PEARSON — AMIABLE BUT AMBITIOUS, HE GOVERNED IN CHAOS AND CONFUSION, YET LEFT A LEGACY OF UNEQUALLED ACHIEVEMENT

John English

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Lester B. Pearson, prime minister from 1963 to 1968. Father of the flag, Medicare and the Canada Pension Plan, he left a legacy much clearer in the long view of history than in the muddle of his times.

Lester B. Pearson had the good fortune to follow John Diefenbaker as prime minister, and the misfortune to have the Chief sitting across from him as opposition leader, taunting and tormenting his Liberal government at every turn. From a botched budget to a string of scandals, it seemed Pearson reigned amid chaos on his side, and the destructive tactics of the Tories on the other. Yet in only five years in office, Canada's 14th prime minister left a record of remarkable achievement — the Canadian flag, the Auto Pact, medicare, and the Canada Pension Plan with an opting out formula for Quebec. Pearson called it co-operative federalism, and he made it his mission to address the aspirations of Quebec within Canada. From the landmark Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Bilculturalism, to the recruitment of Pierre Trudeau and a new generation of francophones, Pearson made Canadian unity and federal-provincial relations the touchstones of his premiership. The irony, as his biographer John English observes, is that a diplomat who made his reputation in foreign policy, made history as prime minister in domestic policy.

Lester B. Pearson a eu la chance de succéder à John Diefenbaker et la malchance de l'avoir comme chef de l'Opposition, celui-ci ne manquant pas une occasion de railler et de tourmenter son gouvernement. Entre un budget bâclé et des scandales en cascade, Pearson semblait mal pris, gouvernant en dépit du désordre qui régnait dans son parti et les tactiques dévastatrices des conservateurs. Au terme de cinq courtes années de pouvoir, il affichait pourtant un bilan de réalisations remarquables parmi lesquelles le drapeau canadien, le Pacte de l'auto, l'assurance maladie et le Régime de pensions du Canada, assorti d'un droit de retrait pour le Québec. Pearson parlait à ce propos de fédéralisme coopératif et s'était donné pour mission de répondre aux aspirations du Québec dans le cadre fédéral. De l'historique Commission royale sur le bilinguisme et le biculturalisme au recrutement de Pierre Elliott Trudeau et d'une nouvelle génération de francophones, il a fait de l'unité canadienne et des relations fédérales-provinciales la pierre angulaire de son mandat. L'ironie étant que ce diplomate qui avait acquis sa réputation en politique étrangère, observe son biographe John English, est passé à l'histoire pour sa politique intérieure.

In 1927, there were two young lecturers in the history department at the University of Toronto, Lester Pearson and Donald Creighton. Both had studied at Toronto and Oxford and were Anglo-Canadians who believed that Canadian history was the expression of the grandeur and the freedom of the British Imperial experience. Both were sons of the manse, members of the so-called "Canadian church" that had carried British values into the Canadian West.

Donald Creighton's father, Rev. W.B. Creighton, commissioned Lester Pearson when he was at Oxford in the early 1920s to write anonymous articles on postwar Britain for the Methodist ***Christian Guardian*** in which Pearson excoriated the end of Prohibition in England, the absurdities of Irish nationalism, and the German tradition of militarism. He commended Lloyd George's response to the Irish crisis and defended him against critics of the Versailles Treaty.

With particular sarcasm, he ridiculed the "technical" universities of America while celebrating Oxford's "classic halls" that sent "forth [men] well equipped to govern the Empire-aye, the World." Donald Creighton, soon to arrive at Oxford, no doubt read these words and agreed.

By the 1960s Lester B. Pearson, Canada's 14th prime minister, and Donald Creighton, its most eminent historian, agreed on very little. Pearson was promoting bilingualism and biculturalism, a policy that Creighton believed lacked historical precedent and threatened Canadian nationality. Moreover, the postwar period seemed to Creighton a careless and eventually fatal embrace of the United States and rejection of the British tradition, which he identified as the foundation of Canadian identity.

