

# THE BEST PRIME MINISTER OF THE LAST 50 YEARS — PEARSON, BY A LANDSLIDE

## Mulroney Second Overall, Trudeau and St-Laurent in a Virtual Tie for Third, Chrétien Fifth and Diefenbaker a Distant Sixth in *Policy Options* Rankings

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**L**ester B. Pearson, who in four elections never won a majority government, is the landslide winner in a *Policy Options* ranking of Canadian prime ministers of the last half-century, coinciding with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth on June 2, 1953.

In a survey by IRPP and *Policy Options* in consultation with eminent authorities on Canadian history and public policy, Canada's 14<sup>th</sup> prime minister emerged as the overwhelming first choice of a panel of 30 leading historians, political scientists, economists, former senior government officials and a sprinkling of top editors, authors and journalists. (Two duos on the panel each cast a single vote, for a total of 28 votes.)

Brian Mulroney, father of free trade and the GST, was a clear second choice, though respondents were sharply divided, usually between English- and French-speaking Canada, in their assessments of his failed constitutional deals at Meech Lake and Charlottetown. Pierre Trudeau finished in third place in the overall rankings, receiving high marks for the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, but low scores for his mismanagement of the economy and the fiscal framework during an era that saw Canada's federal debt increase by more than 1,000 percent.

Trudeau was closely followed in the overall rankings, in virtually a statistical dead heat, by Louis St-Laurent, who governed in an era of postwar expansion and prosperity, and received generally high scores for both his economic management, as well as Canadian unity and conduct of Canadian foreign policy. Jean Chrétien ranked fifth overall, though he received the highest scores for the economy and fiscal framework, notably the balancing of the budget and paying down debt out of the resulting fiscal dividend. But Chrétien also received poor marks on leadership, as well as his conduct of foreign affairs, particularly Canada's relationship with the United States.

However, several panellists pointed out that it is early days to be measuring a prime minister who has not yet left

office. Yet there was general agreement that the balancing of the budget and the fiscal dividend, as well as the Clarity Act, defining rules of the road for Quebec separating from Canada, were the major achievements of the Chrétien years.

John Diefenbaker, a towering personality and mesmerizing campaigner, finished a distant sixth, with most panellists regarding his time in office as a succession of missed opportunities and failed policies, though he received due recognition for initiatives such as the Bill of Rights, wheat sales to Communist China in the face of US opposition, and the expulsion of South Africa from the Commonwealth over apartheid. In winning the 1957 and 1958 elections, he also broke the stranglehold of a Liberal dynasty, swollen with arrogance after 22 years in office, and provided the fresh air of democratic change.

**R**espondents were asked to rate prime ministers on a scale of 1 to 10, low to high marks, in four critical policy areas: Canadian unity and the management of the federation; the economy and the fiscal framework; Canada's role in the world, as measured by foreign and defence policy and international trade; and social policy and the concerns of Canadians. Panellists were then asked to evaluate how each prime minister found the country and how he left it, and to assess the leadership of each as transformational, transitional or transactional. Finally, taking all of those factors into account, the panel members were asked to rank each prime minister from first to sixth place. The scores were tabulated by Daniel Schwanen, IRPP senior economist.

Though nine Canadian prime ministers have served the Queen during her remarkable 50-year reign, we arbitrarily relegated Joe Clark, John Turner and Kim Campbell to 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> place. Clark is ranked seventh because, alone among the last three, he at least won an election — in 1979. Turner is ranked eighth because he at least fought

two elections — in 1984 and 1988, and in the second campaign took a bold stand against free trade. Campbell is ranked last because being prime minister turned out to be her summer job in 1993.

That left us with what we called “the Serious Six” prime ministers of the last 50 years: Louis St-Laurent, from 1948 to 1957; John Diefenbaker, from 1957 to 1963; Lester Pearson, from 1963 to 1968; Pierre Trudeau, from 1968 to 1979, and from 1980 to 1984; Brian Mulroney, from 1984 to 1993; and Jean Chrétien, from 1993 to the present.

