HAIL TO THE CHIEF: THE INCOMPARABLE CAMPAIGNER WHO SQUANDERED A HISTORIC MAJORITY

J.L. Granatstein

John George Diefenbaker was the prairie firebrand who took the country by storm in June 1957, ending 22 years of consecutive Liberal rule with the return of a Conservative minority government. With a promise of "One Canada," Diefenbaker then swept the nation in March 1958. Diefenbaker proceeded to squander his historic majority, blundering in economic, foreign and defence policy. He mismanaged relations with the US, notably during President Kennedy's administration, by his reluctance to raise Canada's NORAD forces to alert status during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. He accepted nuclear weapons on Canadian soil, and then refused them. He promised to divert 15 percent of Canada's trade from the US to Britain, then realized he couldn't against the pull of continental market forces. Reduced to minority status in 1962, he finally lost to the Liberals in 1963, but hung on to fight another election in 1965. Yet even in defeat, he was a mesmerizing campaigner. Perhaps his greatest achievement was winning his first two elections, providing Canadian democracy with the necessary lifeblood of alternation. Jack Granatstein considers the life and lore of the "incomparable campaigner" who was Canada's 13th prime minister.

Venu des Prairies, John George Diefenbaker a pris le pays par surprise en juin 1957 lorsqu'il a ramené au pouvoir un gouvernement conservateur minoritaire, mettant fin à 22 années de règne libéral. Sur la promesse d'un « Canada uni », il a ensuite remporté haut la main le scrutin de mars 1958. Mais il dilapidera bientôt cette majorité historique faute d'une vision claire des questions d'économie, de politique étrangère et de défense. Gérant maladroitement nos relations avec les États-Unis, notamment sous l'administration Kennedy, il a hésité lors de la crise des missiles cubains à mettre en alerte les forces canadiennes de NORAD. Tergiversant sur la question des armes nucléaires, il a accepté puis refusé leur installation en sol canadien. Promettant de détourner vers la Grande-Bretagne 15 p. 100 de nos échanges commerciaux avec les États-Unis, il a dû renoncer à défier les forces du marché nord-américain. Mis en minorité en 1962, il a cédé le pouvoir au libéraux dès l'année suivante mais s'est accroché jusqu'à l'élection de 1965. En campagne électorale et même dans la défaite, l'homme était cependant un candidat redoutable. Sans doute sa plus grande réalisation aura-t-elle été de remporter ses deux premiers scrutins, ce qui a permis à notre démocratie de s'enrichir d'une indispensable alternance. Jack Granatstein retrace les hauts et les bas de l'« incomparable bête politique » que fut le treizième premier ministre du Canada.

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John Diefenbaker, prime minister from 1957 to 1963. The Chief stood for "One Canada" and proposed "a vision of our nation's destiny" that was never realized during the storms of the Diefenbaker years. He was made more for campaigning than for governing.

Two personal anecdotes about John Diefenbaker: I met the Chief once only in his House of Commons office some years after he had lost the Progressive Conservative party leadership. It was a good interview on the subjects that interested me, but what struck me most forcibly was Diefenbaker's gloating glee about the troubles of Davie Fulton, his very able Justice minister a decade before. Then a judge, Fulton had been found guilty of drunk driving, and the story was in the newspapers that morning. Diefenbaker kept returning to Fulton's conviction, chortling as he implied that this explained much about personal betrayals, Cabinet revolts, and party troubles. I left the meeting troubled, convinced that I had been in the presence of evil.

Then, in 1999, twenty years after Diefenbaker's death, Carleton University historian Norman Hillmer and I published a book called *Prime Ministers: Ranking Canada's Leaders*, based on ratings of all of Canada's leaders by a group of 25 Canadian historians. As part of the book promotion tour, I did a phone-in show on CBC Radio in Saskatchewan, and I knew that I'd be questioned as to how it was Dief had been ranked thirteenth of the twenty leaders. I was nonetheless astonished that caller after caller, most of them sounding as if they were senior citizens, pronounced Diefenbaker Canada's greatest prime minister. He had been good to the Prairies and good for wheat farmers forty years before, and his troubles all came about because of the Eastern interests, the Americans, and Tory traitors. "They" had done in Saskatchewan's son.

Two anecdotes, two very different realities, about one complex man. Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between.

