

Splendid Isolation: Prime Minister Mackenzie King's "No Commitments" Policy in the Years
Before the Second World War
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Canada was unprepared for the Second World War. At the outbreak of hostilities, the army, navy and air force were deficient in men and equipment,¹ and there was no single coordinated plan for defense.² One could attribute this state of affairs to the financial crisis of the Great Depression, or possibly post-Great War pacifist sentiment. Both are true to some extent, but overall, most historians ascribe Canada's unpreparedness to Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King's steadfast adherence to his policy of no commitment to any sort of unified Empire defense. The question remains, however, as to why the Prime Minister was so wedded to this policy. A review of the relevant literature generally suggests two points of view. The first portrays King as a nationalist, stridently protecting Canada's autonomy and national unity from imperial entanglements. The second suggests that King was an isolationist who neglected the reasonable defense of Canada, relying instead on the country's "splendid isolation" and proximity to the United States for protection.

To understand King's policy, one must examine the context within which he made it. In hindsight, it seems obvious that the Axis Alliance was a threat of major proportions, and that any measure of prudence would have suggested that Canada arm itself and form some sort of alliance with Great Britain and the other dominions. However, the issue was much more complex, and it dictated Mackenzie King's cautious attitude. Obviously, a major issue was the Great Depression.

When Mackenzie King ascended to the Prime Minister's Office for the third time in October 1935, after a hiatus of five years, Canada had weathered the most intense years of the Depression and no end was in sight. During the winter of 1935-36, 1.3 million Canadians were forced to rely on government relief for survival.³ All the provinces were facing great difficulties - revenues were down and, as unemployment relief was a provincial responsibility at that time, relief expenditures were enormous. Canadians looked to Ottawa for help. The two most populous and politically important provinces, Quebec and Ontario, caused King the most trouble. Their premiers, each noteworthy in his

own right, became thorns in Mackenzie King's side for a number of reasons. Naturally, they were safeguarding the interests of their provinces, but just as important, they disliked Mackenzie King.⁴

The premier of Ontario, Mitchell Hepburn, was nominally a Liberal, with a populist manner and powerful and wealthy friends. Tension between the two leaders dated right from the first days of King's government, when the new prime minister ignored Hepburn's recommendations for cabinet appointments. Further disputes over patronage, power, exports and provincial rights essentially brought relations between the two to a halt by 1938, at which time the Ontario premier seceded from the Liberal Party.

The situation in Quebec was no less troublesome. In the provincial election of 1936, the 40-year reign of the Liberal Party in *La Belle Province* came to a crashing end in the face of the Union Nationale under Maurice Duplessis. Duplessis had been a Conservative but joined forces with disaffected Liberals and the Union Nationale to defeat the government of Louis-Alexandre Taschereau. While Duplessis had promised reform, his regime turned out to be just as autocratic as that of his predecessor.⁵

Meanwhile, Western Canada was also having its problems. On top of the economic conditions, the Prairie Provinces were hit by drought, grasshoppers and windstorms. Production dropped even as prices fell to all time lows. The traditional political parties seemed helpless to remedy the situation and, as a result, two new movements appeared - the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation under the Reverend J S Woodsworth, and Social Credit under William Aberhart. Woodsworth was a long-time voice for social justice in Parliament, having been elected as a Liberal in North Winnipeg soon after his release from prison for his activities during the 1919 Winnipeg strike. As the effects of the Depression deepened, he began to lay the groundwork for what became the CCF.

Social Credit's William "Bible Bill" Aberhart began his public life as a radio evangelist and captured enormous audiences in the prairies during the 1920s and early 30s. Gradually, the Social

Credit theories of Britisher Major C H Douglas started to appear in Aberhart's broadcasts.⁶ As Social Credit Clubs started to pop up throughout Alberta, Aberhart realized that a new political movement was in the offing. Despite the less desirable aspects associated with Social Credit in Britain - anti-Semitism and fascist para-militarism - in the provincial election of 1935, Aberhart was elected premier with 56 seats in the 63 seat assembly.⁷

The federal election of 1935 introduced these two parties to the national political arena. Polling 387,000 votes, the CCF elected 7 members to the House of Commons, while Social Credit won 17 seats with 4.1 % of the popular vote. Mackenzie King had won the election on the slogan "King or Chaos." The electorate may have chosen King, but perhaps they had not completely avoided the chaos.

Whereas Mackenzie King may have avoided the worst of the Depression by his defeat in 1930, he could not avoid the deteriorating international situation upon his return in 1935. Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931 and was expanding its control in China, Fascist Italy under Benito Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, and Hitler consolidated his control on Nazi Germany. Within a year, the latter two countries would be involved in the Spanish Civil War on the side of Fascist General Francisco Franco.