**F**rom English- and French-speaking Canada, from East and West, from left to right on the political spectrum, Pearson was a clear first choice. Though he governed through chaos and confusion, with an unrelenting John Diefenbaker dogging him every step of the way, it is clear that as history settles on the Pearson years, it is his achievements, not his bungling or a numbing succession of petty scandals, that stand out.

“An exciting turning point in Canadian political history,” writes jury member Antonia Maioni, director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada. “Pearson found the country stuck in the past, and decided to do something about it. Pearson arguably laid the groundwork for the three significant facets of the present era: the multilateral agenda, free trade, co-operative federalism and the welfare state.”

On Canadian unity and the management of the federation — the adoption of the Canadian flag, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, and the spirit of co-operative federalism are clearly landmark achievements of the Pearson years. His determination to accommodate the aspirations of Quebec within Confederation enabled the creation of the Canada Pension Plan with an opt-

ing out formula that allowed the establishment of the Caisse de Dépôt et Placement du Québec. While Quebec’s Quiet Revolution was unquestionably a seismic event, Pearson’s leadership from 1963 to 1968 averted a tectonic shift along the fault line of the Ottawa River.

When he left office, as Peter C. Newman wrote in his perceptive 1968 bestseller, *The Distemper of Our Times*: “No matter how history finally judges him, there can be little doubt that Lester Pearson provided the moderating influence that helped bring under at least temporary control the centrifugal forces threatening to split English and French Canada apart during the mid-Sixties.”

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As Alain Gagnon, Canada Research Chair at l’Université du Québec à Montréal, wrote in his appraisal: “Lester B. Pearson is surely the prime minister who contributed the most to bringing English Canadians and French Canadians together. He left his mark by making a call for asymmetric federalism.”

**I**ronically, as his biographer John English notes in his appreciation of Pearson in this special issue of *Policy Options*, he made his reputation in foreign policy as external affairs minister in the 1950s, but created his lasting legacy in domestic policy as prime minister in the 1960s.

He received the highest marks of all “the Serious Six” prime ministers on Canadian unity and managing the federation, as well as on social policy and foreign affairs. And why not? In addition to the flag and the B&B Commission, Pearson practised executive federalism in a dizzying succession of federal-provincial conferences, of first ministers as well as ministers with portfolios.

While federal-provincial conferences had no constitutional role, they became important, if not indispensable, in the governance of the federation during the Pearson years and ever since. When Trudeau wanted to patriate the Constitution, when Mulroney wanted to amend it, when Chrétien wanted new arrangements of the social union, each called the premiers to the table of the federation. Each had a different vision, or concept, of functional federalism, but each adhered to the Pearsonian model of a partnership between Ottawa and the provinces.

As for the Maple Leaf flag that Canadians now take for granted as a symbol of unity, it is generally forgotten that the flag debate was among the most divisive public policy issues of the last 50 years. It should not be forgotten that Pearson, with his determination to put it on the national agenda and his quiet courage in carrying it to a Canadian Legion meeting in Winnipeg, not only framed the discussion but carried the day.

On social policy, in addition to the Canada and Quebec pension plans, Pearson increased Old Age Security, and as the father of medicare, adopted the 50-50 cost-sharing between Ottawa and the provinces that was later replaced by the block-funding formula implemented by Trudeau.

On foreign policy and Canada’s role in the world, Pearson also ranked first, partly because of his record during his decade at External Affairs, a



CP Photo

Four Liberal PMs: In April 1967, Prime Minister Pearson brought three future prime ministers into his cabinet — (left to right) Justice Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Registrar General John Turner, and Minister without Portfolio Jean Chrétien.

period that included the founding of NATO in 1949, and his winning the 1957 Nobel Peace Prize for the Suez peacekeeping initiative at the UN. But as prime minister, Pearson also concluded the Canada-US Auto Pact, forerunner of free trade, and repaired relations with the US, which had been sorely strained during the Diefenbaker-Kennedy period.