John Diefenbaker was born at Neustadt, Ontario in 1895, but the family moved to the west in 1903. There they tried and failed at farming, beaten by weather, weeds, and crop prices. In 1910, the Diefenbakers gave up and moved to Saskatoon, where the father found a job as a civil servant. John went to high school there and entered the University of Saskatchewan in 1912 and, as with all his classmates, his life was disrupted by the Great War. With his Germanic surname, never a source of serious difficulty before, Diefenbaker found himself labelled a Hun, something that made him ever after an opponent of hyphenated Canadianism. He enlisted, became a lieutenant, and proceeded to England, where he seems to have had some kind of nervous breakdown. He was returned to Canada, invalided out of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and kept the details of his military career a secret.

But then it was law school, a successful career as a lawyer in Wakaw and then Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, and the beginnings of his efforts to become a politician. He ran for Parliament unsuccessfully in 1925 and 1926; he failed in an attempt to be elected to the legislature in 1929; and he lost a race for mayor of Prince Albert in 1933. In 1936, he became leader of the Saskatchewan Conservative party, no prize in a province dominated by a powerful Liberal machine, and he lost his next attempt to win a seat in 1938. But in 1940, running as a Tory in Prince Albert in an election swept by Mackenzie King's Liberals, Diefenbaker somehow won election to Parliament. His wife Edna, an attractive and lively woman, had campaigned with him, and this must have helped.

In Parliament, John Diefenbaker arrived with high expectations. The leader in the election, R.J. Manion, had resigned and the Conservatives needed a House leader. "I refused to let my name stand for the leadership," he wrote to his mother on May 15, 1940, "as I couldn't hope to get anywhere as everything was pretty well cut and dried." It was astonishing that he even considered being a candidate, but no more so than that he did put his name forward at the Conservative leadership convention in Winnipeg in December 1942. The convention was essentially rigged to select Manitoba Premier John Bracken, but Diefenbaker ran nonetheless. His speech was a failure — "John was so stiff and starched in his manner I could scarcely recognize him," one observer said, and he was fourth on the first ballot. Others withdrew, but Diefenbaker hung on, only to see Bracken win a majority on the second ballot.

By now, Diefenbaker's public personality and political ideals were in place. He was a difficult colleague in caucus, not very responsive to the party leadership's demands. But he was willing to give speeches at constituency dinners, storing up IOUs for the future. He was a civil libertarian, though he failed to defend Japanese Canadians who were evacuated from the West Coast in 1942. He was for a big war effort and conscription, unsympathetic to French Canadian antipathy to compulsory service. He was for the British Empire and cool to Mackenzie King's reputed continentalism, and he was one of the leaders in ensuring that the Progressive Conservatives did not oppose family allowances in 1944. In 1948, Bracken having failed to improve the party fortunes, Diefenbaker ran again for leader, this time losing to Ontario Premier George Drew. "I cannot hope to win," he told his mother, "but it's a good fight."

Drew hung on for eight years, badly losing the 1949 and 1953 elections to Louis St-Laurent's Liberals. In 1956, ill and tired, he stepped down, and Diefenbaker's time had arrived at last. Edna had died in 1951, and Diefenbaker had remarried two years later to Olive Palmer. Over sixty, slender and tall with a striking head of hair and extraordinary eyes, Diefenbaker made a powerful impression, and he swept to the party leadership on the first ballot, handily defeating Toronto MP Donald Fleming and British Columbia's Davie Fulton.

No one gave Dief a chance to win the election that was coming up in 1957. St-Laurent was aging rapidly, but the government led in the opinion polls (50 percent to 31 for the PCs) and seemed unbeatable. The 1956 pipeline debate had suggested a colossal governmental arrogance, however, and the increasing defence links with the US worried many, as did the extent of American investment in Canada. Still, no one believed that the Prairie lawyer had a chance.

Diefenbaker campaigned vigorously. He accepted the advice of his strategist, Gordon Churchill, MP, to put the party's maximum effort into Ontario, the Maritimes, and the West and to effectively write off Quebec, where the Tories had had terrible luck since 1917. And he agreed with the advice of Dalton Camp, the party's director of advertising, to stress the "personal appeal of the leader himself." The party pitch was to focus on the Chief, as he was already being called. And it worked. Talking to "my fellow Canadians," Diefenbaker spoke of "One Country — One Policy — One

Canada." The emphasis was on "a vision of our nation's destiny, with a positive message of hope and progress." The Tory leader promised a new deal for the provinces and regional aid, and he said Canada needed "roads to resources" as the centrepiece of a national development plan. "It's Time for a Diefenbaker Government," the advertisements said, and "A New National Policy."

