

Pearson's now-forgotten legacy paved the way

By **ANTONY ANDERSON**

If a foreign visitor or even a Canadian waded through the deluge of tributes and slings evoked by Pierre Trudeau's death, they would no doubt conclude that Trudeau invented Canada from scratch.

It may seem churlish to point this out (although the man who prized reason over passion would understand) but Canada did exist before 1968.

It's not surprising that Canadians forget this. At his best, Trudeau was a dominating, enthralling prime minister, unlike anyone who has held that office.

But no one works in a vacuum — not even Pierre Trudeau. Someone opened the door for him. Someone paved the way. That person was his self-deprecating predecessor, **Lester Pearson**. And, in spite of what the obits said, so much of what we associate with Trudeau can be directly traced to Pearson's incredible but largely forgotten legacy.

Charming in person, Pearson on the platform was wooden, polite and utterly incapable of inspiring the country with any great visions or speeches. His feeble public performance ensured that he never won a majority government or dominated the House of Commons.

As we all know, Trudeau could be magnificent on the small screen and electric on stage. When Pearson retired in 1968, people were relieved. His time in office had been messy, scandal-ridden, tumultuous. People wanted a honeymoon from those strained, strenuous times.

But Pearson's five years in office were messy for a reason. Those five years of upheaval were sublimely creative. Pearson had absolutely no interest in power without purpose. Working with a beleaguered minority government, he put into place many of the key elements that still define this nation.

Trudeau talked about a Just Society but it was Pearson who brought in the Canada Pension Plan, the Canada Assistance Plan and, of course, Medicare.



STAR FILE PHOTO

RETHINKING CANADA: We tend to give credit to Pierre Trudeau for many achievements that are directly attributable to **Lester Pearson**, right, during his five years as prime minister.

Trudeau talked about the need for a strong sense of national identity. It was Pearson who brought in the most unifying and defining symbol we have — the flag. His government also established the Order of Canada.

The key legislative achievement of Trudeau's first term was the Official Languages Act, which was passed in 1969. The fact that Trudeau passed the bill so soon after coming into power would have been impossible without Pearson.

In 1963, the man who had grown up in an anglo-Protestant solitude, who could barely speak French, who didn't really know Quebec, took an enormous political risk and launched the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. Pearson's predecessor, John Diefenbaker, had refused to do this. He thought it would tear the country apart.

But Pearson knew that he had to respond to the political and social earthquake rippling through Quebec. It

may have been called the Quiet Revolution but separatists were putting bombs in mailboxes, cutting power lines and vandalizing railway tracks. They had blown up a statue of General Wolfe in downtown Montreal. They were stealing weapons and ammunition from government armouries.

The Royal Commission was a gesture of reconciliation and openness. It signalled to French Canada that the prime minister himself wanted to listen but also wanted the whole country to listen. It launched a national dialogue between communities who had lived side by side in ignorance and indifference.

Listening to the commission's public hearings today is profoundly disturbing. Anglophones erupted with an unapologetic torrent of racism against francophones and the French language. But, fortunately, there was also generosity and tolerance.

Other anglophones came forward to express their support for bilingualism and their own willingness to experiment and accommodate. Pearson knew the commission would expose all of this. He wanted it to. In 1966, he announced measures that would begin making federal government departments bilingual. In a few years he had roused anglophones from a smug slumber and forced them to rethink the country.

When Trudeau came to power in 1968, there would still be resistance to the whole idea of bilingualism but Pearson had already prepared the country and taken most of the risks. However, Trudeau received all of the credit or, depending on where you live, all of the blame. Unlike Pearson, he could literally embody the bilingual, bicultural ideal.

Far more irritating than this confusion over social justice or bilingualism is the idea that Trudeau put Canada on the map, thereby making us feel proud to feel Canadian. The latter is certainly true. The former is a crock.

It wouldn't matter how sophisticated or stylish Trudeau was when he became prime minister. He was able to matter because Canada mattered. And Canada mattered because of **Lester**

Pearson and his colleagues at External Affairs. During Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King's never-ending reign, Canada waffled along with a policy of timid isolationism. King did everything he could to weaken the League of Nations and ensure that it was never more than a debating club. But even he couldn't avoid joining the fight against Hitler. During the course of World War II, the entire economy was converted into a vast war machine.

By the end of the war, Canada had become one of the world's largest economic and military powers. Building on this base, Pearson, then a senior diplomat in External Affairs, was able to play a key role in shaping the first agencies of the emerging United Nations. He was nominated for the post of U.N. secretary-general. He was one of the key architects of NATO. In 1951, he was elected president of the U.N. General Assembly where he struggled to find a peaceful solution to the Korean War. His crowning glory came in 1956 when he was instrumental in solving the Suez Crisis.

Through all of this, Pearson was probably the most well-known Canadian in the world. Through all of this, he transformed our policy of isolation and remade it into a policy of creative intervention. He made his fellow citizens proud to be Canadian. His diplomatic work was essential in defining what it meant to be Canadian — until a more telegenic pirouetting prime minister erased those accomplishments from our collective memory. The fault lies not with Trudeau but with an amnesiac culture that settles for sound bites.

It doesn't detract from anything Trudeau accomplished to recall that there was life before 1968. Back then, in that heady post-Expo atmosphere, Canadians were starved for a charismatic leader who could remake them and the country. What a pity that so few recognized that they'd just been served by a prime minister who had done exactly that.

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