

UNCLE LOUIS AND A GOLDEN AGE FOR CANADA: A TIME OF PROSPERITY AT HOME AND INFLUENCE ABROAD

Desmond Morton

Louis Stephen St-Laurent was a reluctant politician who answered the country's call to service in a wartime cabinet, and stayed on to shape Canada's role in the postwar world as Secretary of State for External Affairs. Succeeding Mackenzie King as Liberal leader in 1948, he became Canada's second francophone prime minister, and in his election landslide of 1949 he became known as "Uncle Louis", the avuncular figure who presided over a period of unprecedented prosperity at home and uncommon influence abroad. From the UN to NATO, he enhanced Canada's stature as a leading middle power, while affirming its role as a reliable ally of the United States. In the Commonwealth, he led newly sovereign states to share a connection to the British Crown. In North America, he built the St. Lawrence Seaway, a harbinger of economic integration to come. Desmond Morton considers the 12th prime minister and concludes: "His era was such a golden age that many Canadians believed that peace, order and good government were their natural destiny."

Politicien malgré lui, Louis Stephen Saint-Laurent a répondu à l'appel du pays pour servir au sein d'un cabinet de guerre, après quoi il sera ministre des Affaires étrangères pour façonner le rôle du Canada dans le monde de l'après-guerre. Succédant à Mackenzie King à la tête du Parti libéral en 1948, il est devenu notre deuxième premier ministre francophone lors de l'écrasante victoire électorale de 1949, qui le fit connaître sous le sobriquet d'« Oncle Louis ». Il présidera à une période de prospérité sans précédent au pays et d'influence inégalée à l'étranger. De l'ONU à l'OTAN, il a su relever le statut de puissance moyenne du Canada tout en raffermissant son rôle d'allié sûr des États-Unis. Au sein du Commonwealth, il a contribué à l'autonomie des États partageant comme nous un lien avec la couronne britannique. En Amérique du Nord, il a fait construire la voie maritime du Saint-Laurent, présage d'une éventuelle intégration économique. À la lumière du parcours de notre douzième premier ministre, Desmond Morton conclut : « Il a dirigé le pays pendant un âge d'or ayant convaincu de nombreux Canadiens que la paix, l'ordre et l'efficacité gouvernementale étaient inscrits dans leur destin. »



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Louis Saint-Laurent, prime minister of Canada from 1948 to 1957. "Uncle Louis" found the country in good shape and left it in better shape.

I don't remember Mr. St-Laurent in 1949. I was spared the folksy style with children that persuaded the media to rename him "Uncle Louis." Years later, my mother took me to Ottawa. As we walked up Elgin Street towards the Parliament buildings, the immaculate figure of the prime minister appeared, walking to the Roxborough where he lived. My mother bowed slightly, Mr. St-Laurent raised his Homburg, and we passed. That moment told me I lived in a country whose prime minister walked the streets like any other citizen, free from guards, sycophants or self-importance. It is perhaps my proudest memory of Canada and it renders the St-Laurent years golden in my mind.

Some years ago, *Maclean's* invited Canadian historians to judge Canada's prime ministers. Most of us gritted our teeth and settled on William Lyon Mackenzie King. My test was what a prime minister inherited and what he passed on. In his fussy, unheroic style, King rebuilt the Canada of 1921, fractured by race, class, poverty and casual injustice. He piloted us through a long, potentially divisive war. Finally, he left a successor so appropriate that 69 percent of Liberal delegates chose him on the first ballot.

Louis St-Laurent never trained for politics. Son of an Irish mother and a French-Canadian father, he was born and grew up in the Eastern Townships, studied and then taught law at

Laval, prospered in private practice, led the Quebec bar as bâtonnier of the Quebec bar and served the Canadian Bar Association as president in 1931-32. Ottawa discovered him as secretary of the Rowell-Sirois Commission on Dominion Provincial relations. When Ernest Lapointe, King's guide to French Canada, died in 1941, King turned to the wealthy corporate lawyer as an obvious minister of justice in a remarkable wartime cabinet.

Affluent, happily married with five children and utterly comfortable in Quebec City and at St-Patrice, near Rivière du Loup, entering wartime Ottawa politics for St-Laurent was like being landed on a Normandy beach on D-Day. St-Laurent accepted a patriotic duty, made more lonely because, like Jean Chrétien's father but few other *Québécois* or *Québécoises*, St-Laurent accepted the need for conscription. Yet, like Lapointe, he learned Cabinet politics and the burdens of a Quebecer in Ottawa, made heavier when Maurice Duplessis defeated Adélard Godbout's provincial Liberals and the army's reinforcement crisis moved overseas conscription from threat to reality.