**B**rian Mulroney, who like Diefenbaker broke the reign of a Liberal dynasty, became the only Conservative leader since Sir John A. Macdonald to win consecutive majority governments. By the time he left office at the end of his second term, he had used up his entire political capital, and left a country that was quite glad to see the back of him.

A decade later, our panel gives Mulroney full marks for what is

unquestionably his biggest achievement — the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, and later the NAFTA, including Mexico. Canadian merchandise exports of \$100 billion to the US in 1988, the last year before implementation of the FTA, had grown to \$350 billion by 2002. Exports to the US, accounting for less than 19 percent of GDP before free trade, had grown to 33 percent of output in just 15 years. By the reckoning of Pierre Pettigrew, the current minister of International Trade, exports have created four new Canadian jobs in five between 1993, when the present government came to office, and 2000.

Yet as Kim Nossal, head of Political Studies at Queen's University, observes in his article, Mulroney may be "over-appreciated" for free trade, and "under-appreciated" for the goods and services tax. Unlike the hidden 13.5

percent manufacturers' sales tax it replaced, the visible GST does not apply to exports, and has been a significant factor in the growth of Canada's trade with the US, as well as a huge cash cow for Ottawa that has helped the Chrétien government to balance the books.

Mulroney also receives high scores — second only to Pearson — for Canada's role in the world, and for restoring good relations with the United States during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and the first George Bush. Besides the trade agreements, bilateral achievements included the Acid Rain Accord. Many panellists also noted that, like Pearson and St-Laurent, Mulroney often differed with the White House on important issues — from Star Wars, in which Canada declined to participate, to sanctions against

apartheid in South Africa, to the Rio Earth Summit where Mulroney signed the biodiversity accord, which Bush refused to sign.

Where our panel differed sharply was over Mulroney's legacy on Canadian unity and managing the federation. There was a clear difference of views, largely though not exclusively along language lines, on the necessity and value of Mulroney's two doomed constitutional initiatives — the Meech Lake Accord, which died in June 1990 when the legislatures of Newfoundland and Manitoba failed to call a vote as promised by their premiers, and the Charlottetown Accord, soundly rejected by voters in a 1992 referendum.

While some panellists in English-speaking Canada saw Meech as an unnecessary initiative whose failure plunged the country into a prolonged unity crisis, our Quebec-based panellists, both francophone and anglophone, saw it quite differently. "He tried to repair the bridges between Canadians," writes Jean Pare, former publisher of *L'Actualité*, Quebec's leading magazine, "but without immediate success."

On the economy and the fiscal framework, most panellists agreed Mulroney inherited a mess from Trudeau — from deficits and debt to state interventions such as the National Energy Program. While Mulroney receives high marks for deregulation, tax reform and employment growth in his first mandate, there is general agreement that he didn't do enough to attack the staggering deficits left behind by his predecessor.

While the Conservative government eventually achieved an operating surplus and reduced the deficit as a percentage of output from 8.6 to 5.9 percent, the deficits remained and the national debt more than doubled again during the Mulroney years.

Still, Mulroney finished a clear second in the overall rankings, pulled up by his strong leadership scores. The panel overwhelmingly regarded him,

along with Pearson and Trudeau, as one of three transformational leaders of the last 50 years. A majority of the panel saw St-Laurent and Diefenbaker as transitional figures, while nearly two-thirds of the participants saw Chrétien as a transactional leader.

Trudeau's third-place finish overall, and lower in his segment scores, is undoubtedly worse than he would fare with the general public. Many members of the panel cited the patriation of the Constitution with a Charter of Rights as Trudeau's greatest achievement, which is not to overlook the importance of official bilingualism or his pivotal role in the 1980 Quebec referendum.

