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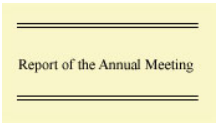

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MR. MACKENZIE KING AND CANADIAN AUTONOMY, 1921-1946

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THIS PAPER is concerned with some impressions of Mr. Mackenzie King's conduct of the external relations of Canada over the twenty-five year period during most of which he held the office of Secretary of State for External Affairs. It is basically not concerned with his leadership in domestic politics, though it is obvious that these were frequently interwoven into the emerging strands of foreign policy. It makes no attempt at formal judgments, but rather at informal impressions.

* * *

When Mr. Mackenzie King was sworn into office as Prime Minister and Secretary of State for External Affairs on December 29, 1921, he had lately undergone the salutary discipline of two years as Leader of the Opposition. He had served three years in the House of Commons at an earlier stage, as a Minister of the Crown, and had had a lengthy acquaintance with the Public Service. He had seen some flickerings of Canadian autonomy abroad because of his own connection with negotiations between Canada and the Governments of Japan, China and India, and he was already known to some of the public servants and political leaders of the United Kingdom with whom he was to be thrown into close contact twenty or more years later.

Among the matters once envisaged by Lord Durham as those on which the "Mother Country" still required a control, the control of foreign relations was now, 80 years later, the area which most required clarification of procedure. In the light of wartime developments, external relations also required consistent development in the mechanics of consultation and action. Mr. Lloyd George had stated in 1917 that the heads of the overseas governments of the Empire were severally to execute the decisions arrived at by the Imperial Conference. In 1921 he asserted, ambiguously, that although the sole control of *British* foreign policy was now vested in the Empire as a whole, the one instrument of the foreign policy of the Empire was, and must remain, the British Foreign office.[1] In Mr. Mackenzie King's view such an assertion could not really be supported if only because of the

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[1]May 17, 1917. War Cabinet, Report for 1917. *Parliamentary Papers, Cd* 9005; cited in W. P. M. Kennedy, *The Constitution of Canada* (Oxford, 1922), pp. 365-366; Great Britain, House of Commons Debates, December 14, 1921; quoted in H. G. Skilling, *Canadian Representation Abroad* (Toronto, 1945), p. xiv.

reliance placed by Canada in the assurance of 1917, and by the fact of Canada's influence in bringing about, very lately, the abrogation of the Anglo-Japanese alliance. As Mr. King had not personally been concerned in either of these developments, he could approach the new situation with some disinterestedness.

The immediate sequel was startling enough. At the time of the Chanak incidents, *before* any official communication had reached the East Block, Mr. King read in an Ottawa newspaper that the Government of Canada was being asked if it would send forces to aid Britain in the Near East. The replies returned by Australia, New Zealand and South Africa to the United Kingdom overtures apparently convinced Mr. King that a *single* concerted policy, even if thought to be desirable, was impossible. The positive lack of effective machinery of consultation likewise made it plain that some straightening-out of channels of communication was imperative. Nearly twenty-five years later, at the end of his term of office as Secretary of State for External Affairs, Mr. King was still insisting that it was morally wrong to take for granted the concurrence of Canada in matters upon which she had not been consulted.

This conviction was first re-inforced by the proceedings of the Imperial Conference of 1923, which may be regarded as a real turning point in the relations between Parliament Hill and Downing Street. The *Report* of the Conference in part gave verbal sanction to what was already accepted practice; and in part it clarified the procedure for the negotiating of treaties But the real importance, in Mr. King's view, was that despite the saving reference to "the diplomatic unity of the Empire", the single-foreign-policy idea was tacitly set aside.[2] The Canadian aim, the uninhibited self-government of Canada by Canadians, implied equal consultation within a developing "commonwealth of nations", and the necessary setting up by Canada of her own instruments, and her own officers, for the conduct of her own external policy.