Victory in 1945 lightened both loads. Only the United States gained more than Canada from the Second World War. Canada had built the world's third largest navy, the fourth largest air force, and a powerful army. C.D. Howe's industrial policies had created a huge productive potential for a devastated postwar world and J.L. Ilsley's pay-as-you-go financing ensured a greedy domestic market for anything that could be made or imported. Canada had launched the greatest economic boom in its history. By the time the steam escaped in the late 1950s, prosperity had transformed Canada into an urban, multicultural society. Affluence and materialism dulled the old atavisms of race and religion.

In Canada, low incomes interrupted by bouts of unpaid unemployment had kept most people poor. The postwar

boom allowed most low-income Canadians to hold a job for their working life. Intervals were bridged by unemployment insurance. Unionization had been facilitated by Charles McTague's National War Labour Order in 1944. Confirmed by the 1948 Labour Standards Act, unions offered even non-union workers workplace justice and rising incomes. In 1945, family allowances had added a week's wages to a large family. After 1945, Canadians became car owners, home owners and holiday takers. In the 1950s, the Chrétiens, Mulroneys and other working-class families had access to post-secondary education and professional training for their children. No previous Canadian generation could realize such dreams.

Like Laurier and Trudeau, St-Laurent showed little interest in eco-

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nomics or business beyond a dutiful respect for the rights of property. More than most Canadians of his age, St-Laurent became interested in the world. He accompanied Mackenzie King to San Francisco in 1945 for the difficult birth of the United Nations. Anxious to keep a gifted colleague, King divested himself of the External Affairs portfolio and passed it to St-Laurent.

The war had changed Canada's world out of recognition. In 1945, we now shared almost all our border with two superpowers. The Cold War between the US and the USSR began in Ottawa in September, 1945, with Igor Gouzenko's revelations. In 1940, Canada had linked its security with the United States through a Permanent Joint Board of Defence. Its real time of testing now began.

In 1945, most Canadians looked across the Atlantic for their heritage but Britain, our counterweight to the

US since 1784, was failing fast. If British-Canadians were in denial, Louis St-Laurent had no illusions. Asia seemed exotic and remote but the Pacific was narrower than it had been in 1941. The fall of Hong Kong had involved Quebecers, many from St-Laurent's Eastern Townships. In wartime, American soldiers had invaded Canada's Arctic to build a highway to Alaska and airfields to stage aircraft to Europe. Mackenzie King bought back every ton of tarmac, but if the Cold War made the US feel insecure, the Yanks would be back.

At External, St-Laurent found the excitement and the Canadian talent he had encountered in San Francisco. He found ideas to capture a logical mind.

Torn between great power rivalry and the impotent self-importance of the rest, the United Nations could easily share the fate of the League of Nations. Much depended on "middle powers." With resources to perform some but not all the functions of power, middle powers must exercise responsibilities that matched their power. It was foolish, for example, to fill the UN Security Council with temporary members too weak to help enforce world peace.

Wealthy, undamaged, but menaced by any world disorder, Canada was a middle power. To make a difference, it needed allies. St-Laurent and colleagues at External devised the multilateralism that has marked Canada's foreign policy ever since. This was new. In 1921, King had inherited a League seat, squirmed under the Covenant's collective security provision, and visited Geneva largely to preach on Canada's righteousness. At External Affairs and even more as prime minister, St-Laurent made the UN the centrepiece of Canadian diplomacy. Its agencies grew to expect Canadian funds and talent. Most Canadians approved.

In the postwar years, the UN was a Cold War battlefield. Most Canadians blamed the Soviets with their aggressive

