

Pierre Elliott Trudeau's Televised Statement on the War Measures Act

October 16, 1970

I am speaking to you at a moment of grave crisis, when violent and fanatical men are attempting to destroy the unity and the freedom of Canada. One aspect of that crisis is the threat which has been made on the lives of two innocent men. These are matters of the utmost gravity and I want to tell you what the government is doing to deal with them.

What has taken place in Montreal in the past two weeks is not unprecedented. It has happened elsewhere in the world on several recent occasions: it could happen elsewhere within Canada. But Canadians have always assumed that it could not happen here and as a result we are doubly shocked that it has.

Our assumption may have been naive, but it was understandable: understandable because democracy flourishes in Canada; understandable because individual liberty is cherished in Canada.

Notwithstanding these conditions, partly because of them it has been demonstrated now to us by a few misguided persons just how fragile a democratic society can be if democracy is not prepared to defend itself, and just how vulnerable to blackmail are tolerant, compassionate people.

Because the kidnappings and the blackmail are most familiar to you, I shall deal with them first.

The governments of Canada and Quebec have been told by groups of self-styled revolutionaries that they intend to murder in cold blood two innocent men unless their demands are met. The kidnapers claim they act as they do in order to draw attention to instances of social injustice.

But I ask them whose attention are they seeking to attract. The Government of Canada? The Government of Quebec?

Every government in this country is well aware of the existence of deep and important social problems. And every government to the limit of its resources and ability is deeply committed to their solution. But not by kidnappings and bombings. By hard work..

And if any doubt exists about the good faith or the ability of any government, there are opposition parties ready and willing to be given an opportunity to govern. In short there is available everywhere in Canada an effective mechanism to change governments by peaceful means. It has been employed by disenchanted voters again and again.

FEELINGS EXPLOITED

Who are the kidnap victims'? To the victims' families they are husbands and fathers. To the kidnapers their identity is immaterial. The kidnapers' purposes would be served equally well by having in their grip you or me, or perhaps some child.

Their purpose is to exploit the normal, human feelings of Canadians and to bend those feelings of sympathy into instruments for their own violent and revolutionary ends.

What are the kidnapers demanding in return for the lives of these men? Several things. For one, they want their grievances aired by force in public on the assumption no doubt that all right-thinking persons would be persuaded that the problems of the world can be solved by shouting slogans and insults.

They want more. They want the police to offer up as a sacrificial lamb a person whom they assume assisted in the lawful arrest and proper conviction of certain of their criminal friends.

They also want money. Ransom money.

They want still more. They demand the release from prison of 17 criminals. and the dropping of charges against six other men, all of whom they refer to as "political prisoners."

Who are these men who are held out as latter-day patriots and martyrs? Let me describe them to you.

Three are convicted murderers; five others were jailed for manslaughter; one is serving a life imprisonment after having pleaded guilty to numerous charges related to bombings; another has been convicted of 17 armed robberies; two were once parolled but are now back in jail awaiting trial on charges of robberies.

NOT POLITICAL PRISONERS

Yet we are being asked to believe that these persons have been unjustly dealt with, that they have been imprisoned as a result of their political opinions, and that they deserve to be freed immediately, without recourse to due process of law.

The responsibility of deciding whether to release one or another of these criminals is that of the federal government. It is a responsibility that the government will discharge according to law.

To bow to the pressures of these kidnapers who demand that the prisoners be released would be not only an abdication of responsibility, it would lead to an increase in terrorist activities in Quebec.

It would be as well an invitation to terrorism and kidnapping across the country. We might well find ourselves facing an endless series of demands for the release of criminals from jails, from coast to coast, and we would find that the hostages could be innocent members of your family or of your neighborhood.

At the moment the FLQ is holding hostage two men in the Montreal area, one a British diplomat, the other a Quebec cabinet minister. They are threatened with murder.

