

RANKING PRIME MINISTERS OF THE LAST 50 YEARS: THE NUMBERS SPEAK

Daniel Schwanen

IRPP and *Policy Options* selected a panel of leading historians, political scientists, economists, former mandarins and top journalists — English- and French-speaking, from all across Canada, to assess the leadership and legacies of the six prime ministers who have served at least one full term of office during the last 50 years since the Queen's coronation in June 1953. Panellists were asked to rate PMs in four performance categories — Canadian unity and the management of the federation; the economy and the fiscal framework; foreign affairs; Canada's role in the world; as well as social policy and the concerns of Canadians. Respondents were also asked to consider how each PM found the country and how he left it, and to assess the nature of his leadership as transformational, transitional or transactional. Finally, taking all of these ratings into account, panellists were asked to rank the PMs from first to sixth place. IRPP Senior Economist Daniel Schwanen, who tabulated the results, details the ratings and the rankings of a remarkably clear consensus — a Pearson sweep.

L'IRPP et *Options politiques* ont formé un jury composé de quelques-uns des meilleurs historiens, politologues, économistes, anciens hauts fonctionnaires et journalistes, francophones et anglophones, provenant de tout le pays, afin d'évaluer le leadership et l'héritage des six premiers ministres ayant gouverné le Canada durant au moins un mandat complet depuis le couronnement de la reine Élisabeth II en juin 1953. Notre jury devait évaluer leur performance dans les quatre catégories suivantes : unité canadienne et gestion de la fédération ; économie et finances publiques ; affaires étrangères et rôle du Canada dans le monde ; politique sociale et satisfaction des besoins des Canadiens. Il devait aussi tenir compte de l'état du pays à l'arrivée puis au départ de chaque premier ministre, et déterminer s'il avait exercé un leadership de transformation, de transition ou de transaction. Daniel Schwanen, économiste principal à l'IRPP, a compilé les résultats et examine ici en détail le résultat de cette consultation qui se conclut avec la victoire de Lester B. Pearson dont la performance a fait l'objet d'un consensus exceptionnel.



The returns are in from the IRPP-*Policy Options* panel of 28 voters — all eminent Canadians — and are presented in summary form in the accompanying table.

The scores received by each prime minister in four specific areas of responsibilities are shown first. Respondents were asked to rate the prime ministers on a scale of 1 to 10, low to high, in each. With the average score, two other indicators of respondents' opinion are provided in the table: the *standard deviation* shows the extent to which individual answers differ from the average response. Thus, if all respondents' scores for a given question are bunched up around the average, the standard deviation will be lower than if sharper disagreement existed among respondents. The *mode* is simply the answer that comes up the most often among respondents — unlike the straight aver-

age, the mode would not be skewed by a few very high or very low outlying responses.

An average of the scores received by each prime minister in the four areas is also shown. It is perhaps a crude way of establishing a comprehensive ranking based on specific performance and initiatives. Respondents were also asked directly to rank prime ministers from one to six overall. The latter marks were averaged, and the PM with the lowest average was given first rank overall, second lowest second rank and so on. The resulting ranking shown on the table also happens to correspond to the mode of the responses, that is, to the overall ranking most often attributed by respondents to each PM.

Respondents were also asked to describe each prime minister's leadership as transformational, transitional or

1 Lester B. Pearson



2 Brian Mulroney



3 Pierre Elliott Trudeau



4 Louis St-Laurent



5 Jean Chrétien



6 John Diefenbaker



| | St-Laurent | Diefenbaker | Pearson | Trudeau | Mulroney | Chrétien |
|--|------------|-------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Canadian Unity and Management of the Federation | | | | | | |
| Average of all respondents | 6.9 | 4.3 | 7.7 | 6.1 | 6.1 | 5.8 |
| Standard deviation | 1.2 | 2.0 | 1.0 | 1.6 | 1.4 | 1.5 |
| Mode | 7 | 3 | 8 | 6 | 6 | 7 |
| The Economy and the Fiscal Framework | | | | | | |
| Average of all respondents | 7.5 | 4.6 | 6.3 | 4.7 | 6.8 | 7.6 |
| Standard deviation | 1.0 | 1.2 | 1.1 | 1.0 | 1.6 | 0.8 |
| Mode | 8 | 5 | 6 | 4 | 7 | 7 |
| Canada's Role in the World | | | | | | |
| Average of all respondents | 7.0 | 4.1 | 7.9 | 6.6 | 7.5 | 5.2 |
| Standard deviation | 1.4 | 1.7 | 1.5 | 1.6 | 1.3 | 1.6 |
| Mode | 7 | 3 | 9 | 7 | 8 | 7 |
| Social Policy | | | | | | |
| Average of all respondents | 5.9 | 5.8 | 8.0 | 6.6 | 5.9 | 5.8 |
| Standard deviation | 1.4 | 1.4 | 1.3 | 1.4 | 1.3 | 1.5 |
| Mode | 6 | 7 | 8 | 5 | 7 | 7 |
| Average Score in Four Areas Above | 6.8 | 4.7 | 7.5 | 6.0 | 6.6 | 6.1 |
| Type of Leadership(out of 28 votes) | | | | | | |
| Transformational | 4 | 2 | 22 | 24 | 23 | 0 |
| Transitional | 11 | 15 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 8 |
| Transactional | 10 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 16 |
| N/A | 3 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Overall Ranking | 4 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 5 |

transactional, and these evaluations clearly influenced the overall rankings.