The Ethiopian crisis had actually started during the Canadian federal election, and Prime Minister Bennett supported the League of Nations' attempts to dissuade Italian aggression through the threat of sanctions. Feeling in Canada at the time was not wholly supportive of the government's move, as some felt that Italy was merely civilizing a barbarous country.⁸ Regardless, the Canadian representative in Geneva Dr. W. A. Riddell presented what became known as the "Canadian Proposal" suggesting that any embargo should also include oil. Taking a firm stand on any international situation was totally against Mackenzie King's policy, and it did not take long before King issued a statement distancing his government from Dr. Riddell's proposal. While King tried to spin this repudiation as not being a rejection of the proposition, Europe saw it as an abandonment of

collective security.⁹ In the view of the British Foreign Office, “the Canadian government [had] very easily - and without dignity - lost their nerve.”¹⁰ According to John Thompson and Allen Seager, Canada - or at least the country as personified by Mackenzie King - did not have any nerve to begin with, and King was merely taking up where he had left off while Prime Minister in the 1929.¹¹ Unfortunately, for world opinion, this would continue.

In all fairness, King reflected the majority of opinion in Canada at the time. There was a bit of a fervor immediately after his repudiation of Riddell,¹² but in general, the Canadian public was more behind King’s isolationist stance than against, as evidenced by the weight of favorable editorial comment.¹³ The strongest voices for isolation were in Quebec.¹⁴ To many French-Canadian nationalists, war implied conscription, loss of provincial autonomy and, overall, an upset in the traditional order of things.¹⁵ However, Quebec was not alone; the Department of External Affairs, under the ubiquitous Dr. O D Skelton was also firmly on the side of isolation.¹⁶ In a paper on imperial defense, Skelton wondered why it should be considered normal that every generation Canada had to “invade the continent of Europe and join the European battle campaigns of the 20th century?”¹⁷

But King knew that if Britain went to war, English sentiment in Canada would force it to follow suit, and if that happened there would be serious divisions within the country and the Liberal Party.¹⁸ Consequently, King’s efforts were to promote peace and keep Canada out of any entanglements that could be viewed by any of the factions within the country as favoring one over the other. To this end, the appeasement policy initiated by British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and later championed by his successor Neville Chamberlain appealed greatly to Mackenzie King. Appeasement meant settlement through negotiations not force, and with no need for force there was no need for Canada to become involved in any sort of co-operative Empire defense. However, unlike King, while Chamberlain firmly felt that Hitler could be appeased, he also started a program of re-armament.¹⁹ With this knowledge, Mackenzie King attended the 1937 Council on Imperial Defense.

Hector Mackenzie suggests that the 1937 conference was the “nadir of imperial defense co-operation.”²⁰ With Skelton and Loring Christie by his side, King was emphatic - some would say obsessive²¹ - in his rejection of any sort of commitment. The conference ended with the British concluding that it would be “disastrous if [Britain] laid [its] plans on the assumption [it] could count on Canada.”²² Despite this, at the end of the conference, King made a special trip to Berlin to meet with Hitler. Impressed with the German leader, and seriously misreading him as basically a man of peace interested in the good of his people, King nevertheless told Hitler that if Britain was the victim of aggression, Canada would stand by its side. While King attributed great significance to this meeting, and indeed C. P. Stacey suggests it is King’s sole serious attempt at international diplomacy,²³ there is no indication that Hitler placed much importance on the visit.²⁴

It took a long time for Canadians to realize that Canada and the rest of the Commonwealth were on a collision course with the Fascist regimes in Germany and Italy.²⁵ The *Toronto Mail and Empire* even suggested that Fascism was more acceptable to Canadians than the “Moscow-bred program of the CCF.”²⁶ As Canada’s minister to Washington Herbert Marler intimated to US Secretary of State Cordell Hull, regardless of how nasty and brutal the Nazis were, no more than ten percent of Canadians would go to war in the defense of a Central European country.²⁷

But the tide of public opinion started to turn. Germany’s absorption of Austria in March 1938 made people take notice but it was the news in May that the Third Reich was trying to buy Anticosti Island at the entrance to the St. Lawrence River that really got Canadians’ attention. The King government disallowed the sale but Canadians were starting to have second thoughts about Herr Hitler and his allies. Shortly thereafter, Hitler demanded the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia and all during the summer of 1938, the world sat on tenterhooks as Hitler threatened to invade. Neville Chamberlain did his best to appease the German dictator, finally signing the Munich Pact in September with its promise of “peace in our time.” The deal left many people uncomfortable and even though his government had taken no part, the Czechoslovakia crisis was a turning point in

Mackenzie King's foreign policy.²⁸ There had never been an unreserved declaration of support for Britain but King now spoke regularly of the possibility of a conflict on the continent and that Canada may become involved. When Germany annexed what remained of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, King realized that appeasement had failed and Britain and the Rome/Berlin Axis were barreling towards war.

