

# Pierre Elliott

*Last fall saw a public outpouring of grief in Canada at the passing of Pierre Elliott Trudeau. For those with long enough memories, it brought to mind "Trudeaumania"—the tidal wave of enthusiasm that swept the charismatic leader into the Prime Ministership with a majority government in the 1968 elections. The event marked the opening of a new chapter in Canadian history.*



Prime Minister Trudeau at the opening of the Tulip Festival in Ottawa, May 17, 1968

With their resounding electoral victory, Trudeau and his government had every right to assume that Canadians had given them a mandate for change. They embarked on a full-scale re-examination of public policy, and no element was too entrenched or hallowed by tradition to escape critical re-appraisal.

One part of the process was a revamping of Canadian foreign policy, with Trudeau taking a personal hand.

In a statement announcing the review, the government gave notice that Canada would no longer act as "an international boy scout," that its national interests would henceforth come first and that Canadian foreign policy would be "the extension abroad of national policies."

In itself, this stance was not unconventional. But the changes it heralded were, reflecting Trudeau's left-of-centre political philosophy, his distrust of Cold War attitudes, and his conviction that Canada could and should pursue a more independent path in world affairs. More fundamentally, the stance expressed Trudeau's innate inclination to take nothing for granted, to question existing facts and to return to first principles in doing so.



U.S. President Richard Nixon and Prime Minister Trudeau on April 14, 1972, in the Prime Minister's office.



Prime Minister Trudeau with leader Mao Zedong, of the People's Republic of China, Beijing, October 13, 1973

## CHINA

The first major policy shift was in 1970, when Canada recognized the People's Republic of China rather than the regime in Taiwan as the legitimate government of China. Recognition came 20 years after Mao Zedong took power but 2 years ahead of President Nixon's China visit. The action signalled Canada's resolve to steer an independent course in world affairs. Thirty years later it is recalled as a master stroke of Canadian foreign policy: it promoted the national interest and helped end the dangerous isolation of China.

## NATO

Another plank of foreign policy given critical scrutiny was Canada's role in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Canada had helped found NATO, and for its size it remained a robust contributor to the Atlantic Alliance in the 1960s. But Trudeau and his ministers were not convinced that NATO membership best served the national interest, and they examined various other options—among them, joining the non-aligned group of nations. Finally the government announced a re-ordering of defence priorities, with NATO ranked third behind national sovereignty and peacekeeping. Canada subsequently cut in half its NATO forces in Europe. While remaining in the Alliance, it now contributed less per capita than any other member country.

## THE COMMONWEALTH AND THE THIRD WORLD

Trudeau was sceptical at first about the value of the Commonwealth connection. In time he came to realize that it gave Canada the opportunity to play a leading role, often in opposition to Britain, as a partner and advocate of Third World member countries.

In this setting and others, Canada maintained its opposition to the apartheid regime in South Africa and backed sanctions against the breakaway white regime in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). On Third World issues, Trudeau was an ardent promoter of the North-South dialogue. Throughout the 1970s, he relentlessly sought ways to bridge differences between the prosperous "North" and the less-developed "South" in international affairs.

For a more detailed biography of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, visit:  
[www.canschool.org/relation/history/8trude-e.asp](http://www.canschool.org/relation/history/8trude-e.asp)