

# Creative inaction: Jean Chrétien and the art of doing nothing

## MACKENZIE KING AND THE STRATEGY OF INACTION

Academics have an understandable bias toward evaluating politicians by their accomplishments. A generous but questionable liberal assumption lurks behind this impulse—a belief that action makes the world a better place. But Canadian academics should be mindful of the advice of William Lyon Mackenzie King, by all measures one of Canada's more successful politicians. He urged us to pay more attention to inaction. At the height of the Conscriptio Crisis he confided to his diary: "I must make increasingly clear to the world that prevention of wrong courses of evil and the like means more than all else that man can accomplish." Taking liberties with his typically obtuse prose I would reformulate this as the Mackenzie King maxim: "Judge politicians not by the good they do but rather by the ills they prevent."

By this metric, how does Jean Chrétien fare? Using one of Chrétien's favourite words, let's examine Kingian inaction in three areas: the constitutional file, the economic file, and the foreign policy file. In each case, Chrétien did not do things that he might reasonably have been expected to do and in not doing so spared the country a good deal of grief.

## STRATEGIC INACTION ON THE CONSTITUTION

By not doing things on the constitutional file, Chrétien deftly outmanoeuvred a whole team of anguished political scientists and hand-wringing constitutional lawyers as well as a gang of very smart and ruthless separatists. In case anyone hasn't noticed, the answer to the Quebec question was "no." That, curiously enough, has produced a better outcome for the time being than "yes" or "maybe."

After the tumultuous years of Meech and Charlottetown, Chrétien came to power intending to take the constitutional

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question off the front burner. The country was tired of constitutional wrangling, first ministers' conclaves, the clamour of interest groups, and the divisiveness of ratification and referenda. Expectations had been raised in so many quarters; the centre seemed unlikely to hold. Chrétien gauged the mood correctly. By not negotiating, he could direct attention to other more pressing issues and shift the burden of responsibility for action to the separatist government of Quebec. His inaction even during the Quebec referendum brought new players into the game—the hitherto silent public. Though the vote was much closer than he would have liked, I am sure, the defeat produced the gaffs and revealed the separatist hidden agenda in a way that put the PQ on the defensive ever after. He let the PQ make the mistakes, and they did.

The Supreme Court reference and the *Clarity Act* have fundamentally changed the rules of the game. No more "nudge, nudge, wink, wink" questions to fool the rubes. And what has been the result of this tough love? As he takes his leave, the PQ is in opposition, the BQ has disap-

peared as a political force, and support for independence without association—which is what the next question must ask according to the Supreme Court—has little chance of achieving general acceptance within Quebec in the foreseeable future. "No" is an answer, and Chrétien delivered with a devilish effectiveness hidden by his shambolic style. The withering scorn and visceral hatred of the separatists directed toward him ought to have been a clue as to how thoroughly their ox was being gored.

## NOT CHANGING THE ECONOMY

The Canada Chrétien inherited from the Conservatives, despite their vaunted talk of fiscal responsibility, was an economic basket case. Here too Chrétien did not do things that substantially improved the situation. In the first instance, he did not repeal the GST as he implied he would. The hated and much evaded GST had been one of the measures that destroyed the Conservative party. The Red Book hinted and Sheila Copps promised to eliminate it. Yet the Chrétien government found ways to keep the tax in place and finesse its way through the repeal imbroglio with Sheila's resignation and resurrection through by-election.

It was a vitally important manoeuvre because the GST replaced a tax that had produced roughly 10 percent of federal revenues at the end of the 1970s with a much broader tax that generated roughly 20 percent of federal revenues at the end of the '90s. Put another way, the GST financed either the surplus or the tax cut, perhaps both. Not touching the FTA and the GST allowed Paul Martin to cut the deficit and taxes, a death defying circus trick as finance minister that effectively made him our next prime minister.