King knew that there was no way that Canada could remain neutral and on March 20, 1939 King publicly rejected isolationism in the event that Britain was drawn into a war of aggression.²⁹ He confirmed that Parliament would decide, but that there was little doubt as to what it and the people of Canada would decide in that event. As was anticipated, public opinion was split along language lines. The French language press spoke of the French-Canadian population withdrawing its support, while the English-Canadian press criticized King for not having been more forthright.³⁰ At any rate, events pre-empted any serious repercussions, as within a week of King's statement, the British government guaranteed Poland's sovereignty against German aggression. King was aghast.

Of immediate concern to the Canadian Prime Minister was the question of conscription - the underlying issue behind Quebec's reservations. Although relatively few French Canadians were pacifists, many felt that no one had the right to force them to fight and/or die in Europe, Africa or Asia for the greater glory of any country, whether England or even France.³¹ King addressed the conscription issue directly in a two-hour speech to the House of Commons on March 30th, whereby he promised that as long as his government was in power "no such measure [would] be enacted."³² When the axe fell the following month, and Canada declared war on Germany, the country was not united as some King historians contend. The divisions were still there. They - as usual - had just been put on hold for the time being.

As previously mentioned, there seems to be two basic schools of thought concerning Mackenzie King's motives behind his policy of no commitments. One of the strongest proponents of the nationalist view is J. L. Granatstein. Granatstein contends that King's policy was not isolationist,

but was meant to encourage peace.³³ He was under no illusion that events abroad would affect the peace and well-being of Canada³⁴ and knew what neutrality would do to the unity of the country if Britain were involved in a war.³⁵ That being the case, King's efforts were not so much to keep Canada out of a war, but to prevent it.³⁶ He felt the best thing, both for Canada and the pursuit of peace, was to keep Canada united and insulated, and restore the world's economic health.³⁷ Joy Esbrey agrees with this assessment, arguing that King believed that a strong Canada, intent on minding its own business, would produce a firm foundation for the role of international conciliator.³⁸ This attitude, she says, dates back to his days as a labour negotiator where his settlement plans were not so much a compromise worked out to please the disputants, but the scheme that he thought was wisest.³⁹

Granatstein argues that King feared that Britain's world-wide interests would eventually lead to trouble for Canada.⁴⁰ He charges that King saw British policy as both bumbling and cunning⁴¹, and one that took the dominions for granted, especially in international affairs.⁴² As a result, King saw ending diplomatic unity with Britain as one of his major tasks as Prime Minister.⁴³ Interestingly enough, as Hector Mackenzie suggests, King's no commitments policy actually paralleled Britain's own policy towards Europe,⁴⁴ one of "limited liability" initially advanced by British strategist Captain B. H. Liddel Hart.

Granatstein observes that it was the votes of Francophone Liberals that won King the leadership of his Party and that he never forgot it.⁴⁵ He knew that the majority of French Canadians were against any automatic commitment to Imperial causes, and as a result, Granatstein says, English/French relations were behind the lack of Canada's pre-war diplomacy.⁴⁶ King knew that domestic politics demanded that at least the appearance of free choice had to be maintained.⁴⁷ Esbrey suggests that King felt that it was advisable to build up a bank of goodwill with those opposed to foreign involvement so that when the time came, there would be less clamor.⁴⁸ Granatstein argues that this was at the core of his no commitments approach and his insistence that

“Parliament would decide” when and if the time came.⁴⁹ H. Duncan Hall refutes this, saying that by continually deferring to parliamentary supremacy, King was merely trying to side-step British pressure to commit and avoid any political pressure and dissent on the home front.⁵⁰ Esbrey sides with Hall on this issue, suggesting that King wanted to be able to share the blame.⁵¹ Regardless, Granatstein insists that King would not let dissension in Quebec deflect him from coming to Britain’s aid.⁵²

Some historians look at King’s alignment with the US as an abandonment of Britain.⁵³ Granatstein, on the other hand, contends that King looked at Canada as a North American nation under the Crown, and had no intention of forsaking Britain in favour of the United States.⁵⁴ George Stanley agrees, suggesting that King was very aware of the problems arising from close political and economic ties with the United States, more so than some of his colleagues.⁵⁵ Granatstein argues that because of Canada’s racial and political difficulties, it was more natural for Canada to emulate American policies and try to remain aloof from any European conflict.⁵⁶ He posits that King actually sought a closer relationship with the United States to both influence British policy and bring Britain and the US closer together as a force for peace.⁵⁷ Roger Parras theorizes that King feared a closer Canadian alignment with Britain would prompt the British government to adopt a harder line that might in itself bring on a conflict.⁵⁸ In any event, King viewed himself as a peacemaker, and Granatstein insists that any intimations of abandonment were merely to encourage the British to do more for peace.⁵⁹

