share the frustration of not knowing what the search is for, or how to give words to the restlessness that fuels it, we privately search for meaning. We search for anything that truly matters.

In our time, politicians do not matter. Yet Pierre Elliot Trudeau mattered. Not because of any specific policy; nor because he was a man of substance and intellect who stretched beyond the elites to reach the people. Not even because he loved his country. But because he was authentic. That authenticity stands strong against today's culture of political consultants, public opinion polls, image-makers and handlers. Love him or hate him, Trudeau was the real thing. To my generation (and one imagines to others as well), how powerful is his memory in a time when meaningless Orwellian phrases, political correctness and a fear of risk-taking conspire to lift the uninspiring mediocre to the head of the class.

How desperate we are to feel, to touch, to see, to sense in any way, something — or someone — that can pierce this blanket of pretension with genuine vision and courage. So desperate that we yearn to touch it even in death. Beyond the sadness that enveloped the five-day long tribute to Trudeau, those who traveled to Ottawa to wait hours in line to see his casket or stood outside Notre-Dame Basilica in Montreal were silent bearers of a parallel grief. There has been none like him since he left and, worse, none on the horizon.

Nostalgia, it must be admitted, is a dangerous game. Its intoxicating tendency should not mask the economic and political failings of the Trudeau years. The residue of controversial policies survives today. The Trudeau legacy — a legacy whose final chapter (Quebec) has yet to be completed — will always carry its scars, and his detractors are quick to point all this out. Yet, in truth, when analyzing the Trudeau legacy, dissections of his policies miss the point. There was something far more enduring.

Les souhaits silencieux de ma génération doivent être contagieux. De quelle autre façon expliquer le désir ardent de plusieurs d'amplifier l'éloge touchante de Justin Trudeau jusqu'à un niveau plus haut, une intention plus politique. Jusqu'à quel point doit-on désirer une voix de conviction et de vision pour qu'au moment même des derniers mots de l'éloge, on se demande quand le fils prendra la relève du trône (et comblera le vide d'inspiration) abdiqué par son père.

Pourtant, ceci pourrait être la forme la plus fidèle de respect que nous pouvont, en tant que public, offrir à Pierre Trudeau. Il nous a rappelé que les paroles fondées sur la passion et la détermination peuvent profondément toucher un peuple. Ceci demeurera une partie centrale de son héritage. Malgré le fait que plusieurs de ses politiques comme le bilinguisme (sain et sauf dans les pages de ce magazine) sont maintenant menacées, le pouvoir de ses discours continuera d'avoir des répercussions.

It may be for this reason that thoughts of Robert Kennedy come to mind. For Canada, 1968 produced the leader its citizens never realized they were searching for. At almost exactly the same moment, our neighbours to the south lost a leader they may have desperately needed. Contemporaries across distinct landscapes, both challenged conventional thinking and used timely speeches to convey their visions. Roger Angell once remarked that while most politicians are 60% 'real' (the balance easily sacrificed for political ends), RFK remained whole. He barely compromised. One suspects the same could be said for Pierre Trudeau. Like Kennedy, Trudeau earned his share of enemies; like Kennedy, he also earned their respect. There may be no higher tribute.

A Trudeau, like a Laurier, may come along once in our time. Many of my generation will hold him as a standard for leadership, a political model for the authentic. And though we will continue to turn away from the public debate and not expect to find another like him, we'll be keeping an eye open just in case. ■