After 1923 one large area of common interest still required formal and accepted definition. The special Imperial Conference which it had been agreed in 1917 should be summoned as soon as possible after the end of the war for the readjustment of constitutional arrangements within the Empire had never taken place. Mr. King was not unmindful of Sir Robert Borden's view, incorporated into the conclusion of the 1917 Conference, that any such readjustment, while thoroughly preserving all existing powers of self-government and complete control of domestic affairs, should be based upon a full recognition of the dominions as "autonomous nations of an imperial commonwealth", and should recognize also their right to an adequate voice in foreign policy and foreign relations. It now became an inescapable corollary that readjustment must provide effective arrangements for continuous consultation in all important matters of imperial concern; and it would be for the several governments to determine what measure of concerted action, based on consultation, might follow.[3]

[2]The phrase "diplomatic unity of the Empire" disappeared from Canadian official correspondence after 1942.

[3]*Parliamentary Papers* (1917), *Cd.* 8566; Kennedy, *The Constitution of Canada*, p. 367.

The fortuitous intrusion of major constitutional developments in Canada convinced Mr. King that a full-dress conference on this matter of constitutional readjustment was now essential. In later allusions to the Imperial Conference of 1926, Mr. King appears to have regarded the organic changes in the manner of appointment of the Governor-General, the changes in the communicatory functions of his office, and the development of new avenues of communication through the creation of the Dominions Office in London, taken together, as of much greater intrinsic importance than the noble language enshrining the "Balfour Declaration". Against the Canadian background and maturing ideas of Canadian *self-government*, it seemed to Mr. King entirely proper that the Governor-General should henceforward be in name, as well as in fact, the personal representative of the Sovereign, and that the forms and manner of his appointment should thereafter become a matter for the King acting on the advice of His Majesty's Canadian advisers. Mr. King was never successful in some rather tentative efforts, notably in 1939, to have the *name* of the office altered, perhaps because no really euphonious alternative suggested itself. As late as 1946 he agreed that in no part of the altered constitutional arrangements dating from the 1926 Imperial Conference had the intent and the proprieties been more scrupulously complied with.

On both sides of the Atlantic, indeed, the necessary consequences of these altered relationships had been met, in large part, with a mutual respect and an exemplary common sense. It may be doubted whether the prestige and the authority of Mr. Mackenzie King were anywhere demonstrated to better advantage. Lord Hankey once told me that the United Kingdom Secretariat at the 1926 Conference had been so much impressed by Mr. King's grasp and persuasiveness in constitutional matters that "once he had tried his hand or looked over a draft, we never dared to alter it".[4] Mr. King was certainly well served by a group of devoted Canadian advisers on this occasion, but, equally, the impression of his personal authority and persuasiveness survived to his very last visit to London.

It was perhaps unfortunate that Mr. Mackenzie King never found it possible to visit other parts of the Commonwealth, though he had frequently been invited. During the Second World War all of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers visited Ottawa, and Mr. King met them in London on several occasions. During these war years the relationships with Great Britain in particular became inextricably intertwined at all levels from the Prime Minister downwards. The Commonwealth Air Training Plan, the provision of foodstuffs and munitions, the long vigil of Canadian forces in Britain before they were committed to action, and the extent of Canadian mutual aid from 1943 onwards all forged strong links of comradeship and co-operation. If Commonwealth relations were never exactly *foreign* relations, they nevertheless represented a special place in the expanding structure of Canadian autonomy. With all his veneration for the Parliamentary usages descended from Westminister, and for all the measure of working agreement with his United Kingdom friends and

[4] In a conversation with the writer (London, May 26, 1946).

colleagues, Mr. King never willingly acquiesced in any formalizing of the working relationships which had developed during his own years in office. Narrowness in outlook, rigidity in action, and any emphasis on centralization must, as he put it, drain the very life blood from the Commonwealth, and I am certain he must often have wished that "official" Britons travelling abroad had shown as much consideration for the self-respect of Canada as the courteous attention to Canadian interests which had been shown whenever he himself had been in London.