On the other hand, Joy Esbrey suggests that King saw international issues “through a lens ground in his experience as a labour conciliator and polished by his own needs.”⁶⁰ He thought any conflict could be reconciled through negotiation, and his own longings for a peaceful existence blinded him to the realities of international affairs. Hence, his total misreading of Adolph Hitler and the impact that King’s visit in 1937 had on the German leader. Granatstein blames O.D. Skelton, Deputy Secretary of External Affairs, for the perception that King was an isolationist.⁶¹ Skelton had

no trust in the British and felt that Canada should mind its own business.⁶² Granatstein argues that King actually wanted to make stronger statements in favour of Britain but Skelton and King's Quebec lieutenant, Ernest Lapointe, prevented him.⁶³

Noted Mackenzie King historian C. P. Stacey agrees that Skelton exerted tremendous influence on King.⁶⁴ But Stacey asserts that King was, nevertheless, an isolationist who neglected the country's armed services in the face of the obvious threat from Hitler's Nazi Germany.⁶⁵ He attributes some of this to Skelton as King's most trusted advisor. Skelton mistrusted the British, and wanted closer ties with the United States, which set the tone of the Department of External Affairs during the inter-war period.⁶⁶ In the first instance, Stacey argues that Skelton regarded himself and King as conservatives whereas the British were dangerous innovators.⁶⁷ With this in mind, Skelton stymied any liaison by the Canadian and British armed forces,⁶⁸ and as a result was regarded by the heads of Canada's military services as "an enemy of defence preparation."⁶⁹ Canada's military saw that war was almost inevitable and that both Canada and Great Britain would be allied together in that war. In truth, they could not foresee that Canada would be involved in any war except as an ally of Britain.⁷⁰ This being the case, it was absurd for King and Skelton to completely ignore any sort of joint planning between the British and Canadian militaries. James Eayrs, in the second volume of *In Defence of Canada*, suggests that it is ironic that the only two exceptions to King's no commitments policy during the inter-war period was the War Graves Commission and King's support for appeasement. He laments that only in burying the dead of one war and causing more dead in another did Canada work with the other members of the Commonwealth during this period to any purposeful end.⁷¹ He further observes that what was needed in defence affairs was co-operation and compliance with a common cause, not non-co-operation and autonomy.⁷² As Duncan Hall points out, King was not even trying to put forth a distinctly Canadian position. He just wanted to enjoy "the quiet life and to keep out of trouble by avoiding any positive commitments."⁷³ Hector Mackenzie is less petty, but does agree that Canadian policy-makers seemed to be more concerned with Canada's status as

conferred by the Statute of Westminster than articulating any “distinct foreign policy for Canada.”⁷⁴ Nevertheless, he does state that by “any reasonable assessment of attitudes, plans and preparations, Canada was allied to Britain, though the arrangement lacked some elements of predictability or assurance.”⁷⁵

The military heads were also more than willing to push for closer ties with the United States, and realized that any sort of effective North American defence would have to be a joint Canadian-American venture.⁷⁶ On the other hand, they also recognized that in all probability the US would not immediately enter a war but would remain neutral for an indeterminate period. Consequently, pre-crisis planning to establish uniformity of organization, training and equipment with Britain was more essential than with the US.⁷⁷ As it was, the King government would allow neither. Instead, Canada’s response to Axis aggression was appeasement and resistance to any improvement in Imperial defence.⁷⁸

Stacey asserts that Canada’s military policy, or lack thereof, was a luxury no other country could have afforded and it was only thanks to Britain and France holding the line early in the war, rather than anything King did, that gave Canada the time to mobilize.⁷⁹ He points out that it was only after the Munich Crisis that defence started to take a priority and while effective, was totally inadequate.⁸⁰ Robert Wardhaugh contends that when King approved re-armament in the 1936-7 budget, it was more out of concern with American intervention in British Columbia if Japan attacked the West Coast than actual defence.⁸¹ Roger Sarty, on the other hand, states that it was “an act of political courage” against “widespread and vociferous” opposition.⁸²

Stacey paints King as living in a dreamworld when it came to Canada’s preparation for a war.⁸³ In a diary entry from just before the Czechoslovakia crisis, King states that Canada’s “defence program [is] in good shape....[ready] to meet all joint emergencies.”⁸⁴ Considering the reality of the country’s military services, this is an extraordinary view. Home defenses did improve, but Stacey points to the complete lack of any Canadian-British co-ordination for Newfoundland as a prime

example of just how limited even they were. He calls this omission, considering Newfoundland's strategic importance to Canada's defence, a "military absurdity."⁸⁵

