

A ‘Basic Dictatorship’ Problem

JAMES BOWDEN *uncovers the roots of the
Prime Minister’s admiration for Communist tyrants*

The Prime Minister of Canada has a “Basic Dictatorship” Problem. To borrow his infamous phrasing from 2013, Mr. Trudeau has expressed a disturbing and obsequious admiration for both China’s “basic dictatorship” and now for Cuba and its “longest-serving president,” Fidel Castro, who died on November 26.

‘A level of admiration’

In November 2013, Trudeau attended a fundraiser that the Liberal Party described as a “ladies’ night” involving “cocktails, candid conversation, and curiosity-inducing ideas.” Before these fawning supporters the moderator asked Trudeau: “Which nation, besides Canada, which nation’s administration do you most admire?” And he replied:

There’s a level of admiration I actually have for China. Their basic dictatorship is actually allowing them to turn their economy around on a dime, and say, ‘we need to go greenest fastest,’ y’know, ‘we need to start investing in solar.’ There is a flexibility that I know Stephen Harper must dream about, of having a dictatorship that he can do everything he wanted, uh, that I find quite interesting.

Trudeau thus unequivocally expressed his “admiration” for a “basic dictatorship” that has since 1949 committed various atrocities, including — like all Communist regimes — mass murder of political opponents and forced famines that starved to death millions of peasants in Mao’s Great Leap Forward. Perhaps Trudeau means that he admires China’s “basic dictatorship” only since the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. In that case, Human Rights Watch describes what

China truly is today:

Ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for more than six decades, China remains an authoritarian state, one that systematically curtails a wide range of fundamental human rights, including freedom of expression, association, assembly, and religion.

TRUDEAU TALKS OF CHINA’S command-and-control economy’s turn toward sustainable energy sources. But then, oddly, he ends his comment with a rhetorical flourish on how Stephen Harper, when he was prime minister, must have fantasized about wielding the immense power of the Chinese president, thereby deflecting some attention and responsibility away from his own self-described “admiration” for dictatorship. Indeed, Harper was such a dictator that the Liberals defeated the Conservatives in a free and fair election which saw Harper’s resignation and an orderly transition of power on Nov. 4, 2015.

Trudeau later offered this mendacious reinterpretation of his earlier remarks at a subsequent press conference:

The point I made was that despite all of our freedoms and our extraordinary system of government and democracy, we are up against countries that play by different rules that we would never accept, but that find themselves, uh, able to address big issues quickly and completely.

But of course that was not the point that Trudeau was making. Instead, he clearly expressed personal “admiration” for a “basic dictatorship” and implied that authoritarian regimes are superior to liberal democracies, at least on the issue of sustainable energy.



RIP Fidel Castro

The Prime Minister's Nov. 26 press release on the death of Castro is worth quoting in full for the record:

The Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, today issued the following statement on the death of former Cuban President Fidel Castro:

It is with deep sorrow that I learned today of the death of Cuba's longest serving President.

Fidel Castro was a larger than life leader who served his people for almost half a century. A legendary revolutionary and orator, Mr. Castro made significant improvements to the education and healthcare of his island nation.

While a controversial figure, both Mr. Castro's supporters and detractors recognized his tremendous dedication and love for the Cuban people who had a deep and lasting affection for 'el Comandante.'

I know my father was very proud to call him a friend and I had the opportunity to meet Fidel when my father passed away. It was also a real honour to meet his three sons and his brother President Raúl Castro during my recent visit to Cuba.

On behalf of all Canadians, Sophie and I offer our deepest condolences to the family, friends and many, many supporters of Mr. Castro. We join the people of Cuba today in mourning the loss of this remarkable leader.

Trudeau has eulogized the dictator in euphemism as a "legendary revolutionary and orator" instead of confronting Castro's brutal legacy: like all Communists dictators, he imposed his utopia by wading through a sea of blood, jailing and murdering political opponents, and then maintained his dictatorship through authoritarian repression.

