

The flq and trudeau essay

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Desperate Times Call for Desperate Measures Faraaz Akhtar History 30 Mr. Whelan December 12th 2008 Canada has always been known as a peaceful country. Among other parts of the world consumed by riots, lawlessness and violence, Canada is seen as an oasis of democracy, freedom, and responsible government. However during October of 1970, it was made very clear that the potential for civil strife, terrorism, and even revolution exists in the true north strong and free.

During this terrifying month, a terrorist group calling themselves the Front de Liberation du Quebec (FLQ) kidnapped British diplomat James Cross and provincial minister Pierre Laporte, and threatened to kill them unless a series of demands was met by the federal government. Then-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau refused to give in to the demands of terrorists, and responded by sending the armed forces to assist the Quebec police, and on October 16th, 1970, Pierre Trudeau addresses the nation, explained his position, and informed Canada that he had invoked the War Measures Act. This move suspended the civil liberties outlined in the Bill of Rights and gave the police and army extraordinary power to pursue leads and arrest suspects. A day after Trudeau made this announcement; Pierre Laporte was murdered by his captors.

Hundreds of arrests were subsequently made, aimed at crippling the FLQ. The Crisis ended when James Cross was released on December 3rd in return for safe passage to Cuba for the kidnappers. [i] Although the majority supported his actions at the time, Trudeau's decision to use the WMA has come under considerable scrutiny, with some wondering whether it was overkill. Yet the fact remains that after the WMA was put into effect, there

were no further FLQ bombings. In invoking the WMA, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau took what was a necessary action to neutralize the incredible threat posed by the murderous and ruthless Front de Liberation du Quebec.

Canadians often refer to the month of October of 1970 as “ Black October”.

This foreboding title gives an indication of just how terrible and uncertain the FLQ crisis was. It started on October 5th, 1970, when armed FLQ members of the Liberation Cell kidnapped James Cross, the British Trade Commissioner, from his home. This kidnapping represented a major step up from previous FLQ activity, which had consisted mostly of symbolic bombings, such as the bombing of the James Wolfe statue.

[ii] Shortly after, the FLQ demanded the release of 23 “ political prisoners”, that the FLQ Manifesto be broadcasted, that safe passage to Cuba be arranged for the kidnappers, as well as a ransom of \$500 000. The FLQ stated that if these demands were not met, James Cross, an innocent civilian, would be executed. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa agreed that the response to these demands and the handling of the situation would be negotiated by both the federal and provincial levels of government, in conjunction with one another. Five days later, the Chenier cell of the FLQ kidnapped Pierre Laporte, the Quebec Minister of Labour. This development was the more significant of the two kidnappings because it appeared to show that the FLQ was a very powerful organization with the infrastructure and ability to victimize anyone at any time. This led to a general state of panic in the minds of Canadians, which was confirmed by Trudeau in his October 16th address; “ The kidnappers

purposes would be served equally well by having in their grip you or me, or perhaps some child.

"[iii] With this mindset that everyone was vulnerable in the forefront, the army was moved into Ottawa to protect various government officials. Soon after, the army was invited by Quebec police to assist them in keeping the populace safe. On October 16th 1970, the October Crisis became arguably the most controversial event in Canada's history when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau invoked the War Measures Act. Never before had the act been used in peacetime, and the strong action shocked some people. However it was clear that after over two hundred bombings over a seven-year period[iv], and two high profile kidnappings in less than a week, the threat posed by the FLQ was great enough to warrant such strong action from the federal government. One aspect of the crisis that called for the WMA was the unique structure of the FLQ itself. Active supporters were split into " cells". These were comprised of somewhere between 5 and 8 members.

These cells had no contact with one another, and thus acted independently. The result of this peculiar setup was that there was no centralized leadership, and therefore no way for law enforcement to neutralize the FLQ threat with anything other than a show of brute force that could arrest droves of members and permanently cripple the organization. To do this the local police would have to identify and build a case against each target, which would take far too long to be effective. Local police also lacked the manpower to carry out such an operation. Therefore the only way to end the FLQ threat and stop the kidnappings was to have the support of the armed

forces and to suspend legislation that held police back. Such legislation included the need for warrants, and the inability of law enforcement to hold a suspect for an adequate time to build a case against the suspect. Thus the WMA was needed to destabilize the FLQ and put an end to the kidnappings.

Kidnapping was not the only technique the FLQ utilized to further their cause. Since the creation of the FLQ in 1963, the organization had carried out bank robberies to finance their crimes, as well as bombings. The threat of bombing was another determining factor in Pierre Trudeau's decision to invoke the WMA. At the time, the government believed the FLQ was in possession of a large amount of dynamite. This later was revealed to be greatly exaggerated, but the Prime Minister and his decision cannot be held accountable for being provided with erroneous information, and this paper deals with the competency of Trudeau, not his intelligence officials. Given the group's history of willingness to carry out bombings, even when it put lives in danger, Trudeau could ill afford to do anything other than take whatever steps necessary to stop the FLQ before they could strike again. In order to understand why the Federal government was forced to go to such drastic lengths to stop the FLQ, one must understand the FLQ, in particular their worldview and their motivation.

The FLQ was created in 1963, in the period of Quebec's history commonly referred to as the " Quiet Revolution". It is known as such due to the sweeping changes that occurred in Quebec during the time. Most of these changes were aimed at giving Quebec greater autonomy. These changes included the creation of government departments such as the Department of

Cultural Affairs, and the Department of Education, as well as the introduction of the Quebec Pension Plan (QPP), which stood in stark contrast to the Canadian Pension Plan used by the rest of the country. [v] This development was funded by increased taxes, and Quebec demanding a greater share of the federal budget. Reacting to increasing pressure from Quebec, the government of then-Prime Minister Lester B.