Stacey argues that King felt that the highest form of statesmanship was preventing evil rather than creating good.⁸⁶ From King's perspective, he would rather keep things quiet in Canada than do any good on the international scene. This being the case, Stacey suggests that King looked at positions of influence, such as the League of Nations, as unnecessary responsibilities, commitments and complications.⁸⁷ Similarly, King regarded the Committee on Imperial Defence as more of a threat to Canadian autonomy than an important channel to an ally.⁸⁸ Stacey points out that Skelton personally briefed the Canadian delegation to the 1937 Council on Imperial Defence to avoid any confusion over just what Canada's position was.⁸⁹ The last thing King wanted to do was to take a lead in international affairs.⁹⁰ It is interesting to note that King's Quebec lieutenant, Ernest Lapointe, took a different view. He looked at such opportunities as an indication of a new international status and importance for Canada.⁹¹ This is somewhat ironic, as it was the ghost of the conscription crisis of 1917 that was behind King's no commitments policy.⁹²

Stacey thinks that while King was reasonably intelligent and possessed a retentive memory and a capacity for detailed work, he was not a "first class intellect."⁹³ This may explain why, even though King recognized Skelton's "real antagonism towards monarchical institutions, and Britain," and was really quite severe in his criticisms of Skelton as war approached, King still kept him as one of his closest advisors. Stacey says that Skelton was an isolationist and set the tone at External Affairs, one which did not change with circumstances. As a result, he says, the department was totally out of touch with the country by 1939. Nevertheless, Stacey argues that Skelton certainly influenced King and often the two men saw "eye to eye."⁹⁴

One of the key arguments in favour of the success of Mackenzie King's pre-war policies is that Canada entered the Second World War a united nation.⁹⁵ This is another aspect of the debate that should be examined. Several historians have countered this boast by saying that Canada was not

united. The divisions were still there and the fact that the country did not disintegrate when Canada entered the war does not mean it was united. As Brian Nolan suggests, King did not unify the quarrelsome racial factions within the country. Rather he just prevented them from breaking up confederation.⁹⁶

Mackenzie King's prime concern was the perceived French Canadian sensibility to anything that even hinted at any sort of commitment to participate in Britain's "brush wars." As a result, under the guise of fighting for Canadian autonomy in foreign affairs, he continually refused to take a stand on any international policy except appeasement. Consequently, some would argue that King sacrificed military preparedness for the sake of not causing problems for himself at home. King's view, as expressed by External Affairs colleague and King biographer J. W. Pickersgill, was that the real secret of political leadership was more in what was prevented than what was accomplished.⁹⁷ To this end, Joseph Boudreau suggests King's talents and training as a "superb arbitrator and conciliator" allowed him to recognize the value of ambiguity and inactivity when any other course of action would threaten national unity.⁹⁸

H. Blair Neatby, in *William Lyon Mackenzie King, III: 1932-1939*, recognizes the "Quebec factor" in King's thinking. King realized that his success was contingent upon adequately considering the interests of French Canada when decisions were made, even though, as Neatby writes, King had no great admiration for French political or religious traditions.⁹⁹ Ultimately, not confronting the differing factions did not unite them, but merely avoided or, as in the case of conscription, postponed the inevitable. King's policy was not so much a policy of no commitments but, as British statesman L.S. Amery observed, one of being "firmly determined to do nothing."¹⁰⁰ As it was, when war was declared none of "The Quebec Men" resigned as King had feared¹⁰¹ and the country was not torn asunder. One writer suggests that maybe this was not due to King's efforts but because the vast majority of Canadians had either, consciously or sub-consciously, started to understand the implications of a Nazi controlled Europe.¹⁰² To say that King had united the country

is considered an overstatement by many King critics. King really just avoided the problem .

It is this chronic avoidance of action that John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager say was King's preferred technique when dealing with domestic matters.¹⁰³ Elected on a platform of health and unemployment insurance, old age security and workplace wage equality for women, the Mackenzie King Liberals fell back into politics of the lowest common denominator after the election of 1921. Ignoring the warnings of the 1921-24 recession, King dismantled the reforms of his predecessors and passed off what responsibilities he could to the provinces.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, Thompson and Seager charge that for the first ten years of King's stewardship, it was not the federal or provincial leaders that were running the country but rather the financial and business elite.¹⁰⁵ Regardless, King paid the price in 1930, when no one was more surprised that R. B. Bennett's Conservatives took power. That could have been the end of it, but as Thompson and Seager suggest, the real political beneficiaries of the Depression were King and the Liberal Party.¹⁰⁶ Bennett answered desperation with oppression, and as regional parties appeared throughout the country with varying degrees of success, the King Liberal's were the only party that could call itself "national." But once again in power, and even as the King government "investigated" the economic crisis, it ignored the advice of its own "Ottawa Men"¹⁰⁷ and concentrated more on its own survival by doing as little as possible that could cause any sort of controversy.¹⁰⁸