The Prime Minister glosses over Communist dictatorship and, in a statement that sounds like a joke, Trudeau deigns to acknowledge Castro as a "controversial figure" -- as if his record were merely a matter of polite disagreement.

Trudeau even throws in a welfare nationalist line about healthcare and education. Perhaps, we should add, the Castros provided a certain standard of education and healthcare to all those Cubans whom they hadn't already murdered, detained, or exiled. If Cubans expressed a "deep and lasting affection for 'el Comandante'" they had no choice in the matter. Overall, Trudeau clearly fell for the Potemkin Village routine that all dictators put on for visiting foreign dignitaries.

In 1999, Human Rights Watch noted:

The Cuban Criminal Code lies at the core of Cuba's repressive machinery, unabashedly prohibiting nonviolent dissent. With the Criminal Code in hand, Cuban officials have broad authority to repress peaceful government opponents at home. Cuban law tightly restricts the freedoms of speech, association, assembly, press, and movement. In an extraordinary June

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1998 statement, Cuban Justice Minister Roberto Díaz Sotolongo justified Cuba's restrictions on dissent by explaining that, as Spain had instituted laws to protect the monarch from criticism, Cuba was justified in protecting Fidel Castro from criticism, since he served a similar function as Cuba's 'king.'

There is no due process, *habeas corpus*, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, free markets, political parties, and certainly no free and fair elections. In short, Cuba's basic dictatorship outlaws and criminalizes all that which the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms upholds and guarantees for Canadians.

Political Romanticism

Trudeau demonstrates a disturbing naiveté about the nature of dictatorships, falling for the Potemkin Village and the mythology of dictatorship as an efficient form of government.

In reality, dictatorships are inefficient. Indian economist Amartya Sen has shown that dictatorships cause famines, which shows that they cannot or do not distribute resources efficiently and justly — which should be obvious to any 20th-century observer. We need look no further than Stalin's Holodomor in Ukraine or Mao's Great Leap Forward.

Good government fundamentally depends upon a strong link between taxation, representation, and expenditure, which bind together the accountability and responsibility of the government and the consent of the governed. We know what happens when that relationship breaks down: many petro-States are authoritarian precisely because the government can rely on royalties from natural resources for revenue rather than having to rely on taxation of the people. Consent and accountability break down when people have no stake in the government.

Classical liberals in the 19th century well understood this principle, especially Lord Durham. In his famous report on the Canadas, which provided the blueprint for liberty and self-government in the British Empire in the 19th century, he maintained that the Royal Recommendation (the requirement that Ministers of the Crown sanction and take responsibility for all money bills) coupled with the principle that all money bills must be introduced by the people's elected representatives in the assembly was a necessary

condition for Responsible Government. Durham even referred to this principle as a "the real protection of the people."

Regrettably, Mr. Trudeau has consistently shown that he either does not understand or is confused about the difference between the executive and the legislature. He presumes to speak "on behalf of all Canadians," as he did in that press release about Fidel Castro's death, and he has taken to asserting that "Canada is back" — the implication being that only the Liberals can legitimately represent Canada. This implies that other parties are unpatriotic and do not represent the millions of Canadians who voted for them. This is ironic and contradictory given that Trudeau has also described Canada as a "post-national" state, which may make patriotism itself a thing of the past.

Let's do a quick civics review. In our parliamentary system, the Prime Minister and Cabinet represent Canada as a State and as an international legal person (as in *le pays*), and they govern in a way that should promote Canada's national interest. But the Prime Minister and Cabinet cannot "represent all Canadians" in the sense of "reflecting their values in government." It is the Sovereign and Governor General who represent Canada in the sense of *la patrie*.