To the media's astonishment — *Maclean's*, caught by its deadline, had published an editorial commenting on the Liberal triumph — Diefenbaker won a minority victory. The Conservatives captured 112 seats to 105 for the Liberals and increased their popular vote from 31 to 39 percent. Diefenbaker won little in Quebec but swept Ontario, taking 61 seats and 48 percent of the popular vote; in the West, he won only 21 seats. It was a Diefenbaker triumph, but how odd that it was Ontario that provided the margin of victory. The country's new leader was naturally delighted, but also stunned. He told the governor general five days after the election that "he can hardly believe this has happened."

The prime minister soon shaped his government and, as he said to Ellen Fairclough, who he made the first woman minister in Canadian history, "I have to form a Cabinet and it begins to look as though I shall have to form it largely of my enemies." He had few friends in the caucus, so Diefenbaker had to give posts to men like Donald Fleming, J.M. Macdonnell, Leon Balcer, the sole francophone in the ministry, and Davie Fulton, who all had opposed him at various points in the past. All the ministers were inexperienced, inevitably so as the Tories had last held power in 1935.

In such circumstances, the prime minister and the ministry ought to have relied heavily on the public service to assist and guide them. But the Conservatives had come to believe as an article of faith that the senior bureaucrats were really Grits in public service drag, working hand in hand with the Mackenzie King and St-Laurent governments. As a result, some ministers approached their deputy ministers as enemies, Gordon Churchill, for one, in Trade and Commerce, viewing Mitchell Sharp in precisely this way. The Department of External Affairs, the prime minister privately stated, was full of "Pearsonalities," men who modelled themselves on the former Secretary of State for External Affairs, Mike Pearson. Even General George Pearkes, the Minister of National Defence, could only muster a half-hearted defence of the chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, General Charles Foulkes: "I doubt if he disclosed plans or policy to Pearson…" But the prime minister himself quickly came to rely on the clerk of the Privy Council and secretary to Cabinet, Robert Bryce, a man who knew everything and how to make the wheels of government turn. But Bryce did not feel immune from suspicion. He cautiously cancelled a regular Saturday lunch group that included Liberal Jack Pickersgill for fear of offending his new boss.

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But was the public service a hive of partisan Liberals? That many former bureaucrats ended up in the Liberal party and Cabinet might be taken as proof that this was so. There is, however, not a shred of evidence that public servants sought to disrupt or confound the new government. Indeed, most maintained that a change of government was overdue and approached the opportunity to work with Diefenbaker's team with enthusiasm. The suspicion with which they were viewed, however, turned that eagerness to a wary caution and soon to bitterness.

In the first months of the Diefenbaker government, however, none of this mattered. Dief seemed on top of the world, a fresh breeze in the stagnant corridors of power. He increased old age pensions to $55 a month, gave the provinces three additional tax points, increased payments to the blind and disabled, and set up a winter works program to help cushion the historic problem of seasonal unemployment. There were huge new wheat sales and unconditional grants to the Atlantic provinces. The government improved veterans benefits and hospital insurance legislation, began its "Roads to Resources" program, and also cut taxes, always a popular move. A hundred thousand lower income Canadians no longer had to pay income taxes. And when Lester Pearson, selected the Liberal leader just days before, used the occasion of his first speech as leader in the House in January 1958 to urge the government to hand power back to the Liberals, Diefenbaker seized the golden opportunity offered him to dissolve Parliament.

The 1958 election was a cakewalk. The Liberals, still surprised to be out of office and with their party funds spent on a leadership race, floundered. The CCF and Social Credit had nowhere to go but down, and the Tories seemed — and were — invincible. The Chief campaigned hard, touting what he had already done and promising more and better. Were there problems? Of course, but they were the Liberals' legacy. The election was about the prime minister's "Vision," about his "Faith in Canada's Future, Faith in her Destiny." The tone of the Conservative pitch was clear enough in the prime minister's televised speech on March 13. His oratory compelling, the cadences powerful, the charismatic presence of the man verged on the hypnotic. "It is with

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Queen Elizabeth at the 1959 opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in Montreal. For John Diefenbaker, it was a proud moment. There was no institution to which he was more devoted than the Crown, and no American leader with whom he got along as well as President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Mamie Eisenhower, between the Queen and her husband, enjoys the occasion as much as Prince Philip and Olive Diefenbaker, beside the Chief.

deep personal satisfaction, my fellow Canadians," the Chief began, "that I am able to come before you tonight and say to you...that there are good reasons for believing that the clouds are beginning to disappear, that we are on the verge of a turn in the tide of gloom and fear which was the legacy we inherited. I refer, of course, to unemployment, tight money, trade deficits, high interest rates..."

Canadians swooned and they believed, giving the Diefenbaker Party 53.6 percent of the popular vote and 208 of the 265 seats, the largest majority ever to that point. It was Diefenbaker's Canada now.