Avoidance was also the by-word in international affairs. Thompson and Seager charge that, while Canada enjoyed the status of its own seat at the League of Nations, it did not want the responsibility that came with it. Canada, in no small way, contributed to the impotence of the League as an instrument of peace.¹⁰⁹ The two historians agree with Duncan Hall that, even with war a possibility, Canada brought nothing more to the Councils on Imperial Defence than platitudes and support for appeasement. Thompson and Seager argue that it was not revulsion for international fascism that eventually pushed Canada to war in 1939, but English-Canadian sentimentality for the mother country.¹¹⁰

As it was, Canadians looked at mobilization for war as a way out of the Depression. Thousands of young Canadians enlisted, not out of patriotic verve, but the prospect of a hot meal and warm clothes.¹¹¹ Thompson and Seager point to the irony that, in the end, the King government was willing to spend on war what it thought immoral to spend on the unemployed.¹¹² They contend that this paradox is the hallmark of Canadian political leadership during the decades leading up to the Second World War. Canada is a country whose major problems are never solved, and Thompson and Seager conclude that in the decades before World War II, Canada's political leaders did their best to see that the country's problems were not even addressed.¹¹³

For a man who most people thought to be unimpressive and some found to be "obstinate, tiresome, stupid"¹¹⁴ and "an awful lot of trouble,"¹¹⁵ Mackenzie King has occupied an important part in Canada's national history since his death in 1950. Some historians see him as one of Canada's greatest Prime Ministers¹¹⁶ while others deride him as being obstructive, obsessive, and a mere "talking head" for his Deputy Secretary for External Affairs. Regardless, all acknowledge his uncanny ability to gauge the public mood. Whatever the truth, King inspires an interesting debate which can still stir strong feelings today. Was King a nationalist, stridently protecting Canada's autonomy and national unity from Imperial entanglements? Or was he an isolationist who neglected the reasonable defence of Canada, relying instead on appeasement and the country's "splendid isolation" and proximity to the United States for protection? Whatever the debate, it is hard to argue with success, and if longevity is a benchmark of achievement then William Lyon Mackenzie King was very successful.

¹The Royal Canadian Air Force could field only twenty-nine modern military aircraft, the army had no more than sixteen light tanks, the navy had a half dozen frontline warships, and the country had exactly four modern anti-aircraft guns to protect its major centers from air attack.

²John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager, *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord*

(Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), p. 319.

³*Ibid*, p. 280

⁴Granatstein, *Mackenzie King: His Life and World* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1977), p. 107.

⁵Duplessis drove out all who were not personally loyal to him and in an attempt to quell opposition, instituted the Padlock Law. Under the guise of combating the world-wide threat of communism, the Padlock Law made it illegal for any house or hall to be used to promote communism. However, the definition of communism was deliberately vague and as a result a broad range of media came under the heading of subversive, including the Liberal Party paper *Le Canada*. See Thompson and Seager, *Canada 1922-1939*, p. 285.

⁶Douglas' premise was basically that total purchasing power was less than the total cost of all the goods produced by modern technology. To narrow this gap, the Major proposed to create new money by giving it directly to the people in the form of dividends.

⁷Granatstein, *Mackenzie King*, p. 98.

⁸*Ibid*, p. 121.

⁹Thompson and Seager, *Canada 1922-1939*, p. 311.

¹⁰*Ibid*.

¹¹*Ibid*.

¹²The Toronto *Telegram* announced that "Britain Stands Firm for Sanctions, but Canada Lies Down." See Thompson and Seager, *Canada 1922-1939*, p. 311.

¹³The French-language journal *La Liberté* suggested that King reflected "the moderate opinion in [the] country," and the Ottawa *Journal* conceded that the Prime Minister "spoke for the vast majority of Canadians." *Ibid*.

¹⁴*Ibid*, p. 314.

¹⁵*Ibid*.

¹⁶C. P. Stacey, *Mackenzie King and the Atlantic Triangle: The 1976 Joanne Goodman Lectures*, Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada Ltd., 1976, p. 27.

¹⁷Thompson and Seager, *Canada 1922-1939*, p. 314.