The verdict from this high-powered group is clear: Lester B. Pearson is the best Canadian prime minister of the last half century. When asked to rank these PM's overall, fifteen respondents ranked him first, and only three put Pearson lower than third place.

With little significant dissent, respondents viewed Pearson's strengths as his ability to maintain Canadian unity and to manage the federation more generally, and the social policy innovations that his government brought in. He is also seen as having been above all the others in terms of strengthening Canada's role in the world—partly attributable to recognition of his achievements as minister of external affairs during the St-Laurent years. Pearson is, however, given only an average score on the economy and the fiscal framework. This seems to be an indication that respondents discounted the boom times he presided over as not entirely of his own making, or that they hold him partially responsible for the subsequent mushrooming costs of social programs.

While Brian Mulroney came in second among respondents, this was not a totally uncontested position, unlike Pearson's first place. Mulroney did garner 18 first and second place rankings overall, compared to his nearest rival Pierre Trudeau, who was ranked in the top two by only 10 respondents. Nevertheless, when the scores for areas of responsibility were averaged, Louis St-Laurent came slightly ahead of Mulroney (both well behind Pearson), who in turn was in the sights of both Jean Chrétien and Pierre Trudeau. In short, the second, third and fourth ranks were somewhat contested, depending on the specific area of prime ministerial responsibility being considered.

In this respect, Brian Mulroney was given more than honourable marks for his efforts on the economy and fiscal framework and for enhancing

Canada's role in the world, the latter stemming from reasons as varied as free trade with the United States and his strong stance on apartheid. But he failed to make it above the fray in terms either of Canadian unity and management of the federation, or on social policy issues. Like Pearson's, Mulroney's leadership was overwhelmingly seen as having transformed Canada — clearly for the better for most respondents, and this is what secured his second place overall.

The third place finisher was also the longest-serving prime minister, and one suspects, from the written answers submitted, that a shorter tenure might have earned Mr. Trudeau a higher ranking in many areas. Comments offered along with some low marks often pertained to his last mandate— though not to the patriation of the Constitution with the *Charter of Rights* in 1982, overwhelmingly assessed as an act of transformational leadership resulting in a new Canadian social contract.

In only one specific area — social policy — is Trudeau's average performance seen as having surpassed that of the second-place Mulroney. In another specific area — the management of the economy and the fiscal framework — Trudeau offers one of the few instances of a prime minister being ranked almost as low as across-the-board last-place finisher John Diefenbaker.

However, Trudeau is the only prime minister whose overall ranking is two notches above his performance-based rankings, as measured by the average of responses in all four specific areas of responsibility. This may, of course, partly reflect the fact that some respondents weighted specific areas differently rather than equally as I did here. But other more subjective factors must also have been at work in this case.

The opposite effect played for Louis St-Laurent and Jean Chrétien, to the detriment of their overall rankings. There is little disagreement among respondents that these two prime ministers performed

well above average on economic matters. As mentioned, St-Laurent is actually ranked second, slightly ahead of Mulroney, when performance scores in all areas are tabulated.

Unlike Chrétien, St-Laurent is also seen as having done well in maintaining Canada's place in the world and on the unity and management of the federation file. On the latter, however, quite a few respondents noted how much simpler to manage some of these issues seemed to be in the 1950s than at any time since. Overall, it may be that their being viewed as transitional (St-Laurent) or transactional (St-Laurent and Chrétien) by most respondents is what ultimately led to these two leaders being downgraded in the overall rankings, relative to what might have been expected on the basis of results in specific areas. Chrétien received his best scores, and came in tied for first, in a statistical dead heat with St-Laurent, on his management of the economy and the fiscal framework, receiving well-earned recognition for balancing the budget and ridding Canada of a burdensome legacy of deficits and debt.

There is no appealing the group's verdict of John Diefenbaker's prime ministership, particularly with respect to Canadian unity and Canada's place in the world, in which he obtains markedly low scores from most respondents, though with some dissent.

Diefenbaker's economic management is also seen as having been poor, although on social policy and concern for Canadians, his score manages to inch toward those of St-Laurent, Mulroney and Chrétien. Perhaps the latter is a reflection of Diefenbaker's respect for individuals, as reflected in the Bill of Rights, his appointment of the Hall Commission that led to universal health care, his anti-apartheid stance and other "firsts" that occurred under his government, such as a female federal Cabinet minister and the electoral franchise for Aboriginal peoples.

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