

# Jean Chrétien and the Shawinigan step dance

Nothing so befit Jean Chrétien's mandate as his departure from it. After nearly a decade of being criticized for undermining the financial security of Canadian institutions (hence Canadians), drifting toward continentalism and globalization and for otherwise being asleep at the switch, Chrétien became determined to leave the country with an image of himself as an activist prime minister with a strong nationalist bent. He would write his own legacy with a thoroughness seldom devoted to his more quotidian tasks. Was it enough? And what is the real legacy of Jean Chrétien's 10 years in office?

*The Chrétien Era: A Red Book Audit* is an in-depth look that defines the failures, accomplishments, and real legacy of the Chrétien years across a wide number of fields. Our point of departure is that Jean Chrétien had, thanks to strong majority governments, a fragmented opposition, and a united Liberal Party, a world of options open to him. More than that, he had a carefully considered mandate in the form of the 1993 Red Book and its two successors.

So what happened? Are deficit reduction, gun control, same-sex marriage, decriminalization of marijuana, the Kyoto Protocol, border security, the Third Country Agreement on Immigrants, the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, *Anti-Terrorism Act*, the *Clarity Act*, offside in the Iraq war, and new social spending the building blocks of the Canada Jean Chrétien wanted?

Reading the contributions submitted to us by some of the leading commentators on Canadian political affairs, our first impression is that Jean Chrétien was a far more substantial prime minister than either his supporters or detractors were prone to acknowledge. Certainly, he never felt himself obliged to follow his own Red Book manifestos to the letter.

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The traumatic deficit reduction exercise rode roughshod over any stated agenda. At the same time, though, the consequences of that exercise fell far short of the Republican ideology that imposed a very obvious societal catastrophe south of the border. Chrétien, it would almost seem, had adopted good old American pragmatism—now that the Americans no longer had any use for it.

Under Chrétien's watch, the Canadian political landscape and public policy were deeply and profoundly transformed, shifting to the right. At the same time, Canadian civil society reaffirmed its long-standing centre/left values. For 10 years, our former prime minister step danced around all these contradictions, cutting and spending, seducing and offending, globalizing and raising the flag with equal conviction.

It is our hope that in these first cold winter months of Paul Martin's reign, we will have assembled a fair description of Jean Chrétien's watch. Martin is himself something of a Chrétien Liberal—elusive, indecisive, pragmatic, self-contradictory, full of spin, and short on action. It is also possible that spending the better part of a mandate around Chrétien's Cabinet table, Martin will want to distance himself from these less than admirable habits. Whether or not he can, and where Canada goes from here will be to a large extent shaped by the man on whose shoulders Martin is now standing. 🍁

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