¹⁸King was haunted by the Conscription Crisis of 1917. By the spring of that year, the Canadian Corps was desperately short of men. Vimy Ridge had been a great Canadian victory but had cost 11,000 men killed or wounded. Recruitment had not produced the needed replacements, and the British were putting pressure on Canadian Prime Minister Sir Robert

Borden for more troops. To that end, Borden announced in May 1917 that conscription was the only answer. Sir Wilfred Laurier, leader of the Liberal Opposition, knew what that issue meant to the majority of Québécois, as well as many farmers and trade unionists, and refused to back it. Even when Borden invited Laurier to join a coalition government, Laurier declined, alienating many of his pro-conscription supporters. The issue polarized English and French Canadian opinion, and led to riots in Montreal. It also caused near fatal rifts in the Liberal Party itself. Twenty-five Liberals deserted Laurier in July, voting in favour of the Military Service Act, and the Union government included 38 Unionist Liberals after the general election in December. It was the Quebec vote that saved the Laurier Liberals from a complete rout and King never forgot it. See R. MacGregor Dawson, *William Lyon Mackenzie King: A Political Biography 1874-1923* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958), pp. 258-269. See also J. L. Granatstein and Desmond Morton, *Canada and the Two World Wars* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2003), pp. 91-94, and Desmond Morton, *A Military History of Canada: From Champlain to Kosovo* (4th. Ed, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd, 1999), pp. 151-158.

¹⁹Some Chamberlain apologists have suggested that the British Prime Minister's appeasement policy was really a delaying action to give Britain time to re-arm.

²⁰Hector Mackenzie, "'Arsenal of the British Empire'? British Orders for Munitions Production in Canada, 1936-39," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 31, No.3 (September 2003), pp. 46-73.

²¹H Duncan Hall is very critical of Mackenzie King, suggesting that King's paranoia of British Imperialists became an obsession to the point that he was obstructive at the Councils on Imperial Defence. See H Duncan Hall, *Commonwealth: A History of the British Commonwealth of Nations* (London: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1971).

²²Granatstein, *Mackenzie King*, p. 127.

²³C P Stacey, *A Very Double Life: The Private World of Mackenzie King* (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada Ltd., 1976), p. 186.

²⁴H. Blair Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King, III: 1932-1939* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 223.

²⁵ During the opening ceremonies at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Canada's contingent gave *der Fuhrer* the Nazi salute as they filed past Hitler's viewing box. See Thompson and Seager, *Canada 1922-1939*, p. 323.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 324.

²⁸Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King, III: 1932-1939*, p. 274.

²⁹Skelton was horrified.

³⁰Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King, III: 1932-1939*, p. 299.

³¹Thompson and Seager, *Canada 1922-1939*, p. 326.

³²Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King, III: 1932-1939*, p. 301.

³³JL Granatstein and Robert Bothwell, 'A Self-Evident National Duty': Canadian Foreign Policy, 1935-1939." (1975). In *Towards a New World: Readings in the History of Canadian Foreign Policy*, J. L. Granatstein, ed. (Mississauga, ON: Copp Clarke Pitman Ltd., 1993), p. 159.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 175.

³⁵Granatstein, *Mackenzie King: His Life and World*, p. 129.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 125.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 126.

³⁸Joy E. Esbrey, *Knight of the Holy Spirit: A Study of William Lyon Mackenzie King*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 207.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁴⁰*Towards a New World: Readings in the History of Canadian Foreign Policy*, J L Granatstein, ed. (Mississauga, ON: Copp Clarke Pitman Ltd., 1993), p. 2.

⁴¹Granatstein, *Mackenzie King: His Life and World*, p. 110.

⁴²*Towards a New World*, Granatstein, ed., p. 2.

The Chanuk Crisis in September 1922 certainly illustrates this impression. King took great exception to British Secretary of State for War Lord Derby's assumption that if any part of the Empire was attacked the "whole Empire [would] rally to the support of the part so attacked." King made it quite clear at the Council on Imperial Defence the next year that Canada would not issue "a blank cheque from the Dominion to be filled at a moment's notice." See Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: From the Great War to the Great Depression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), pp. 78-80.

⁴³Granatstein, *Mackenzie King: His Life and World*, p. 110.

⁴⁴Mackenzie, "'Arsenal of the British Empire'? British Orders for Munitions Production in Canada, 1936-39," pp. 46-73.

⁴⁵Granatstein, *Mackenzie King: His Life and World*, p. 24.

⁴⁶J. L. Granatstein, *Canada's War: The Politics of Mackenzie King Government, 1939-1945* (Toronto: Oxford Press, 1975), p. 8.