The attachment of Mr. Mackenzie King to the person and throne of His Majesty as King of Canada was to me a matter of unusual interest. Mr. King was at great pains to demonstrate wherein the King of Canada was the personal embodiment of the actuality and the genuine substance of autonomy. I recall this especially during the Royal Visit to Canada in 1939: how Mr. King personally concerned himself with the King's coming to Parliament to give the Royal Assent; with his meeting all available members of His Majesty's Privy Council for Canada; and with his personally performing various acts of state. I remember how over a period of months he worked himself very thoroughly not only into the spirit of a great occasion but into the physical properties—stage-manager fashion—by insisting that nothing should be left to chance, and that the minutest detail should be correct because "they will expect us to know how to do it the right way". Even attention to detail never dimmed the splendour of each succeeding day; and probably no part of Mr. King's official responsibility gave him quite the same sense of honour and satisfaction as those meticulous communications, frequently written in his own hand, which began, "Mr. Mackenzie King presents his humble duty . . ."

* * *

If it was the Commonwealth relationship which first gave substance and some consistency to Canadian autonomy in external relations, the increasing dealings with foreign states—through the League of Nations and otherwise — brought a certain momentum and the necessity of dealing with foreign policy on some orderly basis. Foreign policy was not, in the early 1920's, *public* policy in the sense that it provoked very much informed debate in Parliament or discussion throughout Canada; and the initial Canadian emphasis upon *status*, particularly at Geneva, was, and is, puzzling to many Canadians. For some 17 years, Mr. Mackenzie King was content to rely on the "Parliament-will-decide-in-the-light-of-all-the-circumstances-then existing" mentality; but it may be doubted whether this was really a policy, or whether it was an attitude of mind; whether it was a reliance on the best available alternative to something which was unattainable in practice; and whether it was really calculated to arouse and mobilize public opinion in Canada behind any constructive approach to problems of increasing complexity and anxiety.

One antidote to the preoccupation with status might have been a realistic examination of the actual responsibilities of Canada as a member of the League, particularly during the three years in which Canada was a member of the Council and, most important of all, during the autumn of 1935 when the imposing and the lifting of

sanctions against Italy aroused both controversy and irresponsible comment. Canadian policy was never quite so cynical nor quite so naive as to enter into all the benefits and to shoulder none of the responsibilities of League membership. There was, indeed, a consistent thread in the 10 years before 1928, in which it had been no part of Canadian policy to provide any automatic guarantees or to undertake commitments in advance, whether under the League covenant or other security arrangements. One statement of 1928 was relied on for many years; and as a deliberate expression of policy it deserved more serious attention than it seems to have received. In the Canadian reply to the invitation of the Government of the United States to become a signatory of the Kellogg-Briand Pact, Mr. Mackenzie King said:

> "It is plain that the full realization of the idea of joint economic or military pressure upon an outlaw power, upon which some of the founders of the League set great store, will require either an approach to the universality of the League contemplated when the Covenant was being drawn, or an adjustment of the old rules of neutrality to meet the new conditions of co-operative defence."[5]

Mr. Mackenzie King's own definitions of foreign policy emerged largely from the annual statements he made in the House of Commons in bringing down the estimates of the Department of External Affairs, and especially in the period between 1938 and 1945. He paid little attention to a contemporary device of neatly classifying Canadian opinion into the convenient segments of imperialists, isolationists, neutralists, and advocates of collective security. He probably would have admitted, for all his reliance upon the "Parliament will decide" suggestion, that the administration rarely received any new sense of direction, let alone strong encouragement, from debates in Parliament on external relations, which in some years were perfunctory to a degree. It is nevertheless curious that in the period immediately before the outbreak of the Second World War, Mr. King should with apparent readiness have fallen in with a seven-point definition of Canadian foreign policy drawn up by a leading Canadian student of the subject. For even this convenient definition could not provide the *certitude* without which there could be no reputable foreign policy at all.

Mr. King was at some pains, in this period, to say what Canadian policy was *not*, as well as what it aspired to be. But when he said (on May 24, 1938) that "the true Canadian task was to build up a genuine democracy at home, to promote sound social relationships, and to develop a tolerance and readiness to work together with the other members of the Commonwealth and friendly relations with other countries", followers of the subject might well have asked whether any other ranking Canadian could or would have made any more generally acceptable statement.[6]

[5]Note from the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Canada, to the Secretary of State of the United States, May 30, 1928; cited in R. A. MacKay and E. B. Rogers, *Canada Looks Abroad* (Toronto, 1938), p. 331.