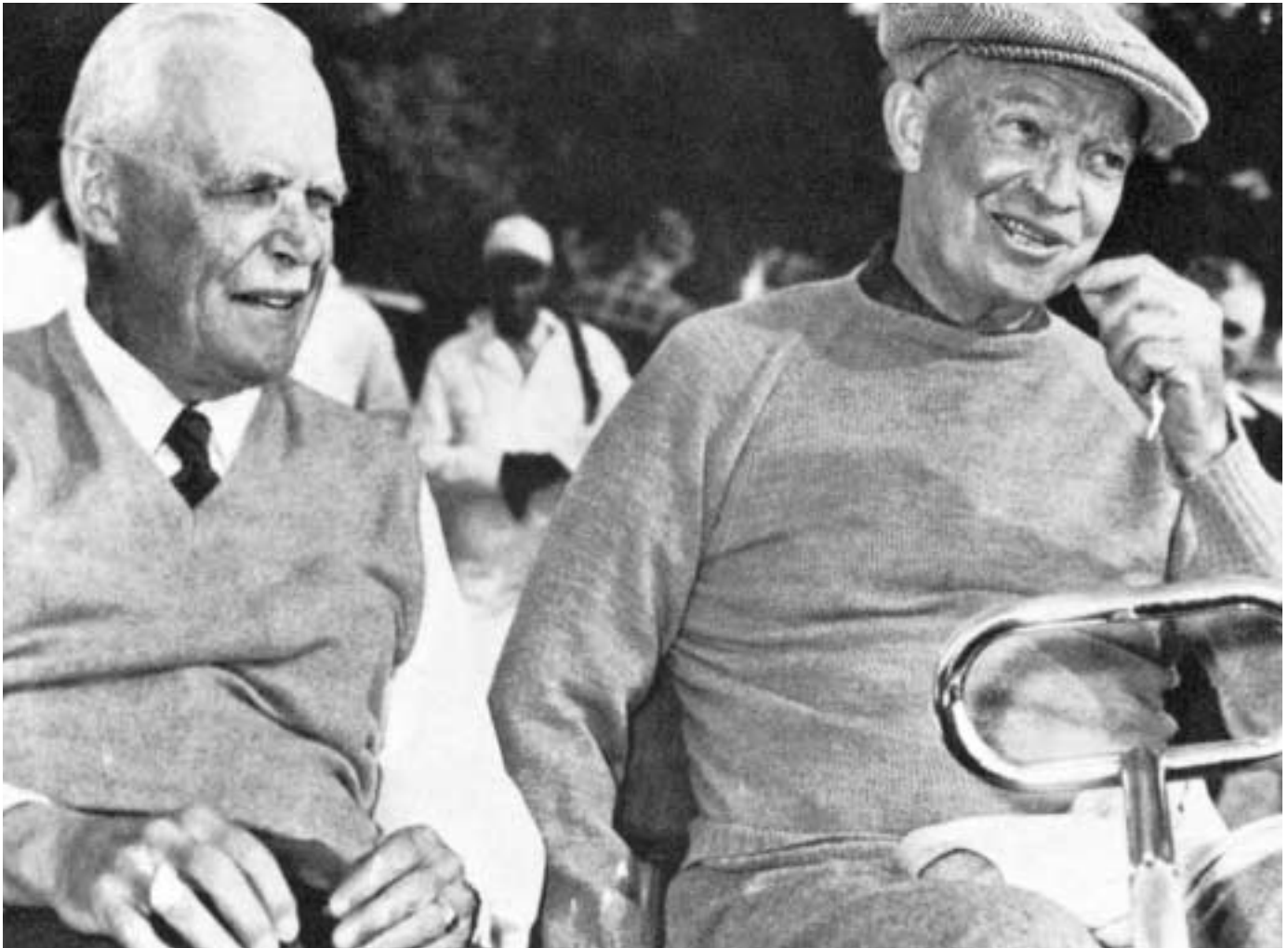
speeches and regular vetoes. Others wondered how the Americans would have reacted if regularly out-voted by Soviet client states. The Soviet takeover of Czechoslovakia in March 1948 ended neutrality. Canadians had admired Jan Masaryk; they were appalled that he was a victim of the Soviet-inspired *putsch*. St-Laurent began mustering the resources that helped create the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The UN Charter, he noted, allowed regional organizations. NATO must only be strong enough to deny Stalin any more easy conquests. The Cold War must be waged and won with diplomacy and a better society, not by armies and air-power. Hardliners sneered at Canadian naiveté, of course, but there were no

battles. St-Laurent also hoped that NATO would ease the American embrace. "Twelve in the bed," went the slogan, "means no rape."

St-Laurent inherited King's campaign to remove the British Commonwealth's aura of imperial solidarity. St-Laurent's first challenge was to make the Commonwealth tolerable for Jawaharlal Nehru, prime minister of a newly independent India. Thanks to King's architecture, he succeeded: if Canada found the Commonwealth no bar to sovereignty, Nehru acknowledged, so could India. Pakistan and Ceylon promptly agreed. To give the Commonwealth substance, St-Laurent promptly organized Canada's first significant aid program, the Colombo Plan

of 1950. By 1969, it had distributed close to a billion dollars. Though critics insisted that charity began at home, usually with tax relief for the rich, most newly affluent Canadians proved to be pleased with their generosity.

