

Lester Bowles Pearson as Prime Minister

A Family Album

Remarks at Walter Gordon Circle Dinner

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Hon. Landon Pearson, O.C.

When I began to prepare my remarks about my father-in-law, Lester B., for this evening's celebration of his life and times as Prime Minister my mind was immediately flooded with vivid images from the period we have been discussing all day. I can see two albums full, a public one and a family one. The public one is overflowing with images from newspapers and magazines, photographs and cartoons (who can forget the polka-dot bow tie?) as well as snippets from the TV screen, notably from the two documentaries produced by the CBC that featured Lester B., "The Tenth Decade" and "First Person Singular." Then there are the official photographs by Karsh and others, the portrait that hangs in the Centre Block that the family really likes and the statue on Parliament Hill that visiting children clamber up on so that they can sit on his lap. (Lester B. would have been delighted!). The family album is smaller but, in its own way, just as significant. It is here that you will find the pictures of the unceremonious, buoyant and engaging family man who was also Canada's Prime Minister for five eventful years.

The first set of pictures I would like to share with you from our private album are primarily about family. Lester B. was a loving and affectionate man and family meant a great deal to him. If you have the kind of happy childhood he claims he had you value the emotional security it gives you and want it for others. I had that kind of childhood, too, and I think that is one of the reasons we bonded so quickly when I joined the Pearson family on my marriage to his son on the day after Christmas in December 1951. Another reason is that we had similar temperaments and could understand one another wordlessly when we were dealing separately or together with our sometimes challenging partners! Lester B. was uncomfortable with excessive displays of emotion so he was happy, I think, to welcome a daughter-in-law who my husband had so unromantically described in his wedding speech as "a woman of amiable disposition." This doesn't mean he didn't respect my intelligence, to the contrary, but I must admit that, in the beginning, it was all those grandchildren that I and my sister-in-law, Patsy, produced for him, and whom he adored, that made us so central to his life!

Lester B.'s father had died long before I married his son, but his mother lived to be 94, dying suddenly as she was putting on her hat on her way out to tea. She was a remarkable woman and her son was devoted to her even though she expressed her disappointment that the "minister" he became in Cabinet was not a minister of his father's church. Unfortunately she did not live to see him become Prime Minister. Then she might have forgiven him! In my "album" I have photos of her taken in 1961 with her great-grandchildren, including my daughter, Anne, who was named after her, but, alas, I did not have a camera the day Lester B.'s two brothers came to stay with him at Harrington Lake three years

later. All three of Annie Bowles' sons had served in the First World War and even though their subsequent lives had followed very different arcs the affection they still shared was palpable. Harrington Lake was a wonderful place to gather his "clan" and all of his relatives were welcome, including those he had acquired through his marriage and his children's marriages.

Still it was as a grandfather that he was at his best. I cherish my photos of him disappearing into the woods followed, like the Pied Piper of old, by a train of enchanted little children although, unlike the Pied Piper, he was happy to bring them back when they became hungry. And I have other photos of him standing warily on the dock with the children plunging into the lake like dolphins (he was not a strong swimmer), or rowing with two of the older ones to fish in "Barbara's Lake" or, in the winter, roaring off on a skidoo with one or two clinging on tightly behind him. And best of all is the family video taken on New Year's Eve as 1965 turned into 1966 of Lester B. dancing along with his grandchildren and a giant stuffed **ookpik** in front of the open fireplace.

The second section of the family album showcases the man who loved Canada, the man we watched from his office in the East Block standing on the steps in front of the Centre Block on February 15, 1965 as the Maple Leaf flag was unfurled for the first time, the man we stood beside on January 1, 1967, shivering in the cold, as he lit the Centennial flame, the man who welcomed the Queen to Canada on July 1st and the invited his family to accompany the official group to Champlain Point to watch the celebratory fireworks that night rise above Parliament Hill. This was the same man who rode with us on the monorail to that miraculous island in the Saint Lawrence, who stayed with us (but not all of us at the same time) at **Habitat** and took us through the Canadian Pavilion. For Lester B., Expo 67 exemplified everything that mattered to him about being Canadian. Innovative and exciting it was a showcase of Canadian talent, of national unity and of Canada's openness to the wider world.