Creighton's anger, so evident in his later writings such as *The Forked Road,* focused directly on Pearson, who, in Creighton's view, had so clearly betrayed his own past. Betrayal, of course, is in the eye of the beholder, but Creighton was correct in his argument that the path that Pearson chose was not the one that his colleagues in the history department in 1927 would have predicted. Nor did Pearson in his final lecture in his 1927 course on institutions of the modern British Empire when he forecast, "with confidence," that a hundred years ahead eager Toronto students would listen to another young lecturer in a course on "The successful solution to Britain's imperial problems in the 20th century."

Of course there was no solution, and the Imperial fork in the road became a dead end. Creighton responded to that outcome with eloquent evocations of the British Canadian past in his great biography of Sir John A. Macdonald but later with angry nostalgia and vilification of those he deemed the betrayers. Despite the imperialist sentiments of his Toronto lecture, Pearson gave up hope for the future of the British Empire as early as 1940, when he took part in negotiations that secured American help for the Empire/Commonwealth war effort. Although wistful about the Imperial past, he, unlike Creighton and many others, never regretted the new and expanded ties with the United States. He told his friend MP Brooke Claxton in 1940 that the new ties were "something to cling to" and in the long term would prove "decisive."

Pearson became Canada's prime minister one day before his sixty-sixth birthday in 1963. Complex, highly intelligent and ambitious, Pearson concealed those qualities beneath a rumpled amiability and a self-deprecating humour. He was not an easy read. The ardent Methodism of his youth disappeared quickly in the later 1920s and religious observance became formal and rare. He served in a military uniform twice as long as any other Canadian prime minister and he served at a war front, fortunately the quiet eastern front. Nevertheless, Pearson had a private's scepticism about "the brass" and military ways. In the 1950s, he spent most of his spare time with business people, but he shared few of their views about economy and society.

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What had shaped Pearson was his career in the Canadian diplomatic service. Entering the small Department of External Affairs in 1928, he quickly attracted attention for the excellent prose of his memoranda and his easy manner. Prime Minister R.B. Bennett selected him to be secretary to two Royal Commissions and rewarded him with an Order of the British Empire. He had the good fortune to serve in London in the last years of the peace and the first years of the Second World War. He then went to Washington in 1942, just at the moment when the Americans were assuming leadership of the war effort and the making of the peace.

It was the construction of the peace that allowed Pearson to demonstrate his exceptional skills in negotiation and conceptualization. He took part in numerous committees that sketched out the architecture of the new international order. In these meetings, he tended to remain silent until he sensed the mood and direction. He would then begin to make gentle and often witty interventions. By the end of a series of meetings, he was either the chair or the principal drafter of the final document. Such was the case with the series of meetings that culminated in the formation of the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization. Agriculture was a subject about which he knew little, but his colleagues on the interim commission recommended that he become the first secretary-general of the FAO.

He chose instead to return to Canada where he became the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs and guided Canada's response to the early Cold War. His principles were clear: strong opposition to Soviet Communism; support for multilateral organizations; and expansion of the Canadian foreign service. He could be pragmatic if circumstances demanded flexibility. When the United Nations failed to realize its promise because of the Security Council veto, he enthusiastically promoted the concept of a regional security alliance. In the debates that led to the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Pearson argued for a broader alliance that would embrace not only security but also socio-economic concerns. The so-called Article II of the Alliance was called the Canadian article. Although

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Queen Elizabeth looks down from atop the mini-rail at Expo 67, during her tour with Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson. The spirit of Expo announced a new sense of confidence in Canada and opened the door of Liberal succession to Pierre Elliott Trudeau

it amounted to little, it reflected Pearson's concern about political support for the alliance in Canada.

Others had noticed Pearson's political shrewdness and growing prominence. In 1948 Prime Minister Mackenzie King, with the strong agreement of his successor Louis St-Laurent, recruited Pearson for the Liberal Party. Pearson won a safe Northern Ontario seat in an October bye-election and became St- Laurent's secretary of state for External Affairs. The timing was superb.

St-Laurent had total confidence in Pearson and gave him complete freedom to direct Canadian foreign policy. The Canadian bureaucracy was highly respected in the postwar era, and its foreign service was its elite. With the assistance of highly talented officials, Pearson became the government's most popular minister. The consensus among Canadians of all major parties that Canada should participate actively in the American-led alliance confronting Soviet Communism meant that Pearson faced few political challenges in his first years in office. Nevertheless, he took the strong cards that fate had dealt him and played them with consummate skill.