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- ⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ⁴⁸Esberey, *Knight of the Holy Spirit*, p. 208.
- ⁴⁹*Towards a New World*, Granatstein, ed., p. 2.
- ⁵⁰Hall, *Commonwealth*, p. 479.
- ⁵¹Esberey, *Knight of the Holy Spirit*, p. 208.
- ⁵²Granatstein and Bothwell, "A Self-Evident National Duty," p. 167.
- ⁵³Hall, *Commonwealth*, p. 477.
- ⁵⁴*Towards a New World*, Granatstein, ed., p. 2.
- ⁵⁵George F G Stanley, "Canada's War: The Politics of the Mackenzie King Government, 1939-1945," Book Review, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 81, No. 3 (June, 1976), 698-699.
- ⁵⁶Granatstein and Bothwell, "A Self-Evident National Duty," p. 161.
- ⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 162.
- ⁵⁸Galen Roger Perras, "No Need to Send an Army Across the Pacific: Mackenzie King and the Pacific Conflict." In *Mackenzie King: Citizenship and Country*, John English, Kenneth McLaughlin and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, eds. (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio: 2002.), p. 125.
- ⁵⁹Granatstein, *Canada's War*, p. 5.
- ⁶⁰Esberey, *Knight of the Holy Spirit*, p. 196.
- ⁶¹Granatstein and Bothwell, "A Self-Evident National Duty," p. 167.
- ⁶²*Ibid.*
- ⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 170.
- ⁶⁴Stacey, *Mackenzie King and the Atlantic Triangle*, p. 17.
- ⁶⁵C P Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-45* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer for Canada, 1970), p. 99.
- ⁶⁶Stacey, *Mackenzie King and the Atlantic Triangle*, pp 26-7.
- ⁶⁷C P Stacey, "Laurier, King, and External Affairs." In *Towards a New World*, Granatstein, ed., p. 18.

⁶⁸Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, p. 77.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁷¹James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: From the Great War to the Great Depression* (2nd ed., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 25.

⁷²James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: Appeasement and Rearmament* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 81.

⁷³Hall, *Commonwealth*, p. 500.

⁷⁴Hector Mackenzie, "'Arsenal of the British Empire'? British Orders for Munitions Production in Canada, 1936-39," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 31, No.3 (September 2003), pp. 46-73.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

⁷⁶Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, p. 99.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*

⁷⁸Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: Appeasement and Rearmament*, p. 81.

⁷⁹Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, p. 6.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, p. 6 and p. 70.

⁸¹Robert Wardhaugh, "Considering Both Sides of the Ledger: J. W. Defoe and Mackenzie King," *Mackenzie King*, English, McLaughlin and Lackenbauer, eds., p. 125.

⁸²Roger Sarty, *The Maritime Defence of Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 1996), p. 110.

⁸³Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, p. 98.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁸⁶Stacey, *Mackenzie King and the Atlantic Triangle*, p. 21.

⁸⁷CP Stacey, "Laurier, King, and External Affairs." In *Towards a New World*, Granatstein, ed., p. 22.

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- ⁸⁸Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, p. 92.
- ⁸⁹*Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ⁹⁰Stacey, "Laurier, King, and External Affairs," p. 22.
- ⁹¹*Ibid.*
- ⁹²Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, p. 5.
- ⁹³Stacey, *Mackenzie King and the Atlantic Triangle*, pp. xv-xvi.
- ⁹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 27.
- ⁹⁵Granatstein, *Mackenzie King: His Life and World*, p. 193.
- ⁹⁶Brian Nolan, *King's War: Mackenzie King and the Politics of War, 1939-45* (Toronto: Random House, 1988), p. 3.
- ⁹⁷J W Pickersgill, *The Mackenzie King Record, Vol.I, 1939-1944* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), p. 10.
- ⁹⁸Boudreau, Joseph A. "William Lyon Mackenzie King: A Political Biography, 1974-1923, Vol. 2: *The Lonely Heights, 1924-1932*, Vol. 3: *The Prism of Unity, 1932-1939*," Book Review, *Journal of American History*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (June, 1978), 111-113.
- ⁹⁹Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King*, III, p. 128.
- ¹⁰⁰As Quoted in Hall, *Commonwealth*, p. 533.
- ¹⁰¹Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, p. 8.
- ¹⁰²Richard A Preston, *Canada's War: The Policies of the Mackenzie King Government, 1939-45*" Book Review, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (Summer, 1975), 376-377.
- ¹⁰³Thompson and Seager, *Canada 1922-1939*, p. 312.
- ¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, p. 331.
- ¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*
- ¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*
- ¹⁰⁷In reference to J. L. Granatstein, *The Ottawa Men: The Civil Service Mandarins, 1935-1957* (2nd. Edition, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).
- ¹⁰⁸Thompson and Seager, *Canada 1922-1939*, p. 332.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹¹J. L. Granatstein and Desmond Morton, *Canada and the Two World Wars* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2003, p. 181.

¹¹²*Ibid.*

¹¹³*Ibid.*

¹¹⁴British Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon as quoted in Hall, *Commonwealth*, p. 533.

¹¹⁵South African Prime Minister General Jan Smuts as quoted in *Ibid*, p. 428.

¹¹⁶Granatstein, *Mackenzie King: His Life and World*, p. 194.