

Trudeau shirking chance to define Canada's relationship with U.S.

OTTAWA

When a complex economic issue dominates the political life of a nation, as it does in Canada at the moment, one of the central problems is that only a handful of people understand what is happening.

In this nation of more than 20 million people, only a few thousand economists and financial specialists at most have been in a position to evaluate the events of the past two months. A much smaller number have been capable of transmitting their understanding in a form which educated laymen could understand. And among this select group, so many different interpretations of reality have been current that the layman who has made an effort to understand often has succeeded only in substituting confusion for ignorance.

In the field of economics, our highly developed mass media are surprisingly ineffective; and as a rule, this ineffectiveness increases with the size of the audience.

TV almost useless

The electronic media, with the largest mass audience, are almost useless as transmitters to the public of complex data. As every television producer knows, the toughest programs to put together are those which set out to explain inherently complicated subjects. Attempts to explain these subjects through talks, interviews, debates, group discussions and other routine television techniques are largely wasted. It seems to be impossible for the ear and eye to absorb complex information from television in compressed,

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journalistic packages. This has been evident to everyone who, in recent weeks, has watched television trying to deal with the international monetary situation, the American import surcharge and the Canadians' responses to these developments.

Daily newspapers suffer from the same limitations to a lesser degree. Many newspapers in recent weeks have printed explanatory articles and structured summaries of economic developments which do give a fairly clear picture to their readers. But often the articles are written by economic specialists for other economic specialists and they mean little to readers who don't have the right type of academic background.

An exotic example

Newspaper journalists also suffer from a tendency to see everything in terms of contestation. This may be due to the fact that most journalists are trained on cops-and-robbers reporting or it may be simply that issues break down into black and white components under the distorting pressure of daily journalism. Whatever the cause, newspapers usually report political events as contests between good guys and bad guys.

An exotic example of this was seen recently when

the Peking People's Daily portrayed the international monetary crisis as an opposition of "the bright phase in China's yuan" and "the dark phase in the financing and currency of capitalist countries." A more domestic example has been presented by the reporting in our own newspapers of current economic relations between the United States and Canada.

The result of all this is that the average Canadian, despite the information explosion, understands as much about the causes of our current economic difficulties as the average Englishman of the last century understood about the reasons for the Napoleonic wars. He certainly doesn't know enough about the situation to make an intelligent decision about it. All he knows is what he feels in terms of the impact of the situation on his everyday life.

A sharp contrast

This impact is psychological as well as financial. Without understanding much about what is really happening, most Canadians are aware at the moment that Canada is experiencing economic difficulties and that these are being aggravated by the United States. Because it is impossible for most people to understand the day-by-day economic developments and to make a decision on who is "right" or "wrong," the attitude of our political leaders at this time exerts an unusually strong influence on the public.

This is where Prime Minister Trudeau may be failing Canada at the moment.

There is a particularly sharp contrast between his performance in recent weeks and during the

October crisis of 1970. Then, he was certain of his ground and his words and bearing showed it. Now, the issue is more complex and it also lies in a field where his background and competence may not be much greater than the ordinary intelligent layman's, although his sources of information are obviously better. As a result, Trudeau has adopted a tentative and experimental approach to the problems of the past two months. His remarks at his press conference last Friday were typical of this: "I'm not saying now that I would narrow my options down to one . . . I would be wrong to state now that we have eliminated some possibilities . . . I don't think any theoretical avenue should be closed. . . ."

This is probably good economic strategy. But is it an adequate political response? As the Prime Minister said on Friday, the new American posture "has sowed uncertainty" in Canada. Has this uncertainty been aggravated by a Canadian response to the U.S. initiative which has appeared to be adaptive rather than creative?

At this point, this criticism relates more to style than to content. It doesn't imply that Trudeau should leap immediately into a posture of "no truck or trade with the Yankees." But there needs to be an appearance by the Prime Minister, and other Canadian leaders, of welcoming the American move as an opportunity to redefine our relationship with the United States.

So far, at a time when Canadians are listening not so much to what he says but to how he says it, the Prime Minister has failed to put this across.