The Korean War could have been divisive: a poll in August 1950 indicated that only 21 percent of francophones would support sending ground troops. Yet Canadian ground troops were sent. Moreover, the fear that the Soviet Union would take advantage of the events in Asia to attack Western Europe prompted the government to increase defence budgets rapidly and

create a significant Canadian military presence in Europe. As the Korean War developed, Pearson was increasingly anxious about American impetuosity, but he told one critic, the historian A.R.M. Lower, that there was nothing to be gained by washing "our democratic dirty linen" in public. As one who drew his lessons from the events of the 1930s when the United States had stood aside, Pearson supported the postwar American willingness to exercise its power internationally. The challenge for Canadians was to accept American leadership while trying to influence American policy in a way that reflected Canadian interests and Canada's conception of global good.

That challenge made Pearson speak out in 1951 when General Douglas MacArthur publicly considered expanding the war to China and using the atomic bomb. It was time to wash some dirty laundry publicly, and Pearson did so in a speech on April 10, 1951. Declaring that the age of "relatively easy and automatic political relations" with the US were probably over, Pearson asserted the right to criticize American leadership when it was necessary. He also worked closely within NATO and the UN to create multilateral options for American policy-makers.

Pearson's activities sometimes offended the Americans, especially those on the conservative right. Most, however, admired his sincerity and ability. He was offered the post of first secretary-general of NATO in 1952, became president of the United Nations General Assembly in the fall of that year, and was the West's favoured candidate for the position of secretary-general of the United Nations. The Soviets, as before, would not accept Pearson as secretary-general. Nevertheless, the possibility of Pearson's departure caused St- Laurent to indicate to him that he believed Pearson should succeed him. He would have a long wait.

St-Laurent won the 1953 election decisively, but his government began to lose strength immediately. Senior ministers departed, and St-Laurent himself lost vitality and confidence. Pearson continued to be an active foreign minister, especially with NATO and the UN. He was the first NATO foreign minister to visit the Soviet Union, which was a memorable but disturbing experience. A wild night on the Black Sea, where Nikita Khrushchev insisted that he join him in consuming eighteen shots of vodka, confirmed for Pearson that the finger upon the nuclear button was unsteady.

Nor was the American finger as reluctant as Pearson thought it should be. He believed that John Foster Dulles, the American secretary of state, took the West too close to the brink of war. McCarthyism in the United States, with its outrageous assertions about Communist infiltration, deeply troubled Pearson. He did not escape accusation himself: former Communist agent Elizabeth Bentley had identified Pearson as a Russian source when Pearson was stationed in Washington during the war. More irritating to the American anti-Communist right was Pearson's defence of Herbert Norman, a Canadian diplomat considered by many conservative Americans to be a Communist agent. When Norman committed suicide in 1957 because of these allegations, Pearson expressed private bitterness and public anger.

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The tragedy followed Pearson's greatest triumph: the creation of a United Nations Emergency Force to respond to the British-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt in late October 1956. Pearson and St-Laurent immediately made it clear that, for the first time, Canada would not support Britain in a major war. With the assistance of UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld and the Americans, Pearson crafted a motion that called for the creation of a peacekeeping force and the withdrawal of the invading forces. In Canada, the Pearson initiative faced strong criticism from Conservative anglophone journalists, and the British were irritated, even though Pearson argued that he was saving them from catastrophe. For his efforts, however, Pearson received the Nobel Peace Prize in October 1957.

By that time, Pearson was no longer a cabinet minister. In the spring, the Liberal government was defeated, and John Diefenbaker formed a minority Conservative government. Pearson now had to consider whether he wanted to lead the Liberals in opposition. He rightly believed that he lacked some desirable political skills. He wrote in his memoirs about his dislike and distrust of "the marketing of politicians and policies as thought they were detergents or deodorants." Nevertheless, when St-Laurent retired in September, party leaders and press immediately identified Pearson as the best possible successor. With Nobel Prize in hand, Pearson became Liberal leader in January 1958. He soon proved as politically inept as he had feared. Two days after becoming leader, he moved a motion in the House condemning the government for its management of the economy and calling, not for an election, but for its resignation. The old charge of Liberal arrogance suddenly had new substance, and John Diefenbaker called an election.