Pearson was by all accounts doing its part to try and accommodate French-Canadian demands. In 1965 Pearson formed the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. The goal of this Commission was to recommend legislation for Canada to “ develop along the lines of an equal partnership between the two founding people. ”[vi] The two founding people referred to are the English and the French. Even still, the FLQ continued its terrorist activities despite Pearson’s “ honest attempt to accommodate French Canadians in their demands.

”[vii] This shows how the FLQ were determined to carry out potentially dangerous crimes against the “ bosses” despite every effort to placate and accommodate them. The ultimate goal of the FLQ was to create a sovereign state of francophone Quebecois. This was a goal shared by many Quebec residents, including Rene Levesque. However while Levesque shared the FLQ’s ideals, instead of terrorism he chose to pursue his aims through lawful, peaceful, democratic channels by creating the Parti Quebecois, which won in 1976.

Pierre Trudeau in his October 16th, 1970 address had in fact alluded to the possibility of a separatist party forming government, commenting “ there is

available everywhere in Canada an effective mechanism to change governments by peaceful means. [viii] This victory irrevocably proves wrong the FLQ claim that elections are fixed and a separatist party cannot hope to win in such conditions. By rejecting peaceful means of achieving their ends and demonstrating an unwavering resolve to “ wash our hands of the British Parliamentary system”[ix], the FLQ gave the government no opportunity to negotiate, and therefore forced the government to resort to the WMA. When the FLQ kidnapped James Cross and communicated their list of demands, Pierre Trudeau had two basic choices available. He chose to refuse the FLQ demands, but there are some who say perhaps he should have given in to at least some of the demands, and if he had been softer, the life of Pierre Laporte might have been saved. Upon closer examination of the repercussions that would have arisen had Trudeau given in, it is clear that the negatives would far outweigh the positives. Ironically, the keystone to the free society is its legal system. While it may seem a paradox to need prohibiting laws to make a society free, it is these laws that make us safe, create opportunities, and bring order and stability to people’s lives.

Therefore it is of the utmost importance to protect our legal system’s integrity and credibility. Trudeau cited this in his address, saying “ it has been demonstrated...how fragile a democratic society can be, if democracy is not prepared to defend itself. ”[x] Trudeau firmly believed that the role of the government in a situation such as the October Crisis was to resist such insurrection at all costs. At a time where the people of Canada were on the brink of losing faith in their government and democracy, he made sure that

the government took strong, decisive action against a potential grassroots revolution.

In taking this action, Trudeau rewarded the citizens of Canada's faith in him when he was elected two years previously. His actions were met with almost unanimous approval at the time, with 87% of English Canadians approving of his decision. That being said, there is a dangerous side to the incredible authority that the WMA grants law enforcement. The suspension of civil liberties, the foundation upon which a free society is built upon, even in the gravest of circumstances is not something that can be taken lightly. The chief concern lies with innocent people being detained on nothing more than suspicion, and held without bail and without being charged for an extended period of time. Normally our legal system prohibits such behavior, but for a short time, the WMA overrode that prohibition.

There is no denying that the result was droves of innocent people being arrested. However while the innocent arrested numbered in the hundreds, none were held for longer than twenty-one days without being charged, and none more than ninety days without trial. xi] While these conditions are far from ideal, it seems a very small price to pay for the safety of Canadians from terrorism. Ultimately the best way to judge whether or not Trudeau made the right decision is to look at the results of said decision. In this case, the facts speak for themselves. After the WMA was invoked, there were no further bombings by the FLQ. There were no further kidnappings by the FLQ. All those who participated in any illegal activity under the banner of the FLQ were arrested, charged, and convicted.

Before the WMA was enacted, police efforts to neutralize the FLQ were utterly ineffectual. A parallel can be drawn between the Greek myth of Hercules and his slaying of the Hydra, and the police's struggle against the FLQ. The Hydra had nine heads and each time Hercules cut one off, two more would grow in its place. Only after Hercules discovered he could cauterize the neck, thereby completely eradicating any chance of a revival, was the beast defeated. In the same fashion, only after the police were given unprecedented power and authority were they able to slay the many-headed beast that was the FLQ. To summarize, the decision to use the WMA was successful because the FLQ was unable to cope with a government that could move swiftly and without hesitation to accomplish its aims.

[xii] In October of 1970 Canada watched as one the most shocking and horrendous events in our history took place in the oft-controversial province of Quebec. While Quebec has been a lightning rod for heated debate since before Canada was even a country, it is safe to say that neither federalists nor separatists would have wanted to see what they saw during Black October. The kidnapping of James Cross and the murder of Pierre Laporte, two completely innocent men, was nothing short of heinous, and their ordeals will remain as a black mark on Canada's history for generations to come. It was in these troubled and traumatizing times that one of Canada's greatest leaders, Pierre Trudeau, began his storied legacy of unwavering federalism and proved he was willing to do whatever was necessary to protect his dream of national unity. When asked by a reporter how far he would go in his crusade against the FLQ terrorists, he famously said, "Just watch me". And watch Canada did as Trudeau took the action necessary to

neutralize the threat of the FLQ by invoking the War Measures Act. The FLQ had gone from an isolated group of malcontents to a deadly banner under which violence and frustration rallied. The imminent threat posed by the FLQ, coupled with their adamant refusal to see reason, forced Trudeau's hand.

By invoking the War Measures Act, Pierre Trudeau salvaged the reputation of both Canada's government and its legal system's credibility, and put a firm end to the FLQ and their campaign of terrorism. Endnotes ————— [i] Author Unavailable. The October Crisis.

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