Even after Liberals chose St-Laurent as their new leader, King clung to power until he had outlasted Britain's longest-running prime minister, Sir Robert Walpole. St-Laurent took office on November 18, 1948 with a Cabinet that included C.D. Howe, Douglas Abbott, Brooke Claxton and his chief leadership rival, Jimmy Gardiner. He still needed an electoral mandate. He could boast that, after two months of personal negotiation, Newfoundland became Canada's tenth



NAC

Uncle Louis and Ike: Prime Minister St-Laurent and President Eisenhower golfing at the Augusta National Golf Club, in 1956. Like Ike, Uncle Louis was an effective chairman of the board in a time of golden prosperity.

province an instant before April Fool's Day, 1949. He had also signed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) with its promise to expand Canada's overseas markets.

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King's craftiness, could he capture support? The campaign, which I remembered as a boy, was dull. Half way along, bored reporters noticed that a silver-haired lawyer in a three-piece suit could be avuncular; "gorgeous" George Drew could not. Perhaps it was enough. June 27 unleashed a Liberal landslide: 193 Liberal seats to 42 for Drew, 12 for the CCF, 10 for Social Credit and 5 independents. No previous Canadian leader had ever delivered such a triumph.

The victory allowed St-Laurent to pursue his own agenda. "There is no conquered race nor superior race in this country," he had told election rallies, "there are only Canadians." It was speech-writer rhetoric, but it meant much to a man who merged the two solitudes. The word "Dominion," never accepted in French Canada where it was translated as "Puissance," faded from use. On December 16th, 1949, Britain's Parliament conceded that Ottawa could amend the British North America Act within its own federal jurisdiction. The Judicial Committee of the Privy Council vanished too: legal appeals would stop at the Supreme Court of Canada. In 1951, St-Laurent managed Princess Elizabeth's first Royal Tour. In 1952, he appointed the chairman of a Royal Commission on the Arts and Letters in Canada, Vincent Massey, as the first Canadian-born governor general. Tories

grumbled, few cheered and most approved. The boy from Compton had grown to maturity; with a little help, so would Canada.

On June 25, 1950, North Korea sent its Soviet-equipped army to invade its southern neighbour. Washington alerted its forces and

called its allies. Canada would help, St-Laurent responded, but the United Nations must first approve. Harry Truman politely listened and, on June 27, the United Nations urged its members to help resist the first overt aggression since 1945. Moscow's veto was silent: Soviet delegates had earlier walked out and the exiled regime of Chiang Kai-shek had hung on to China's seat and veto.

In 1950, few Canadians could even locate Korea. Three middle-aged destroyers sailed to meet Canada's UN commitment. Ottawa then waited for a quick US victory. Instead, by late July, Americans, Koreans and a British brigade barely clung to a perimeter around Pusan. On July 22, Mackenzie King died. As though liberated from a shadow, St-Laurent and the cabinet gathered on the train returning from King's funeral. Canada, they agreed, would add 5,000 troops to its Korea

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commitment. A special appeal recruited ten thousand volunteers in a few weeks; the first Canadians reached Pusan 900-strong on December 18th, just as a once triumphant UN army was chased south by Chinese Communist troops.

It was what St-Laurent had feared. Early in 1950, his friend Nehru had virtually persuaded St-Laurent that Canada should recognize Mao-Tse-tung's new regime. Fears of US outrage and Canadian opposition led St-Laurent to hesitate; war in Korea killed the idea. Still, St-Laurent's links with Nehru and his left-leaning minister, Krishna Menon, led US Secretary of State Dean Acheson to lump Canada with "the Menon Cabal." When General Douglas MacArthur crossed the 38th parallel and drove north to unite all of Korea, St-Laurent warned that he had exceeded the UN mandate. After warnings, Chinese Communist forces smashed the UN advance. St-Laurent joined Britain's Clement Atlee to resist any desperate American resort to nuclear weapons. Loyally, Canada kept troops in Korea until the war ended in 1953, and a year longer.