The election was a debacle for the Liberals as Diefenbaker, a superb campaigner and orator, won 208 seats and the Liberals only 49. Pearson thought of resigning, but there was no convincing Liberal alternative. For the

next five years, Pearson rebuilt the party and laid in place the foundations for another Liberal government.

Pearson was no match for Diefenbaker in Parliament; there he relied on the parliamentary skills of Paul Martin, Jack Pickersgill, and Lionel Chevrier. Outside Parliament, he recruited new candidates and advisers, relying on his personal networks and those of Walter Gordon, a Toronto businessperson who had helped Pearson financially when he entered politics and later. Gordon's close links with *The Toronto Star* were enormously useful and brought such talented young politicos as Keith Davey. Pearson himself recruited Tom Kent, an Englishman who was editor of *The Winnipeg Free Press*. Kent had criticized Walter Gordon's economic nationalism, but when they met at a Kingston policy conference in September 1960 they liked each other and quickly discovered common goals. Kent's speech at the conference irritated some of Pearson's parliamentary colleagues in its criticism of past Liberal policies and its call for a shift to the Left. Nevertheless, it caught the mood of the times and reflected Pearson's own inclinations.

The Liberal party had lost power because Diefenbaker's Conservatives pushed them to the Left. After 1960 Pearson with the assistance of Gordon and Kent drew up an activist program of government. The conference, Pearson later wrote, was a "forecast of the future." The Liberal Party of Canada would become a liberal party, which it had not always been in the past. While the influence of John Kennedy's *new frontier* and John Kenneth Galbraith's *affluent society* were obvious in the policy approach, there was another important factor: the election of the Liberal Party in Quebec and the so-called Quiet Revolution. Quebec had historically been an obstacle to state intervention in the economy and society; under Jean Lesage's Liberals Quebec became a catalyst for change and state intervention.

Pearson's Liberals lost the June 1962 election, but Diefenbaker was held to a minority. In the fall of that year, the Conservative government began to crumble. Diefenbaker's truculent attitude during the Cuban missile crisis in October undermined his relationship with the United States and his ties with the English Canadian business community. Pearson moved quickly to take advantage of the situation by changing Liberal policy and supporting nuclear warheads for Bomarc and Honest John missiles that Canada had earlier purchased. His reversal of policy drew criticism from Princeton student Lloyd Axworthy, who accused Pearson of reneging on past principles, and from Quebec intellectual Pierre Trudeau, who labelled Pearson the "unfrocked priest of peace." It probably won no additional votes, but it did cause a leadership crisis in the Conservative government. The minority government fell, and the election on April 8, 1963 returned a Liberal minority government.

Despite the disappointing minority status, Pearson promised "sixty days of decision." The first sixty days, however, were marked by confusion and disappointment, as Finance Minister Walter Gordon's first budget was a political disaster. The next two years were filled with scandals, especially involving francophone ministers. Pearson himself seemed an ineffective leader, and rancour marked parliamentary debate. Diefenbaker privately accused Pearson of being a communist mole, while Pearson in return threatened Diefenbaker with revelations about the sexual involvement of Tory ministers with Soviet agents. Separatist bombs exploded in Montreal just as Pearson took office, and the challenge of Quebec nationalism became ever more intense.

Pearson himself took leadership in two areas. The first was the adoption of the new Canadian flag. Despite the doubts of his Cabinet colleagues, Pearson told the annual meeting of the Canadian Legion in 1964 that Canada must have a new flag. On December 15, 1964 the maple leaf design won parliamentary approval, and eventually became the badge of Canadian backpackers and the symbol of a new Canada.

Yet the government kept its head — its program focus — while everything around it seemed chaotic. Tom Kent produced a stream of memoranda telling the cabinet how its program could be realized, and Walter Gordon as finance Minister gave his strong support. In retrospect the record seems remarkable: the Canada Pension Plan, expanded old age assistance, the Canada Student Loan plan, medicare, expanded regional development, an international development agency, "colour-blind" immigration, and many other programs that brought the state more directly into Canadian lives.

Pearson himself took leadership in two areas. The first was the adoption of the new Canadian flag. Despite the doubts of his Cabinet colleagues, Pearson told the annual meeting of the Canadian Legion in 1964 that Canada must have a new flag. It provoked angry debate, and many times the political "wise men" suggested the idea should be dropped. On December 15, 1964 the maple leaf design won parliamentary approval, and eventually became the badge of Canadian backpackers and the symbol of a new Canada.