The signs of difficulties to come were already showing through the celebratory mood. The economy was slowing down, unemployment increasing, interest rates going up, and the clear indicators that the boom was over and a recession underway were everywhere. Having returned 50 Tories, Quebec now had its share of ministries but, some complained, the portfolios were unimportant. On the verge of a new era, Quebecers sensed that Diefenbaker did not understand them.

Soon, so did the British. With one ill-advised comment, the prime minister had raised hopes in Britain that it was Canada's "planned intention" to divert 15 percent of Canadian trade from the United States to Britain. As British imports to Canada had been dropping for years, and as American imports had been steadily rising, this was a tall order. Indeed, it was impossible, and the "planned intention" disappeared. It was, however, an indication of Dief's love of Britain and, when the United Kingdom began to look longingly at the European Common

Market, Diefenbaker took this as almost a personal betrayal. Already upset by the trade diversion fiasco, London was furious at the criticism emanating from Ottawa, a sentiment only compounded when Diefenbaker, after wavering for months, helped push South Africa out of the Commonwealth in 1961. The Imperial tie had become sadly frayed. Only Canada's relations with the United States were worse.

Curiously, the PM greatly admired President Dwight Eisenhower with whom he dealt cheerfully enough. US pressures on Canada to do more in defence were constant, however, and the new government quickly — too quickly, it turned out — decided to combine the air defences of the two countries within a month of coming into office. The Cabinet Defence Committee had not yet been formed, the Department of External Affairs was not advised, and the North American Air Defence Agreement turned into a wounding melee in the House of Commons. So too did the government's February 1959 decision to stop funding the development of the Avro Arrow, a supersonic fighter aircraft. The decision was the right one, for Canada could not afford the skyrocketing costs of creating and producing a major defence system on its own, but the government handled it clumsily, and Avro laid off 14,000 workers in its Toronto plant the very day of the cancellation.

Compounding the difficulties over the Arrow was the prime minister's announcement the same day that Canada would take nuclear-armed Bomarc anti-aircraft missiles from the United States, with Washington paying two-thirds of the cost. This all made sense. The Bomarcs protected the US heartland and Strategic Air Command bases as well as Toronto and Montreal, but to many Canadians, the Arrow and Bomarc decisions seemed to dash hopes of military and industrial independence. The Bomarc eventually was to destroy the government.

Meanwhile, "Ike" flattered "John" shamelessly and kept the tensions under control until he left office in January 1961. His successor, John F. Kennedy, mispronounced the prime minister's name ("Deefenbawker) on their first meeting, annoying the Chief, and he showed little patience for the older man's touchy nationalism or oratorical flatulence. There was also some tough talk when the Kennedys visited Ottawa in May 1961 about trade with Beijing and defence. Even worse, a US memorandum somehow got lost in the sofa cushions, and Diefenbaker decided that a scrawled note on it described him as an "SOB." The memo was not returned, as it should have been, and Diefenbaker began to cherish his resentments of the young and handsome president. The worst was yet to come.

In Canada, it had already arrived. By 1959, the economy was in serious trouble with interest rates rising, and the finance minister was forced to raise taxes to keep the deficit under control. At the same time, the governor of the Bank of Canada was preaching both tight money and the necessity to control inflation. Those were not unusual subjects for a central banker. More controversially, James Coyne spoke out against foreign investment or, as he called it, "foreign domination." With its strong nationalistic streak, the government might have been expected to cheer at this (and a supplementary budget in 1960 did put withholding taxes on non-resident interest and dividend payments), but Coyne, a Liberal appointee, was tough-minded and seen as arrogant, and his tight money policies offended Diefenbaker and many ministers. When the board of the Bank of Canada passed a bylaw giving Coyne a lucrative pension when he retired, the government, eventually learning of this, seized the opportunity to force the governor out. This it could do, but Coyne went public, appearing before a Senate committee. The resulting mess made clear that petty vindictiveness seemed to have moved the prime minister to rid himself of Coyne. And that the government's economic policy was in confusion.

This became apparent to everyone when the 1962 budget came down, forecasting a very large deficit. And when Diefenbaker called a general election for June 1962, speculators staged a run on the dollar. The government then pegged the currency at 92.5 cents US, while ministerial doubts about the selected peg soon filled the media. The Liberals, sensing that Diefenbaker's political wizardry had disappeared, issued "Diefenbucks," 92.5-cent mock dollar bills. Opinion polls in May had the Grits at 44 percent, the Tories at 36, so they had reason for confidence.