St-Laurent and Canadians kept some distance from Cold War passions. Gouzenko's revelations were a harsh reminder that spies and traitors existed outside Senator Joe McCarthy's imagination, but Canada's Communist party remained legal, and Canada's labour movement was left free to cope with its Communist members. To recurrent American displeasure, St-Laurent and Lester B. Pearson, his successor at External Affairs, insisted that there could be dialogue with the Soviet bloc. However, the offset to that case was an

enhancement of Canada's defences. By 1947, Canada had 38,000 regular service personnel, three times the 1939 total. By 1952, Canada's defence forces had tripled again. The army had sent a brigade to Europe and recruited almost

two full-time divisions to back its NATO and UN commitments. Shipyards built a dozen Canadian-designed anti-submarine destroyers for NATO service. Aircraft factories turned out F-86s to equip a NATO air division and eighteen squadrons of CF-100s to patrol Canada's skies. AVRO designed a supersonic fighter to replace them in the 1960s. By 1957, three lines of radar stations crossed northern Canada. The northernmost, a Distant Early Warning

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(DEW) line along the 70th parallel, was built by Americans but only after St-Laurent had extracted US recognition of Canada's Arctic claims.

It all cost money. By 1952, 52.2 percent of federal spending, 9.9 percent of Canada's G.D.P., was devoted to defence. If anyone wonders what happened to Liberal promises, Cold War rearmament devoured them. Canadians did not appear to mind. In 1951, the decennial census found 14 million people, making the 1940s a time of substantial population growth. The baby boom would continue into the 1960s. Before legal contraception and environmentalism, population growth had one explanation: contented people reproduce. Ignoring imminent thermonuclear death, as almost all of them did, Canadians qualified. They were content, too, when they voted on August 10th, 1953. "Uncle Louis" regained almost the majority he had won in 1949: 171 Liberals, 50 Progressive Conservatives, 23 CCFers, 15 Social Crediters and 6 Independents.

At 71, Louis St-Laurent was entitled to think of the comforts he had abandoned a decade earlier. The business of government went on. In December, Jean Lesage's Department of Resources and Development became the

Department of Northern Development and Natural Resources. "We must leave no doubt," St-Laurent explained, "about our active occupation and exercise of our sovereignty in these northern lands right up to the pole." Since the 1930s, Canadians and Americans had contemplated joint hydro and canal development for the upper St. Lawrence River. US legislators from the Atlantic seaboard states regularly killed the project in Congress. With Canada's

credit rating rock solid, St-Laurent revived the Seaway project unilaterally, with talk of a billion dollar bond issue. Washington got the message. On May 13, 1954, President Eisenhower joined the project. When work started on August 10th, each country reflected its stereotype: Americans exploded dynamite; Canadians quietly turned a sod.

In the spring of 1954, after an armistice in Korea, St-Laurent undertook a world tour. In New Delhi Nehru again persuaded him that it was time to recognize Mao Tse-tung's regime. When St-Laurent revealed his conversion in Manila and Seoul, the resulting furor led him to abject apologies. The heat of Asia, the stress of

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nonstop diplomacy and the strain of mindless ideology aged him. After the tour, colleagues in cabinet found him listless and acquiescent.

Except for Clarence Decatur Howe, Minister of Trade and Commerce and of Defence Production, most of the minis-

ters St-Laurent had inherited from King were gone. Defence Minister Brooke Claxton, who had presided over rearmament, left to head an innovation St-Laurent had initially viewed with suspicion. "Funding ballet dancers?" he snorted, in response to the Massey Commission's recommendations. Still, amidst Canada's new prosperity, the state of the arts was abysmal, and the prime minister was a civilized man. Winnipeg, Montreal and Toronto indeed boasted ballet troupes, all desperate for funds. In 1954, the first Stratford Shakespeare Festival opened in a tent. The opportune death of three millionaires produced an estate tax windfall to fund a Canada Council for the Arts. A weary Claxton was an ideal founding chair.

Equally worn out, St-Laurent continued. So did modest reforms. Old age pensions were made universal at age 65. A *Female Employees Equal Pay Act* promised salary equity for women doing "substantially identical work." Since 1947, Saskatchewan's *Hospital Insurance Act* had protected its people from the single most crushing health care cost. Over bitter resistance from other provinces and the medical establishment, Ottawa adopted a *Hospital Insurance and Diagnostic Services Act* in April, 1957.

Earlier that year, a Royal Commission under the normally cautious Toronto accountant, Walter

Gordon, predicted 26.5 million Canadians by 1980, a tripled GNP and an average 34.3 hour work week — but only if Canada protected its economy from foreign ownership and invested heavily in universities. It was a platform for St-Laurent's next election campaign.