By the same token, Chrétien did not back out of the Free Trade Agreement as might have been expected from Lib-

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by a Liberal Party spokesman possessing a foreign vantage point upon which to base his remarks. Through a sometimes highly vocal foreign policy, and very proud of its capacity to balance its financial budgets, Canada has been covering up its unwillingness to spend money, especially on equipment where it counts, for defence purpose. Although Canada increased its defence spending in 2003 by about 800 million dollars, in the past only about 10 percent of the budget has gone for equipment acquisition, the bulk of the expenditure going for salaries. Averaged annually since 1993, Canada is at the bottom of NATO

both in terms of gross military expenditures as a percent of GDP, and in terms of the percent of military expenditures for equipment. Since 1993, the budget has declined to the point that some Department of National Defence officials were reportedly about ready to close up shop.

An announced increase in expenditure for armoured vehicles, carved in part out of the now moribund tank budget and a small administrative saving, will strengthen the army over the navy and air force. The intention to replace aging Sea King helicopters and a possible increase in the size of the army

could be of assistance to Canadian peacekeeping, but only if the overall defence budget continues to increase at the current rate. Otherwise, salaries will continue to eat up the equipment budget.

In the larger context, Canada must make some important decisions soon about the degree to which it wants to coordinate its defence policy with others. At stake, in time, may well be its status in NORAD, NATO, and the G8. At stake is continuity with a brilliant recent half century, and prospects for future statecraft that could be equally productive but are a bit more uncertain. 🍁

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eral opposition to it. Indeed, on his watch, the agreement was expanded to include Mexico. The quantitative economic effects of these Free Trade Agreements are still being debated by economic historians (I write ruefully as one who opposed it), but there is no doubt that they significantly shifted attitudes within Canadian business. No longer was the Canadian market enough; being able to compete continentally and internationally became the goal of Canada's companies. This shift in benchmarks combined with technological prowess is creating a much more dynamic, globally competitive economy that can likely withstand a rising dollar.

### STAYING OUT OF HARM'S WAY: FOREIGN AFFAIRS

After 9/11, what Chrétien didn't do demonstrated that Canada retained the ability to maintain an independent foreign policy even in the face of open threats from the United States. As the United States descended into its fiercely retributive mood after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, Canada did what was necessary under the circumstances as a neighbour and friend without being drawn into a subservient position or an open-ended commitment.

JFORS units operating in secret did much of our dirty work, but quietly in Afghanistan. The Canadian Navy remained well out of harms way cruising the Indian Ocean. Regular Canadian Forces, a bare minimum, were sent to Afghanistan where they experienced the tragedy of "friendly fire," which effectively put an end to Canadian fighting as part of the coalition. Instead Canada reverted to the role it initially rejected, acting as part of a UN security force in the region.

When the time came for the coalition of the willing to be formed to invade Iraq in alleged pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, Canada shuffled inconspicuously into the ranks of the unwilling. Unheroic to be sure, and certainly not the most direct means of confronting new forms of evil in the world, but until we figure out what our interests are and how best we might pursue them in this new era with the United States in such a dangerous and self-destructive mood, this policy bought precious time and restored our international credibility. It is difficult to know what all of this will cost us in the long run, but, in the short run, the answer has been fewer lives and a renewed reputation at the UN as an independent actor and a possible mediator.

As Tony Blair twists in the wind over the decision to go to war in Iraq, Canadians may honestly declare, "there we go but for the grace of Jean Chrétien." Would Paul Martin or Brian Mulroney have been able to resist the incredible pressure from Washington to be with them rather than against them?

### CONSTRUCTIVE INACTION AS LEGACY

The legacy of Chrétien's constructive inaction in these three key files is quite impressive. Chrétien did nothing in the face of electoral pressure in Quebec and the advice of all of the constitutional experts. He disentangled his party from an implied promise to repeal a hated tax, and thus could leave office basking in the warm glow of reduced deficits and balanced budgets that must have old Tories grinding their dentures. And it is Britain not Canada that must suffer through the anguish of being "had" by the Americans over Iraq. By not doing things, Jean Chrétien leaves office with the Liberals the most popular party in Quebec, an economy leading the G8, and a demonstrably independent foreign policy. Mackenzie King would have been proud of him. We might at the very least be moderately appreciative. 🍁