The Chief's evangelical oratory had begun to pall, especially in urban Canada, but he was still an incomparable campaigner, even when, as it seemed, his heart wasn't in it this time around. What helped the Chief was that the Liberals, their arrogance showing, steadily lost support while, in Quebec, Creditiste candidates came out of nowhere to run strongly. The results showed that Diefenbaker's huge majority in 1958 had turned into a minority, the Tories winning 116 seats to 100 for Pearson's team. The Creditistes, with 26 seats, had saved Diefenbaker's bacon. But only for a time.

Now the troubles mounted. Diefenbaker broke an ankle and was in constant pain, grumpy over his losses and blaming everyone around him. The growing financial crisis forced the government to cut expenditures, put surcharges on imports, and seek cred-

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its in the US and from the International Monetary Fund. The final crisis was at hand.

The issue was the nuclear warheads intended for the Bomarcs. As construction of the two Bomarc bases in Canada progressed, the negotiations with the Americans for the warheads dragged on. Part of the problem was a difference in view between External Affairs, intent on pressing nuclear disarmament, and National Defence, keen on fulfilling commitments. But the real problem was in the prime minister's head. One day he was for taking the warheads, the next for not, and the key factor in his indecisiveness seemed to be his mail. Canadians had suddenly realized that nuclear weapons were dangerous, and peace groups and ordinary citizens deluged the Chief with letters and petitions.

When the Cuban missile crisis erupted in October 1962, and the Kennedy administration assumed, reasonably enough, that Canada would put its fighter squadrons in NORAD on alert. But Diefenbaker refused to do so, despite repeated requests from the defence minister. Remarkably, the air force quietly went on alert on its own, however, and the prime minister eventually agreed to his minister's importunings. When the crisis eased and the details of the government's inaction leaked out, there was a furor that combined with the nuclear crisis to highlight Diefenbaker's congenital indecisiveness.

The denouement had elements of tragedy about it. A visiting American general said in Ottawa that Canada had not lived up to its commitments. The US State Department, acting on instructions from the White House, issued a press release stating that Canada had failed to propose any arrangement for taking the Bomarc warheads that was "sufficiently practical to contribute effectively to North American defence." Within days, the Cabinet came apart at the seams as rumours of coups and countercoups circulated. Only herculean efforts by some caucus members kept the government alive long enough for it to be defeated in the House on a vote of confidence. The Diefenbaker era was over, its six-year life ending in confusion and indecision.

Or was it? To everyone's astonishment, the Chief, his back to the wall, fought a magnificent, if completely unscrupulous, anti-American election campaign in the winter of 1963. He was, one of his party opponents said, completely rejuvenated, "every inch a Prime Minister." The Bomarcs were worthless, Diefenbaker said, somehow forgetting he had accepted them four years before. President Kennedy wanted him out of power, he claimed, neglecting to give the reasons why. And "they" were against him, a group that encompassed the Grits, the sophisticates in the cities, the traitorous Tories, and a host of other enemies.

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The Liberals focused their attack on Diefenbaker, issuing a colouring book that showed the prime minister riding backwards on a rocking horse:

This is the leader.
He is trying to go two ways at once.
Sometimes he tries to go three.
Most of the time he doesn't move at all.
Colour him in reverse.

The tactic backfired, fueling the Tory voters' indignation and proving that "they" would stoop to any tactic. Thus, Dief turned a certain and calamitous defeat into a near-win. He held on to 33 percent of the popular vote and 95 seats, while the Liberals formed a minority government with 129 seats. This time the Prairies and British Columbia saved the Tories, Pearson winning only four seats there.

But Diefenbaker was out of power. His government had grossly mismanaged foreign relations, defence policy, and the economy, and the Chief had turned his own party into a contested terrain. He had squandered the huge majority of 1958 and thrown away the chance of making the 20th century the Conservative century. His record was terrible, but no leader proved better at leading an Opposition. He made Pearson's life hell for the next two years, and his brilliant campaign in the 1965 election led to yet another minority Liberal government. Not until 1967 was the 72-year-old Chief forced out of the Conservative leadership, and even then he spent another dozen years in Parliament tormenting his successors.

Somehow, in the long years after his toppling from the prime ministership, the Canadian public turned Dief into a lovable old codger, the man with a quip ready for every reporter. He wrote his memoirs (his ghostwriter was also Mike Pearson's!) which, though mendacious in the extreme, sold well, and when he died in 1979 he lay in state in Ottawa until a funeral train carried his remains to Saskatoon for burial. The nation turned out one last time to bid the Chief farewell, and he passed into legend. Almost 35 years later, historians seemed to have passed harsh judgment on Diefenbaker, but so long as any of those he mesmerized survive, the debate on his character and actions will go on.

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