Or was it? The 1953 victory inspired critics to wonder whether the Liberals had been in power too long. Opposition in Parliament grew more strident. A filibuster against one of Howe's bills taught Tories that the great man could explode when his plans were derailed. In May of 1956, Howe warned Parliament that if the American-owned Trans-Canada Pipeline Company failed to get authority to link Alberta gas and Ontario customers by June 7, its deal was off. Closure cut off any delay. It was all an angry Opposition needed. By June 7, Howe and TCPL had their bill but Parliament and the Liberal reputation for good government were in ruins. St-Laurent sat silent and numb amid the wreckage.

Worse followed. In Egypt, a series of coups had toppled British puppet King Farouk and put Colonel Gamal abd'l Nasr in power. He promptly seized the British- and French-owned Suez Canal, encouraged guerilla assaults on Israel, and opened negotiations with the US for a dam on the Upper Nile. Outraged and convinced that Egyptians were paper tigers, British, France and Israel co-ordinated plans. In November, Israeli paratroops and tanks crushed Egyptian forces in the Sinai; British and French forces bombed Cairo and invaded the Canal Zone, much as their great grandparents had overthrown Arabi Pasha in the 1880s. Like their own ancestors, many Canadians cheered.

Not Louis St-Laurent. His Irish and French-Canadian blood boiled at old-fashioned imperialism. Except for Australia, Britain had ignored the Commonwealth; all the aggressors had ignored the UN Cultivating Nasr as a potential friend amidst Middle East chaos, Americans were outraged. Moscow threatened nuclear bombardment if France and Britain didn't back off. From New Delhi, Nehru signalled his utter disillusionment with Britain.

For St-Laurent, despair was a luxury. As his multilateral world came

apart, he could only try to nail it together again. To Mike Pearson at the UN in New York, the prime minister sent word to do anything he could; St-Laurent would cover him. To Nehru he sent a plea for patience. Simultaneously that fall, Hungarians revolted against their Communist dictatorship. After a few heady days of triumph, Soviet tanks crushed the rebellion. Could the UN or NATO have intervened? The Suez imbroglio, St-Laurent bitterly admitted, had made it impossible. All he could do was offer thousands of Hungarian refugees free passage to Canada. Meanwhile, Pearson had pieced together the idea of a UN force to

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cover a British, French and Israeli retreat. A Canadian, the dour Lieutenant-General Eedson L.M. Burns, would command. A Canadian battalion, the Queen's Own Rifles, would participate, until Colonel Nasr said no. The embarrassment had to be swallowed; administrative troops were substituted, complete with an aircraft carrier to deliver their equipment. Functional power mattered.

St-Laurent called his third election for June 10, 1957. It was a year early but opinion polls promised another victory. Liberals could boast of hospital insurance, the Canada Council, a six-dollar raise in old age pensions, and Canada's prominent peace-making in the Suez crisis. Canada, too, was prosperous in 1957 though secret projections suggested it would not be so in 1958. George Drew had resigned and the Tories had a new leader in John Diefenbaker. A quick election would keep the Prairie populist from becoming better known.

That ignored a new medium. In 1952, the CBC had opened Canada's first television stations. The new medium had spread quickly. Unknown to most Canadians and their politicians, you no longer had to go to the Regina Armouries to see your next prime minister. You could see and judge the choices on a flickering black-and-white screen in the living room. Canadians saw a white-haired old man woodenly reciting his notes. They also saw his dynamic challenger raging at pipeline dictators, treachery to Britain and the Empire, and at "the six-buck boys" who cheated the elderly of their happiness.

Still, the media promised, Canadians would surely re-elect St-Laurent. Most voters agreed, but they would take the arrogant Liberals down a peg. And they did. On June 10th, St-Laurent emerged with only 105 seats. However, Diefenbaker elected 112 MPs, the CCF, 25 and Social Credit, 19, with 4 independents. In 1925, Mackenzie King had fought a similar verdict and reversed it; Louis St-Laurent was too old for such games. On June 21, Vincent Massey swore in John George Diefenbaker and the first Progressive Conservative cabinet ever.

Win or lose, Louis St-Laurent had been ready to leave. In September, 1957, he announced his retirement as Liberal leader, returned to Quebec City and lived in honourable obscurity until he died on July 25, 1973. He left behind an enlarged and prosperous Canada, respected in the world. He was an architect of the multilateralism which, with American power, kept the Cold War cool. His era was such a golden age that many Canadians believed that peace, order and good government was their natural destiny. They would learn their error.

Desmond Morton, founding director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, is Hiram Mills Professor of History at McGill University. His 37th book, Understanding Canadian Defence, was published by Penguin Canada in May.