National unity was such an important issue for my father-in-law that I am surprised that more has not been made of it today although I appreciated the paper about Marcel Cadieux who was such a fierce Francophone federalist! During his five years as Prime Minister Lester B. did everything in his power to promote national unity and it was a frequent subject of conversation when we got together. He followed the work of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism established shortly after he came to power with intense interest. Geoffrey, who was as fluent in French (partly as a result of our six years in Paris) as his father was awkward, was a strong supporter of the Commission's work and a solid advisor with respect to its recommendations. He felt as strongly about national unity as his father did and I was not surprised to find this quote in his handwriting among his papers of something that his father had said at the Federal-Provincial Conference in Charlottetown in September 1964:

"Let us accept as our highest purpose trusteeship over the concept of a Canada fortunate in the duality of its origins and the diversity of its development; but a Canada greater than the sum of its parts."

Lester B. not only made sure that highly qualified Francophones from Quebec were hired into the public service but also every time an election was called he asked the Party to recruit able francophone federalists as candidates; Jean Chretien in 1963, Pierre Trudeau, Jean Marchand and

Gerald Pelletier in 1964; and a number of others although not all worked out as well as he might have hoped. Still I remember him talking about them all, particularly about “the three wise men” as he called them. He seemed especially taken by Jean Marchand perhaps because he had been a labour leader. In any event, the Canada of this vision of national unity held such power for him that it is no wonder he exploded when de Gaulle made his outrageous statement. We were there at Sussex Drive when he did!

Now let me share some snapshots that highlight two of Lester B.’s most engaging characteristics, his love of sports and his sense of humour. With respect to sports I can still see him slouched in the comfortable armchair in the little upstairs sitting-room at Sussex Drive, his feet up and his lap covered with papers, watching the World Series. By the time he was PM he was no longer playing competitive sports, a little golf with Geoffrey and his son-in-law, Walter Hannah, fishing with his doctor Peter Burton or his grandchildren, more likely to throw the ceremonial opening pitch at a baseball game than stand at bat. But I do have a vivid memory of watching him play doubles tennis a few years earlier, alert at the net, lobbing the ball just out of his opponents’ reach, throwing them off their game. Judging by the materials I have from his youth, including his diary from 1915, Lester B. was always intensely competitive and not only in sports. I don’t think he was ambitious in the classical sense, ruthless in the search of power; it was more that he really wanted to win, whether it was first prize in the piano competition in high school or the presidency of the debating club at university or any one of the many games he played, hockey, baseball, rugby, lacrosse, and he usually did! That kind of ambition teaches you to tack against the wind if you have to to reach your goal and it also teaches you collaboration and a certain sensitivity to the strengths and weaknesses of your team-mates as well as how to encourage them to play together. So it was not just his years as a diplomat that made him the kind of Prime Minister he became but his life-long urge to lead a winning team.

As for his sense of humour it was almost legendary. My mother used to describe it as “epic” but perhaps she was referring more to his resilience than to his wit. There is no doubt that he was affable, everyone said so, but the affability was a question of temperament whereas the wit was a product of his extraordinarily quick and playful mind. Like the best Canadian humour it was self-deprecating, generous and light-hearted. Several times during Centennial year I replaced Maryon at one or another of the many lunches being offered to visiting dignitaries from all over the world. The highlight of the meal for all concerned was always the Prime Minister’s speech. Lester B. was not a great orator, that’s for sure, but as an after-lunch speaker he was **peerless**. He would read his audience perfectly and deliver speeches that were both appropriate and amusing, putting everyone at ease. I also saw him do this when he welcomed students to Sussex Drive. He always liked young people and knew how to bring them hope. The Company of Young Canadians was created during his time and even though it didn’t endure as a program it meant a great deal to all those who took part in it. He loved talking to students and many times over the years since have I met people who would tell me “when your father-in-law came to my school, what he had to say changed my life.” So he was inspiring for some and everyone remembers him as a likeable man but as he once said to me, bemoaning his minority status “if they like me so much why don’t more of them vote for me?”