[6]*Canada, House of Commons Debates,* (1938), vol. III, pp. 3175-3191; the summary here quoted is from F. H. Soward (and others), *Canada in World Affairs: The Pre-War Years* (Toronto), 1941, p. 99.

The Second World War made upon Mr. Mackenzie King the most urgent demands of his whole career: upon his strength, his persuasiveness, his vision, his patriotism. Out of his leadership of a nation at war, four strong strands emerged which carried the notion of Canadian autonomy to its most stalwart and four-square expression. The first was the unity of Canada; the second the effective defence of Canada, and the third was the self-respect of Canada, perhaps never valued intrinsically at home until Canada was thrown into a struggle for survival with 30 other embattled nations. This concept of self-respect was to be regarded as the final accompaniment of self-government. In it there was no littleness, no vaunting of self-importance, no echo of an outmoded idea of neutrality, no reliance any longer upon the accidents of geography or the fortunate circumstance of Canada's neighborhood In it, rather, were dignity, and compassion, and generosity unsurpassed in Canada's history; and the whole free world was the better for it.

The fourth strand was the contribution of Canada to the myriad tasks of peace-making, peace-keeping, the reconstruction of shattered national economies and, where possible, the rebuilding of confidence and competence among freedom-loving peoples whose minds and bodies had been cruelly persecuted and oppressed. Even so, in these contributions Canada never sought to outrun her strength or youthfulness. The concept of a "Middle Power", one supposes, was almost wished upon Canada. It was not that Mr. King and his colleagues disliked the rôle, or that the satisfactions of "Middle Power" co-operation did not offset the frustrations of "Great Power" heavy-handedness. But when Mr. King enunciated (on July 9, 1943) the principle known as "functional representation", he did so only after reiterating the necessity for a large preponderance of force on the side of peace. The object was to provide a working compromise between, and an acceptable alternative to, the undisguised hegemony of five major powers on the one side, and the sovereign equality of more than 50 states on the other. Behind the object was a thoroughly consistent attitude, for as far back as 1936, Mr King had said that as one of two conditions essential to the working of any plan of universal compulsion, there must be "an overwhelming preponderance of power, economic and military, in the League, as against any possible aggressor or combination of aggressors." As Mr. King made clear, that condition had not then existed.[1]

* * *

On the broad subject of Canadian autonomy and relations with the United States, Mr. Mackenzie King could not be numbered among those who regarded these relations as being so intimate and continuous that they were not to be regarded as foreign relations at all. Neither

[1]Speech on the announcement of the lifting of sanctions against Italy, June 18, 1936; *Canada, House of Commons Debates* (1936), pp. 3862-3873; quoted in MacKay and Rogers, *Canada Looks Abroad,* at p. 360. See also *House of Commons Debates,* August 4, 1944, p. 5908.

The second condition was the certainty that members of the League would be ready to exercise that force when the occasion arose, regardless of where it arose or whether they had any direct interest in the quarrel. Equally in 1936, said Mr. King, that condition did not exist.

were they to be taken for granted, even after 100 years of generally friendly dealings across the "undefended" border which for long had been the cynosure of all platitudes. On the development of the working relations between Washington and Ottawa, Mr. King seems to have felt that it was from Lord Bryce's day in Washington that a more intelligent appreciation of Canadian interests and Canadian needs had been apparent in official circles. He regarded the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909, with its provision for an international joint commission, as a remarkable achievement in institutional co-operation. He had, by many appearances, shared in a growing distaste for the patent absurdity of having had to entrust the conduct of Canadian official business in Washington so largely to the British Embassy. It was not goodwill which was involved, but knowledgeability, and a consecutiveness of interest which had to be divorced from a "traditional" view of diplomacy which was certainly not indigenous to Canada. The only apparent reason for delay, after 1921, in acting upon the right to appoint Canadian diplomatic representatives abroad, was Mr. King's deference on this point to some of his older colleagues.

