

Christo Aivalis, *The Constant Liberal: Pierre Trudeau, Organized Labour, and the Canadian Social Democratic Left* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2018). 293 pp. Hardcover \$89.95, Paperback \$34.95.

For those readers of Christo Aivalis' *The Constant Liberal: Pierre Trudeau, Organized Labour, and the Social Democratic Left* who were active in left/social democratic politics during the late 1960s through to the late 1980s (and afterwards), the first thing that they need to keep in mind when embarking on their reading is that this book is about Pierre Elliot Trudeau (PET) and *his* relationship with organized labour and the social democratic left and not the reverse. It is PET who is the central focus of the book and not Tommy Douglas, Edward Broadbent, or any given leader of the trade union movement. It is important to adopt this orientation if you are not to be—perhaps wrongly—disappointed with this first incursion into this relationship from either orientation. Indeed, as Aivalis writes in his introduction, such a book is necessary despite voluminous publications on PET precisely because this relationship has not been studied in any systematic manner.

That said, it is one of my criticisms of this book that the “organized labour and Canadian social democratic left” analysis of PET and his liberal ordering is somewhat stilted, presented, as it is, almost exclusively through the eyes and words of a select grouping of leaders in the CCF-NDP and organized labour. While fully acknowledging the immense difficulties—really, impossibilities—of researching and integrating the views of ordinary CCF-NDP members and rank and file trade unionists, it remains the case that the full range of left voices regarding PET is absent. This raises the question of how much the views and analyses of the social democratic leaders, as reported by Aivalis either through their words or via party and union publications, were, in fact, representative of activist and member ideas and opinions? As most Canadian labour history informs us, it is only the most vain and glorious trade union leaders who believe that what they believe and say will be received as gospel by their members. As the history of voting for the CCF and NDP attests, union leaders have not really been able to deliver the vote. Nor, of course, has the labour movement ever been wholly and completely behind CCF-NDP platforms and campaigns. We have only to look at the 2019 Labour Day parade in Hamilton and see Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at the head of the Labourers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) contingent to be reminded of this ongoing reality.

On the plus side, at the very least Aivalis' research may well serve to whet the appetite of those readers who were on the “left” during these times and who are on the “left” now. They are going to be wanting more—more information, more

discussion, and more analyses of the policies and actions pursued by organized labour and the social democratic left. More because the times and events that Aivalis examines—the trials and tribulations of the CCF-NDP—perhaps especially its utter failure in Quebec, Trudeau’s promise of a “Just Society,” discussion of a Guaranteed Annual income, wage and price controls, the National Energy Program (NEP) and the Foreign investment Review Agency (FIRA), and the repatriation of the Canadian Constitution in the form of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, are very important events in Canadian history. We do need to revisit and critically reflect upon how organized labour and the social democratic left dealt with them both theoretically and strategically.

That said, adopting Aivalis’ orientation of looking at the relationship between organized labour and the social democratic left from PET’s perspective, what do we learn? We learn that as PET was pirouetting behind the back of Queen Elizabeth, he would also regularly pirouette behind the backs of friends and political acquaintances in the Quebec and broader labour and social democratic communities. For example, in the years spanning the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, PET dangled the possibility that he would join first the CCF and then the NDP. As we know, he left these dance partners for the brighter electoral partner that was the federal Liberal Party. For example, his touting of the central place and role of workers and trade unions in resisting the degradation of the workplace, on the one hand, and in strengthening democracy on the other hand, became afterthoughts when PET repeatedly enacted back-to-work legislation and, more profoundly, introduced wage controls—the price control dance partner never really showed up—as a means of subduing, not inflation, but those very workers and unions. Indeed, as Aivalis sees it, PET’s wage and price controls were central to the Liberal order’s efforts to shore up its hegemony by persuading workers that these were just and legitimate measures in the interests of all Canadians.

Another important example of this duplicity was, tellingly, that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, fashioned and fought for by PET, omitted the right to association. In this discussion, Aivalis is quick to point out that organized labour bears some responsibility for this outcome as it arrived late to this party.

So, we learn at least three important things about PET and his orientation to economic, social, and political issues before and during his time as Prime Minister. First, we learn that none of these behind-the-back twists and turns should surprise us: as he was when he was “Liberal” Prime Minister, PET was a “liberal” when he was critiquing, but floating above, the anti-democratic quagmire wrought by Maurice Duplessis while he was Premier of Quebec from 1944 until his death in 1959. PET was, according to Aivalis, always a liberal—hence the title of his book. What this means for Aivalis is that, given PET’s constant liberalism, we should not be surprised that while PET could, and on occasion did, expand the traditional bandwidth of classical liberalism, he did pull it taut when “private property” (in all of its possible meanings including the right to private profits) was in any way endangered.

Second, we learn that PET's belief in, and adherence to, a form of classical liberalism was never, of course, social democratic in the socialist sense nor even in the policy/practical shape it took in the minds and hands of some of PET's friends and acquaintances in the Canadian social democratic community. In fact, we learn that these views were antithetical to his and no political bridges could be built for people to cross over. What this means is that by seeing the distance between PET's views and those of his social democratic contemporaries, we see that there was a different vision of how Canadian society could be organized and whose participation—workers and unions among them—was essential to the realization of this different vision. Part of this realization may be a new-found respect for Tommy Douglas or Edward Broadbent or a good number of other unnamed activists who worked diligently and with integrity to challenge the liberal order in the name of a different kind of just society.

Third, we learn that this book contains some history lessons for those readers who did not live through these years but who are now battling their economic, social, and political results. As outlined above, Aivalis is clear, crystal clear, that we should not be surprised by PET's political trajectory because he was a "constant liberal." In his formal political role, PET was an astute politician who understood that changing political configurations required some give, i.e., the National Energy Program and the Foreign Review Investment Agency, but, critically, also some take, i.e., wage and price controls, back-to-work legislation. What is also clear is that for the last three to four decades the "gives" have been overwhelmed by the "takes"—"takes" so all-encompassing that today Prime Minister Justin Trudeau can blithely pressure, even brow-beat, members of his Cabinet to intervene in the legal process in order to halt criminal proceedings against a Canadian corporation that was involved in corrupt behaviours with the leaders of corrupt foreign countries. Revealed here is not only the sanctity of the market but also the acceptance by ongoing governments that the role of the state is not only to subsidize but more than ever to indemnify private capital accumulation.

Liberalism has not brought a "just society" or "sunny days" to the great majority of Canadians. As someone who has lived through the four-to-five-decade transition from PET liberalism to this now fully-blown vicious neoliberal order, I can say that I was never drawn to PET or to his son "Pierre Lite." I am not to be found among those who Aivalis writes "romanticize" Pierre Elliot Trudeau. In a word association with his name I would probably respond with "Just watch me"—his response to how he was going to deal with the actions of the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ). It will be recalled that he enacted the War Measures Act and much injustice followed.

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