Now for my last set of images from the family album, snapshots of Geoffrey with his father. Geoffrey’s face and name are virtually absent from the public record. Both men were unusually discreet

about their relationship, Geoffrey out of deference, I think, Lester B. because he did not want to compromise him in any way. Yet their relationship of “special trust and confidence” was a remarkable one. I first wrote about this in a presentation I made to RHOMA (The Retired Heads of Mission Association) in Ottawa a couple of years ago based on the correspondence I had uncovered between them about NATO, Suez and the French dating from 1956-61 when we were posted to Paris. I had known that they were close, bound by mutual affection and a shared passion for foreign policy as well as for baseball. I had also known that they were both deeply committed to international peace and security and to a responsible role for Canada in world affairs. However they had such different personalities! As we have heard today Lester B. was a pragmatic idealist. Geoffrey, on the other hand, as much a Moody as a Pearson, was once described by our daughter, Hilary, as a “romantic curmudgeon.” Still they were both noted for their sense of humour (although Geoffrey’s quips tended to have more of an edge than his father’s) and for their sense of perspective. After all they were both history graduates! And they were also men of honour and integrity who not only loved and respected one another but also, and deeply, the country they both served so well.

When Lester B. became Prime Minister we were still on posting in Mexico but Geoffrey flew home late in June 1963 to spend two weeks with his father after the latter had had a tumor removed from his neck. I know they talked then a great deal about what his father hoped to accomplish. Then when we returned to Canada the following year we spent the summer at Harrington Lake while our house was being renovated. From then on we would see his parents two or three times a week either there or at Sussex Drive, usually the latter. Most of the time it was just the four of us. Our oldest daughter, Hilary, had to take a lot of responsibility in those years watching over her rambunctious younger siblings as we drove regularly over to Sussex Drive for a drink before dinner. But Lester B. seemed to need to see us. He was always remarkably candid, talking about whatever was on his mind, a looming strike, the Auto-Pact, his latest conversation with Paul Martin Sr. who was his parliamentary seat-mate, a crisis at the UN, a challenge with one of his cabinet ministers, his irritation with Diefenbaker. Geoffrey said little about domestic policy although Maryon was vocal. Her instincts about who Lester B. should or should not trust were invariably sound and perhaps he should have listened more often. On foreign policy issues, however, Geoffrey was his most trusted advisor.

In Geoffrey’s memoirs entitled “Anecdotalage” this is what he had to say about the advice he gave his father and the way his father received it. “My friends and I,” he wrote, “were proud to be public servants, offering our best advice to those in power whether critical or not. My father, as a former official, understood and welcomed advice. When at NATO I questioned his view of council decision-making, and later I encouraged him to speak out on the Vietnam War.” Which is what his father did, as we all remember, at Temple University in Philadelphia leading to the famous image so well recounted by Charles **Ritchie** of LBJ holding up LBP by the coat lapels and telling him to “stop pissing on my parade!” That being said, my father-in-law liked and admired the United States (if not LBJ) and knew how important it was (and is) to have good and constructive relations with our neighbor to the South.

It will be clear by now that I both loved and revered my father-in-law. Yes, I recognized his faults both as a man and as a politician but in my considered opinion his achievements thoroughly trumped whatever short-comings he had so you will not be surprised by the emotion with which I share this final

image; the view from the car window on that late December afternoon over forty years ago as the funeral **cortege** carrying his body to its final resting place in Wakefield's Maclaren cemetery wound its way up the Gatineau Hills. What I saw through my tears were small clusters of people lining both sides of the road, men, women and children, some of them bareheaded in the freezing rain, the old men saluting, the younger ones waving Maple Leaf flags. No more needs to be said.