After 1935, when Mr. King came back into office, a steadily mounting preoccupation with the effective defence of the North American continent entered into discussion on each succeeding visit he made to Washington. The same preoccupation marked the official visits which President Roosevelt made to Quebec in 1936, to Victoria in 1937, and to Kingston and Ivy Lea in 1938. Based upon a friendship which went back over 30 years, these discussions on defence proceeded with increasing precision and comprehension.

The growing impression that the United States was prepared to defend its own neighborhood was powerfully reinforced by the statement of Mr. Roosevelt at Kingston on August 18, 1938, that the United States would not stand idly by if domination of Canadian soil were threatened by any other Empire. Mr. King took the first opportunity, two days later, to reply that Canada also had her obligations as a good and friendly neighbour,. It may be guessed that in no rôle was Mr. King's stature as a negotiator ever better demonstrated than in the sphere of collective defence in co-operation with the Governments of Britain and the United States.

During the 1939-41 period of these negotiations Britain and Canada were both belligerents against Germany while the United States was a "neutral" in a mounting world conflict. On August 16, 1940, Mr. Roosevelt announced that conversations were being held with the government of the British Empire about the acquisition of naval and air bases for the defence of the Western Hemisphere, and that the Government of Canada was concerned in the conversations. The next day Mr. Mackenzie King met the President at Ogdensburg, N. Y., talking far into the night, and on the following day a joint statement, now known as the Ogdensburg Agreement, revealed that a permanent joint board on defence was to be set up at once to consider in the broad sense the defence of the north half of the western hemisphere. The Board held its first meeting in Ottawa eight days later. On August 20, Mr. Winston Churchill announced in the House of Commons at Westminster the decision of the British Government "spontaneously and without being asked or offered any induce-

ment" to offer the United States sites for naval and air bases in the western hemisphere. On September 3, Mr. Roosevelt announced that sites for bases had been made available: those in Newfoundland and Bermuda on leasehold for no other consideration than Great Britain's interest in the strength and security of North America; those in other British possessions in the Caribbean area on leasehold in exchange for 50 "over-age" United States destroyers. Recalling these swift and stirring proceedings, recalls also a unique demonstration of Mr. Mackenzie's King's modest but thoroughgoing interest and action; "In all this line of thought (Mr. Churchill had said on August 20) we found ourselves in very close harmony with the Government of Canada" A few weeks later, in thanking Mr. Mackenzie King for all he had done in promoting "a harmony of sentiment throughout the new world", Mr. Churchill said: "This deep understanding will be a dominant factor in the rescue of Europe from a relapse into the dark ages".[8]

Mr. Mackenzie King's connection with the Hyde Park Declaration of April, 1941, may rightly be considered the very highest point in his long career as a negotiator. If I were to be asked to choose one incident in the fullest demonstration of Canadian autonomy in relations with the United States over the whole period from 1838, I would unhesitatingly single out these negotiations, which led to this fullest co-operation in economic defence. The achievement was the more remarkable because there was, of necessity and under the stress of war, no profound public understanding how great were the issues and the risks involved. Mr. Mackenzie King was faced with the multiple problems of conserving Canadian reserves of U. S. dollars (since Canada had never benefitted from the operations of the Lend-Lease Program, and had in fact paid cash for all war materials received directly from the United States); of avoiding wasteful and costly duplication in war production; and generally of enabling war production in Canada to proceed without interruption and in mounting volume. Now, in order to provide the most prompt and effective utilization of North American productive facilities, it was agreed that each country should provide the other with the defence articles which it was best able to produce, and produce quickly. A supplementary feature which was both realistic and commendable, was the agreement that Great Britain could obtain, under Lend-Lease, components needed in munitions and equipment under manufacture in Canada on British account, and have them forwarded to Canada for inclusion in the finished articles. As an economic corollary of the Ogdensburg Agreement, the Hyde Park Declaration was of great and continuing importance.