CRUDE BLACKMAIL

Should governments give in to this crude blackmail, we would be facing the breakdown of the legal system and its replacement by the law of the jungle. The government's decision to prevent this from happening is not taken just to defend an important principle.

It is taken to protect the lives of Canadians from dangers of the sort I have mentioned. Freedom and personal security are safeguarded by laws; those laws must be respected in order to be effective.

If it is the responsibility of government to deny the demands of the kidnapers, the safety of the hostages is without question the responsibility of the kidnapers. Only the most twisted form of logic could conclude otherwise.

Nothing that either the government of Canada or the government of Quebec has done or failed to do, now or in the future, could possibly excuse any injury to either of these two innocent men.

The guns pointed at their heads have FLQ fingers on the triggers. Should any injury result, there is no explanation that could condone the acts. Should there be harm done to these men, the government promises unceasing pursuit of those responsible.

During the past 12 days, the governments of Canada and Quebec have been engaged in constant consultations. The course followed in this matter had the full support of both governments, and of the Montreal municipal authorities. In order to save the lives of Mr. Cross and Mr. Laporte, we have engaged in indirect communications with the kidnapers.

OFFER SPURNED

The offer of the federal government to the kidnapers of safe conduct out of Canada to a country of their choice, in return for the delivery of the hostages, has not yet been taken up. neither has the offer of the government of Quebec to recommend parole for the five prisoners eligible for parole.

This offer of safe conduct was made only because Mr. Cross and Mr. Laporte might be able to identify their kidnapers and to assist in their prosecution. By offering the kidnapers safe exit from Canada, we removed from them any possible motivation for murdering their hostages.

Let me turn now to the broader implications of the threat represented by the FLQ and similar organizations.

If a democratic society is to continue to exist, it must be able to root out the cancer of an armed, revolutionary movement that is bent on destroying the very basis of our freedom. For that reason the government, following an analysis of the facts, including requests of the government of Quebec and the city of Montreal for urgent action, decided to proclaim the War Measures Act.

It did so at 4:00 a.m. this morning, in order to permit the full weight of government to be brought quickly to bear on all those persons advocating or practising violence as a means of achieving political ends.

GOVERNMENT RELUCTANT

The War Measures Act gives sweeping powers to the government. It also suspends the operation of the Canadian Bill of Rights. I can assure you that the government is most reluctant to seek such powers, and did so only when it became crystal clear that the situation could not be controlled unless some extraordinary assistance was made available on an urgent basis.

The authority contained in the act will permit governments to deal effectively with the nebulous yet dangerous challenge to society represented by terrorist organizations. The criminal law as it stands is simply not adequate to deal with systematic terrorism.

The police have therefore been given certain extraordinary powers necessary for the effective detection and elimination of conspiratorial organizations which advocate the use of violence. These organizations, and membership in them, have been declared illegal.

The powers include the right to search and arrest without warrant, to detain suspected persons without the necessity of laying specific charges immediately, and to detain persons without bail .

POWERS DISTASTEFUL

These are strong powers and I find them as distasteful as I am sure you do. They are necessary, however, to permit the police to deal with persons who advocate or promote the violent overthrow of our democratic system.

In short, I assure you that the government recognizes its grave responsibilities in interfering in certain cases with civil liberties, and that it remains answerable to the people of Canada for its actions.

The government will revoke this proclamation as soon as possible.

As I said in the House of Commons this morning, the government will allow sufficient time to pass to give it the necessary experience to assess the type of statute which may be required in the present circumstances.

It is my firm intention to discuss then with the leaders of the opposition parties the desirability of introducing legislation of a less comprehensive nature. In this respect I earnestly solicited from the leaders and from all honourable members constructive suggestions for the amendment of the regulations.

Such suggestions will be given careful consideration for possible inclusion in any new statute.