Only the House of Commons "represents all Canadians" as a political nation because we elect Members of Parliament. Within the House of Commons, the loyal opposition represents "the political minority" and makes the representation of political dissent integral to Westminster parliamentarism,* and the government's legitimacy depends on commanding the confidence of a majority of MPs within the chamber. Therefore, no Prime Minister could ever claim to "represent all Canadians" unless his party won all 338 seats in the House of Commons in what would then be a one-party State — rather like the Communist countries that Justin Trudeau claims to admire so much. As Ajzenstat states, "the supreme benefit of parliamentary government is that it pro-

* Janet Ajzenstat, "Bicameralism and Canada's Founders: The Origins of the Canadian Senate," in *Protecting Canadian Democracy: The Senate You Never Knew*, ed. Serge Joyal (University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 3, 7.

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fects political opposition, the right to dissent.”

At the party event in 2013 where Trudeau expressed admiration for Chinese dictatorship, he also praised the “consensus government” that pertains in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

But if I were to reach out and say which kind of administration I most admire, I think there’s something to be said right here in Canada for the way our territories are run. Nunavut, Northwest Territories, and the Yukon are done without political parties around consensus. And are much more like a municipal government. And I think there’s a lot to be said for people pulling together to try and solve issues rather than to score points off of each other. And I think we need a little more of that.

Trudeau is essentially right in his description of how consensus government works. But he is wrong about the Yukon, which in fact has had standard responsible government with competing political parties since 1978. Only the Northwest Territories and Nunavut have consensus government.

While this comment received less attention, this remark and his praise for China are not as tangential as they might first appear. The only difference between consensus government and an authoritarian regime is whether the threat of force and coercion are necessary to mandating, manufacturing, and maintaining that consensus. In small communities, a genuine consensus can emerge legitimately and peacefully. But this is impossible in a large State.

What appears to animate Justin Trudeau’s political thought therefore, is, above all, something akin to Counter-Enlightenment Romanticism. It seems to be a “philosophy of community” where “all strive to be virtuous according to the same definition of virtue.”[†] In its mild and benign form, political Romanticism manifests itself as a kind of “civic republicanism,” which derives more from the Ancients like Aristotle and his views on a “virtuous and participatory citizenry” than the Moderns. In its worse forms, Romanticism derives from Counter-Enlightenment philosophy from Rousseau onward, with infusions from Hegel and Marx.

Romantics see the absence of consensus as an existential threat to the general will and the public interest. Therefore, anyone who disrupts that consensus prevents the political nation from realizing the general will and becomes an impediment that must be removed. Romantics also view history as teleological and thus as a force inexorably moving in one direction toward a clear endpoint.

Trudeau expresses his teleological “sunny ways” romanticism in his blithe phrase, which has since become a meme, “Because it’s [insert current year].” In other words, anyone who attempts to disrupt, slow down, or alter the course of history must simply step out of the way of progress. Trudeau’s “post-nationalism” best corresponds to what political scientists would call “post-materialist politics,” which concerns itself with “opening opportunities for political demands” — particularly of historically marginalized groups — and participation rather than the distribution of scarce resources. In short, as Ajzenstat puts it, “romantics shrink from the adversarial politics of the parliamentary system.” Trudeau laments the “politics of division,” enveloping himself in what Weber would call “monarchical authority” in his official biography, as the living embodiment of Canadian unity:

His passion for public service and vision for Canada are shaped by his experiences and influences — his father, Pierre, and mother, Margaret; the Trudeau and Sinclair families; his roots in the East and West, French and English.

Note that “The Trudeau and Sinclair families; his roots in East and West, French and English” evokes the Tudors, with their rose both red and white, with roots in the Houses of Lancaster and York, both North and South.

However as Christopher Hitchens observed, “politics is division by definition,” because in a liberal-democratic society, we are free to express disagreement and because our parliamentary system itself legitimates opposition and adversarialism in order to maintain the accountability of the government. Politics is by nature divisive. Without the disagreement and dissent that comes from persons who sincerely hold opposing views and beliefs, politics would cease to exist. ¶

[†] Ajzenstat, *The Once and Future Canadian Democracy: An Essay in Political Thought* (MQUP, 2003), pp. 8, 9.