In these, as in all other external relations, it was essential to preserve a sense of proportion. The fuss and bother which was stirred up by occasional ill-timed statements, imputing motives, about the unreasonable detention of freight cars on the lines of either country, about the prices of potatoes, and the importation into Canada of literature and films catering to popular tastes, were certainly deplorable. The momentary attention attracted by these matters

[8]*Canada, House of Commons Debates,* November 12, 1940, p. 54.

never swayed Mr. Mackenzie King from the larger objectives in long-range dealings; nor did these objectives, in turn, obscure a legitimate indignation over the occasional arbitrary and even bad-tempered intervention of the United States. Mr. Mackenzie King could certainly be regarded as a staunch and intelligent friend of the United States, its government and its people; and if he was never a figure who made a strong appeal to the somewhat flamboyant imagination of the American public in the large, he was at least regarded with great respect in official circles.

* * *

What concluding estimate may then be given of Mr. Mackenzie King and Canadian autonomy? At best it must be a personal and rather reminiscent estimate. But I always though of Mr. King in a two-fold way: first as a man of a few essentially rugged convictions; and secondly, as a man whose active life had been subject to a few readily-identifiable and pervading influences. Among his robust convictions, I recall his belief that the really important people in this world were the *conciliators*. He once said that the conciliators would outlive all the Hitlers of whatever age. He had, too, some of the convictions of the *rebel on principle*, though not perhaps the appearances of the rebel in action, since he was rarely in a hurry. I remember his telling an interested audience in Ottawa that if he had been alive in his grandfather's time, he'd have been a rebel too.

Of the institutional influences which dwelt upon him, there is no doubt in my mind that the House of Commons was by far the most enduring. It is a commonplace to say that to the extent that Parliamentary tactics entered into public policy, he had no master and perhaps no equal, and that no one surpassed him in devotion to the usages and the massiveness of Parliament. I cannot explain in any other way the elaborate, very nearly wearying, exposition which went into his statements to the House; apparently effortless, seemingly flowing from some hidden source of vigour and concentration — statements which frequently read much better than they sounded at the time.

Of his personal characteristics, I think I would put first his exemplary patience. He was patient not in any indolent or indifferent way, but patient the better to underline the peaks of decisiveness and effectiveness which he sometimes reached when in the Parliamentary idiom he was 'plain fighting mad'.

Upon many matters of external policy he took decisions as all in the day's work; that is, except for the advice and knowledgeability of his principal advisers in the public service, they were decisions based not upon profound personal study of issues, but upon the apparent needs of the moment. I suppose it might have come as a distinct shock to him if he had been confronted with the suggestion that Canadian policy in external affairs, was, at bottom, the policy of the best available alternative. I think he might have been excused, in much of his long tenure of the office, if he regarded the duties of the External Affairs portfolio as auxiliary to and inseparable from the Prime Ministerial function. In this case it could scarcely be expected that his auxiliary portfolio could become, in his holding of it, an expansive or an imaginative office of state. I am bound to say I regretted

that the Department grew so slowly: that it was systematically raided to provide able men and women for other extra-Departmental duties; and that for so long a period it was able to display so few of the direct benefits of interested ministerial supervision.

I sometimes asked myself whether any man, or any combination of men, confronted by the same problems over so considerable a period of time, would have dealt with them so well and in a way so generally acceptable to the great majority of the people. I am not one of those who write off the real essentials of our corporate existence by saying that by and large we Canadians get the kind of government we deserve. We may have a special stake in the *kind* of government which takes place, but for the *quality* of that government we are pretty well bound to rely upon the human qualities of the main guiding hands. In Mr. Mackenzie King's case there was a curious blending of the reflective and the ruthless, of the rational and the intuitive, of the sunlit peaks of aspiration and achievement, and the valleys of the shadows of disappointment and frustration. And there was more: the loneliness, if not the anonymity, of direction; the white heat of intensity in which decision sometimes emerged; and only rarely the quietness of twilight to provide some of the compensations of ordinary livelihood.

And yet I think that his instincts, his will, his endurance, all his rock-like qualities, were for Canada and the future of Canada. No man who is at the head of the government of this country for over 20 years can afford to presume upon the public gratitude, any more than he is bound to rely upon other people's estimates of the strength of public opinion on any particular question. I feel certain that his good deeds will never be lost, for, like scattered seed, they will yield a far-off harvest.