A TRAP

I recognize, as I hope do others that this extreme position which governments have been forced into is in some respects a trap. It is a well-known technique of revolutionary groups who attempt to destroy society by unjustified violence, to goad the authorities into inflexible attitudes. The revolutionaries then employ this evidence of alleged authoritarianism as justification for the need to use violence in their renewed attacks on the social structure.

I appeal to all Canadians not to become so obsessed by what the government has done today in response to terrorism that they forget the opening play in this vicious game. That play was taken by the revolutionaries; they chose to use bombing, murder and kidnapping.

The threat posed by the FLQ terrorists and their supporters is out of all proportion to their numbers. This follows from the fact that they act stealthily and because they are known to have in their possession a considerable amount of dynamite.

To guard against the very real possibility of bombings directed at public buildings or utilities in the immediate future the government of Quebec has requested the assistance of the Canadian Armed Forces to support the police in several places in the province of Quebec. These forces took up their positions yesterday.

VIOLENT DECADE

Violence, unhappily, is no stranger to this decade. The Speech from the Throne opening the current session of Parliament a few days ago said that "we live in a period of tenseness and unease." We must not overlook the fact, moreover that violence is often a symptom of deep social unrest.

This government has pledged that it will introduce legislation which deals not only with symptoms but with the social causes which often underlie or serve as an excuse for crime and disorder.

It was in that context that I stated in the House of Commons a year ago that there was no need anywhere in Canada for misguided or misinformed zealots to resort to acts of violence in the belief that only in this fashion could they accomplish change.

There may be some places in the world where the law is so inflexible and so insensitive as to prompt such beliefs.

But Canada is not such a place. I said then, and I repeat now, that those who would defy the law and ignore the opportunities available to them to right their wrongs and satisfy their claims will receive no hearing from this government

We shall ensure that the laws passed by Parliament are worthy of respect. We shall also ensure that those laws are respected.

HATE CULTIVATED

We have seen in many parts of Canada all too much evidence of violence in the name of revolution in the past 12 months. We are now able to see some of the consequences of violence.

Persons who invoke violence are raising deliberately the level of hate in Canada. They do so at a time when the country must eliminate hate, and must exhibit tolerance and compassion in order to create the kind of society which we all desire.

Yet those who disrespect legal processes create a danger that law-abiding elements of the community, out of anger and out of fear, will harden their attitudes and refuse to accommodate any change or remedy any shortcomings. They refuse because fear deprives persons of their normal sense of compassion and their normal sense of justice.

This government is not acting out of fear. It is acting to prevent fear from spreading. It is acting to maintain the rule of law without which freedom is impossible.

It is acting to make clear to kidnapers, revolutionaries and assassins that in this country laws are made and changed by the elected representatives of all Canadians -not by a handful of self-selected dictators. Those who gain power through terror rule through terror. The government is acting, therefore, to protect your life and your liberty.

The government is acting as well to ensure the safe return of Mr. James Cross and Mr. Pierre Laporte. I speak for millions of Canadians when I say to their courageous wives and families how much we sympathize with them for the nightmare to which they have been subjected, and how much we all hope and pray that it will soon conclude.

STAND FIRM

Canada remains one of the most wholesome and humane lands on this earth. If we stand firm, this current situation will soon pass. We will be able to say proudly, as we have for decades, that within Canada there is ample room for opposition and dissent, but none for intimidation and terror.

There are very few times in the history of any country when all persons must take a stand on critical issues. This is one of those times; this is one of those issues.

I am confident that those persons who unleashed this tragic sequence of events with the aim of destroying our society and dividing our country will find that the opposite will occur. The result of their acts will be a stronger society in a unified country. Those who would have divided us will have united us.

I sense the unease which grips many Canadians today. Some of you are upset, and this is understandable. I want to reassure you that the authorities have the situation well in hand.

Everything that needs to be done is being done; every level of government in this country is well prepared to act in your interests.

Source: *Canadian News Facts*, 1970, pp 527-528

© 1999, Claude Bélanger, Marianopolis College