When Jean Chrétien, then justice minister, introduced Trudeau to a huge rally at Montreal's Paul Sauvé Arena on May 14, 1980, he presented the prime minister as "the pride of Quebec and the pride of Canada." In one of the great Canadian speeches of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Trudeau brilliantly personified the *appartenance canadienne*, the sense of belonging to Canada, which most Quebecers shared. It was a critical moment in the life of the country, and Trudeau defined it by drawing on his mother's name, which René Lévesque

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had said proved he wasn't a real Quebecer. "Bien sur que mon nom est Pierre Elliott Trudeau," he roared, "c'était le nom de ma mere, voyez-vous?" In a Quebec where millions had traces of Irish or Scottish ancestry, he was speaking to family, but he was also lashing the sovereignists for intolerance, their Achilles heel.

It was equally the occasion on which Trudeau pledged that he and

his Quebec MPs would "place our seats on the line" for constitutional reform and that they wouldn't stop until it was done. That it proved to be a different kind of reform than that which many Quebecers had in mind, adopted without the support of either party in the Quebec legislature, would be a debate for another day — and to this very day. But the point is that he got it done.

The survey does not measure what Tom Courchene of Queen's calls Trudeau's "Camelot" factor. From the moment he burst on the scene in 1968 to the evening of his farewell speech to the Liberal convention in June 1984, when he exited with a trademark pirouette, Trudeau fascinated the country as an entirely unconventional and charismatic leader. Yet as historian Desmond Morton, founding director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, writes in his assessment of Trudeau. "Philosopher princes make better literary heroes than practical leaders."

For all the sizzle of the Trudeau era, many of panellists found the steak somewhat disappointing. On a ranking of his average scores in the four category segments, Trudeau actually placed

fifth in a closely bunched middle of the pack, rising to third on the strength of his ranking as a transformational leader, and wide agreement that the Charter was a transforming act of governance.

Louis St-Laurent also received high marks for his management of the economy and the federation, and for Canada's high standing in the world between 1948 and 1957, particularly in the UN action in Korea, in NATO and



The Gazette, Montreal

Tory Twosome: Joe Clark and Brian Mulroney at their famous meeting at the Ritz in Montreal in December 1982, where Mulroney pledged his support for Clark's leadership. Two months later, unsatisfied with his support in a leadership review, Clark called a convention, where he lost the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party to Mulroney.

the Commonwealth. Also the builder of the St. Lawrence Seaway, St-Laurent actually ranked higher in his performance scores, in virtually a statistical tie with Mulroney for second place, than in his overall ranking, which dipped to fourth, primarily because he was seen as a transitional leader.

Former *Globe and Mail* and *Montreal Gazette* editor-in-chief Norman Webster reflected the consensus on St-Laurent when he wrote that he "found the country in good shape and growing, post Second World War, and left it in good shape. A good chairman of the board in essentially steady

times, his rule was ended by age and Liberal arrogance in office. Like his contemporary, Eisenhower, he is looking better as time passes."

For McGill's Morton, St-Laurent "made Canada a middle power, and crafted much of the new, involved foreign policy, from military alliances to third world development aid, that Canadians have come to see as their international image."

Of Louis St-Laurent, it was later said by one of his Cabinet ministers, that the country "ran so well it seemed anyone could run it, so they elected anyone to run it" — Diefenbaker. The Diefenbaker years, which in the beginning signalled that democracy was alive and well in Canada, to the point where Canadians would throw out the governing Liberals once in a generation, soon degenerated into turmoil.

Diefenbaker's tenure was marked by a succession of crises — from firing the governor of the Bank of Canada, to renegeing on a promise to station nuclear weapons on Canadian soil, which became the tipping point in the disintegration of the Conservative government in 1963. Yet for his generally disappointing performance in office, all agreed he was a dominant campaigner. Even as his government fell apart in 1963, the Chief pulled it together on the hustings to deny Pearson a majority that had been easily within reach. Dief did it again in 1965, meaning that the best prime minister of the last half century governed for two terms and five eventful years, without the comfort of a majority.

On Parliament Hill, there is a statue of the Chief striking a typical orator's pose, hand on his hip as always. A few yards away, there is a bronze of a genial Pearson, sitting at his ease.

In a way, Pearson's statue is his revenge on Dief for all the torments he endured in Parliament — he is looking down on the Chief.

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