The second area of leadership was policy towards Quebec. In opposition, Pearson had proposed a royal commission on the French presence in Canada even though several of his advisers, including Gordon, thought it politically

unwise. He kept the promise and established a Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, one of the very few royal commissions that fundamentally affected Canada. Its hearings compelled all Canadians to consider what the transformation in Quebec society meant for Canadian confederation. Simultaneously, Pearson expanded the role of francophones in the government and, more importantly, in the public service of Canada. He constantly searched for new voices to speak to and for Quebec and for policies that would make francophones a more integral part of the Canadian political process.

When his first francophone ministers stumbled, he took a chance. In 1965, he decided to call an election for November 8, mainly to secure a majority, partly to reorganize his government. He took a personal role in the recruitment of three Quebec candidates: the journalist Gérard Pelletier, the labour leader Jean Marchand, and the Quebec intellectual and frequent Pearson critic Pierre Trudeau. He did not win a majority government, but the three Quebec recruits won and profoundly influenced the final two years of the Pearson government. Walter Gordon, who had urged an election, left the government, and the focus of the government turned away from the social programs to the challenge of Quebec nationalism and separatism.

Pearson's diplomatic experience persuaded him that dialogue must remain open and principles must not trump common sense. Federal-provincial meetings occurred incessantly — 125 in 1965 alone. The failure of the attempt to revise the Canadian constitution under the so-called —Fulton-Favreau formula" caused the federal government to find other expedients. It fiddled with constitutional precedents and adapted funding agreements to satisfy Quebec's demands for control of social programs and even foreign relations. However, Pearson responded angrily when French President Charles de Gaulle visited Quebec in 1967, Canada's centennial year, and endorsed Quebec separatism. His back stiffened; de Gaulle went home.

The Gazette, Montreal

Prime Minister Trudeau with his predecessor at the unveiling of the former PM's portrait outside the House of Commons. Of the rough parliamentary arena, Pearson told a group of students near the end of his life: "Don't be downhearted in the thick of battle. It is where all good men would wish to be."

In December 1967 Pearson announced his resignation. He quietly encouraged francophones to seek the leadership, and Pierre Trudeau finally accepted. He must have remembered Trudeau's earlier criticisms, and he was unable to establish a good personal relationship with Trudeau. After Trudeau was elected, he never consulted Canada's sole Nobel Peace Prize winner about foreign policy. Trudeau's foreign policy angered Pearson, but he strongly supported him in the general election that occurred just before his death on December 27, 1972.

Donald Creighton gave Pearson poor marks for his work. Biculturalism was a historical myth, Canadian cultural duality a chimera. Pearson's remaking of the Canadian constitution would inevitably lead to Quebec separation. In Creighton's view, “All that really mattered” for the Pearson government was “whether Confederation satisfied French-Canadian cultural needs and fulfilled French-Canadian cultural aspirations.”

Creighton's charge has substance: his former colleague, who like him was born in a Methodist manse, studied at Oxford, and had supported conscription in both wars, spent his prime ministerial years concentrating upon “whether Confederation satisfied French Canada.”

The Quebec historian José Igartua has described the end of British Canada in the postwar era as “the other Quiet Revolution.” Pearson's achievement in diplomacy in the 1940s and 1950s was to recognize Canada's North American fate and to give Canadians a sense of pride in their new place in the world that made the other quiet revolution relatively tranquil. His achievement in government was to respond to the challenge of French Canada, a society about which he knew little and whose language he did not speak. Nevertheless, he took the French language from the Ottawa elevators to the Cabinet table, fashioned symbols for a new Canadian nationality, and kept Canadians talking about common purposes.

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At the end of Pearson's first year as prime minister, the *Canadian Annual Review* declared that Pearson might well borrow Roosevelt's retort when someone said that he would be the greatest president: “either the greatest or the last.” Perhaps he is not the greatest, but his achievements assured that he was not the last.

John English, Professor of History at Waterloo University, is the author of critically acclaimed two-volume biography of Lester B. Pearson, and is currently at work on a biography of Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

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