

The Hidden Pierre Trudeau

Pierre Elliott Trudeau was one of Canada's most flamboyant and controversial prime ministers, and, under the eye of the media, perhaps the most watched. Yet many Canadians were taken by surprise by his traditional Catholic funeral. Until his death, many hadn't known Trudeau was a practicing Catholic.

Although he rarely spoke about his faith, and was often critical of the church hierarchy, "his Catholicism was the prism through which he looked at the world," says Waterloo history professor John English, Trudeau's official biographer. With Richard Gwyn, author of *The Northern Magus*, and Chancellor of St. Jerome's, English instigated a well-attended conference held at St. Jerome's and the University of Waterloo in May: *The Hidden Pierre Trudeau: His Spirituality, His Faith, His Life, His Times*.

"The conference worked because it blended some very serious academic questions on faith and politics with input from individuals who had actually dealt with those questions in political life," English says. Among the 30 speakers were some of Trudeau's former colleagues: prime minister John Turner, cabinet ministers Allan

MacEachen and Otto Lang, and principal secretaries Jim Coutts and Tom Axworthy.

For many Canadians, Trudeau was an enigma. He was credited (in some quarters blamed) for catapulting Canada into an era of moral and religious tolerance (or permissiveness) by liberalizing the laws on divorce, abortion, and homosexuality and by introducing the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. How did this square with his deep faith? The answer, as conference speaker Stephen Clarkson noted, may lie in Trudeau's equally deep belief in democratic liberalism and in the right of the individual to choose.

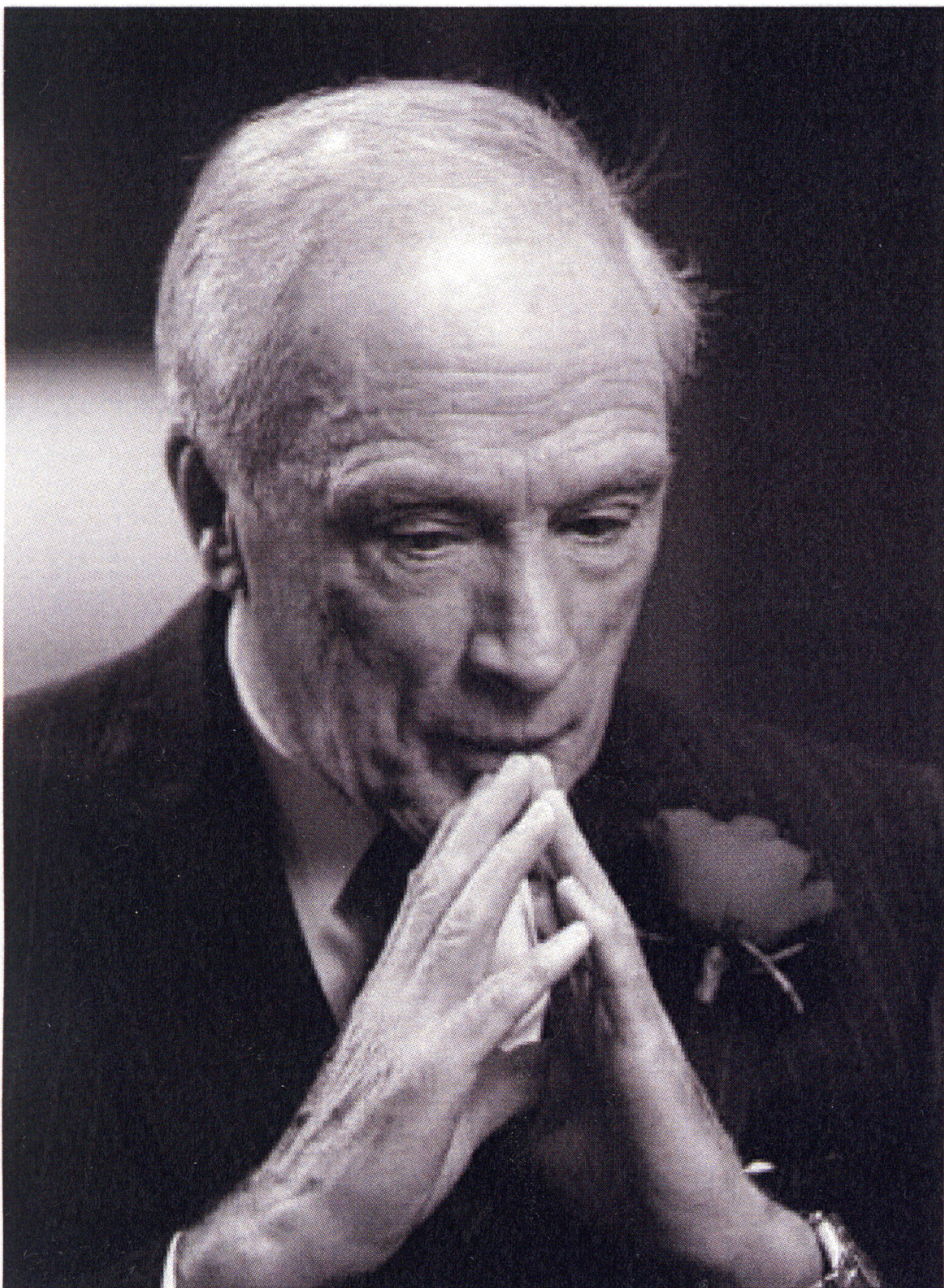
According to St. Jerome's President Michael W. Higgins, who also spoke at the conference, Trudeau's faith was a complex thing formed by the Jesuits (a strong sense of discipline), the Dominicans (an intellectual approach combined with action) and the Benedictines (contemplation), as well as by a Catholic philosophical perspective known as personalism that emphasized the individual's personal responsibility to take action to improve the world.

The conference also explored the coexistence of religion and politics in Canada. Religion has always played a vital part in Canadian life, and there's been no shortage of MPs who came to the House straight from the pulpit. Yet Canadians, and especially the media, have shied away from openly mixing religion and politics, especially in the last half-century. Not so in the United States and Europe. Why is Canada different?

Allan MacEachen suggests that, precisely because religion matters so much in Canada, potentially dividing English and French, we had to privatize faith in order to survive as a nation. Nobody was more aware of this than Trudeau, Clarkson says. Perhaps our most multiculturally sensitive prime minister, he saw Canada as a society in which no group could be allowed to impose their beliefs on others. In this, he believed Canada could serve as a model for the world.

The conference was sponsored by Canadian Heritage, the *Catholic Register*, the Donner Foundation, Dr. Desta Leavine, RBJ Schlegel Holdings Inc., St. Jerome's University, and the University of Waterloo. 

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