

Pierre Trudeau at the Crossroads

by James Panichi

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The following article explores some linguistic aspects of cross-cultural identity, and proposes some interesting solutions.

There are several meanings to the Italian word 'incrocio', as I soon found out. Having moved to Italy from Australia at the age of 9, my new classmates used it, quite affectionately, to refer to my family environment. With an Italian father and an Anglo-Saxon mother, the word took on the meaning of 'mixture, or 'cross-breeding'. The word was also used when commenting on my name – English my Christian name, Italian the surname. *Madonna, che incrocio!* – what a mixture!

However, the meaning of the word which has always fascinated my sister and me is another. 'Croce', a cross, 'incrociare', to cross, 'l'incrocio', the crossroads, the intersection. It is where two thoroughfares meet, the point from which you can see down both roads. It may be the scene of many an accident, but for those prepared to stay alert, to understand and anticipate the erratic patterns of the traffic flow, life at the crossroads can be an exhilarating existence. This is where I was born, and where I have always lived: *l'incrocio*.

The fate of most people in Australia with one Italian parent is usually the same: no matter how firm initial resolutions, the common language will dominate – English becomes the household 'lingua franca', and soon any day-to-day use of Italian falls by the wayside. The Italian-speaking parent will communicate with the children in English, and the children will come to know that parent through a language once-removed, through words which often are not adequate to translate what the parent is thinking. This would have described my own family situation perfectly, had my father not decided to embark on what is now given the trendy appellation of *immigrazione di ritorno* – return-immigration. In other words, my father reversed what had been a firm decision to go on a one-way trip. Dad had left Italy thirty years before in anger, so I think his decision to return with a young family must have been as traumatic as a practicing Catholic requesting a marriage annulment. Dad

was forced to turn to Italy to give his children the one thing he and Australia could not: an understanding of his language and culture.

I was about to finish grade 3 in Australia, and arrived in Italy mid-way through their grade 4, or *quarta elementare*. Within six months I was conversing with my class mates in a Tuscan dialect, in less than a year my sister and I spoke to each other in nothing but Italian. Mum cried for days, lamenting the 'loss' of her children. Dad reassured her by saying that we would chose neither culture, we would forget no language. We would be both. My sister soon became the 'language police' of the family. She had sensed what I came to understand only much later – that the groove of bilingualism could become a rut of confusion; that one language could become a crutch for the other; that intellectual laziness would leave us neither here nor there. When my sister was around, a sentence begun in Italian could only end in Italian. When she wasn't home, Dad would teach me the language he had learnt among Australia's Italians – a *miscuglio* rather than an incrocio of languages, two soluble elements coming together, a mixture without order, a jumble. English was used to give emphasis, an Italian sentence was repeated in English to highlight its significance. We both loved it, but Dad also respected my sister's approach – after all, we were the ones at the crossroads, while if my father ever had to jump, he would have landed firmly on *Via Italia*, the Italian Way.

I first came across the figure of Pierre Trudeau while travelling in Canada. He had become one of a handful of Canadian 'elder statesmen', a point of reference for journalists searching for a quotable quote from an important figure of a different era of Franco-Canadian political life: the *Revolution Tranquille*, the Quiet Revolution. Unashamedly upper-middle-class in his tastes and wealth, Trudeau's family background was both French and Anglo-Saxon. His maternal

grandfather, Mr Elliot, was of Scottish descent (Trudeau insisted on signing his name *Pierre Elliot Trudeau*), while his father was in the jargon of today's national chauvinists, a quebecois pure laine, 'pure wool', a man completely of French heritage.

Trudeau enjoyed life at the crossroads, graduating in law at the *Université de Montreal*, studying economics at Harvard, politics at the Sorbonne, then a bit of both at the London School of Economics. He was what my sister would call 'profoundly bilingual' – in other words, he could express the most difficult and challenging notions in either language, and did so most passionately over the many years of his prime-ministership.

His philosophical outlook was what I would refer to as 'cosmopolitan' – in other words, he was a true child of the Enlightenment. He believed in a liberal, bi-lingual state, capable of providing both the anglophone and the francophone populations with the framework in which to live and prosper, no matter which language they chose. He had himself experienced the exhilaration of the mixture of cultures in his native Montreal, although my guess is that he failed to fully understand just what a feat it was to bring about a peaceful co-existence of such different cultures. To him it came naturally simply because he knew no other way of expressing his 'Canadian-ness'.

Trudeau's vision of the truly cosmopolitan bilingual man and woman failed to become reality, but he became an important point of reference for me in dealing with the perceptions of others. In both Italy and Australia when I was asked 'Italian or Australian?', I would calmly point out that the question is flawed. Australia is the state to which I belong, the state of which I am a citizen, the country of my birth. My cultural identity, on the other hand, is both Anglo-Celtic (English and Scottish) and Italian (Veneto and Tuscan). 'Then are you English or Italian?' The answer is simple: both. No crises, no mixed feelings, no 'neither-here-nor-there', no 'if-you-have-to-choose' scenarios. Simply both.

This is not a political statement, not a remediated digging in of heels, a *presa di posizione*. This is simply where I was born – with two languages, two cultures, two distinctly different ways of seeing the world. That which is perceived by others as odd is all grist to the cultural mill of my everyday life. One's identity is not like

a computer with limited memory space, with room only for one program. Yet my schoolmates in Italy had an almost biological view of '*italianità*': you either are Italian, or you're not; blood is thicker than water, after all. Well, it was never like that for us – there was never a clash – just my desperate attempt to be on top of the detail of so demanding a 'heritage portfolio'.

On the eve of the 1980 Quebec referendum on independence, Trudeau spoke in French to a packed 'federalist' gathering, with bright Canadian and Quebec provincial flags being waved by a supportive crowd. He accused the *separatists* of forcing him to choose an identity – of having to decide whether he would accept a Scottish grandparent over a francophone father. It was a choice, he claimed, no-one should have to make, and no one need make. The nation-state advocated by the separatistes was demanding that the scrambled-eggs be unscrambled. Trudeau had taken his cultural ancestry seriously enough to study both languages, and had no problem in finding a place for himself within the structure of a tolerant modern democracy.

I dare compare myself to Trudeau in one way only: his downfall was that he just did not understand how deep his country's cultural divisions actually ran. From the vantage point of the crossroads it is easy to forget how terrifying it all appears to speeding traffic approaching from all sides. To my mother, the fact that neither my sister nor I chose one culture over the other was certainly not obvious at the time, and understandably caused her great concern. For me, it has simply been a great adventure.

My sister now lives in Italy, is married to an Italian and has just had her first child, whom she named Timothy Alexander James. True to her reputation as the 'language police', she speaks to him only in English, and answers him when he speaks English – although he is encouraged to speak Italian to his father. Sure, it's all a bit of a burden for an 18 month-old child, but this is the only reality my sister knows, the only upbringing she can relate to. And perhaps one day a very Italian Timothy Alexander James will be proud that like his mother, he was born at the crossroads.