Lester B. Pearson

**By: Patricia Pearson
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It is our deepest hope that we can simply be peaceful and prosper. It is the evocative power of this hope that is nested in Tolkien’s great trilogy, The Lord of the Rings. Everything, all sense of malice and chaos and drift is measured against the peace of the hobbit’s shire. That is where the story begins, in the books. But for Tolkien, as for so many authors, politicians and scholars of his generation, that was a retrospective analysis. Peace comes to be cherished by the terrors in its absence.

So it was for Lester Pearson and his colleagues at Canada’s fledgling department of external affairs in the decade after World War One. These were young men who had been forged, hazed and traumatized by war. Who then experienced it all over again in the 1940s.

The extraordinary years from 1945 to 1968, during which my grandfather made his mark on Canada, involved the response of those men and women to what they had lived through: the negotiation of the great post-war global institutions, the creation of key trans-Atlantic alliances such as NATO, the Suez crisis giving rise to peacekeeping, and finally the domestic politics of the sixties that defined Canada as a compassionate, humanitarian nation, and that culminated in the flag debate and in our centennial celebration. We became who we continue to be: a nation of citizens, of immigrants, who have witnessed suffering and vowed, ‘never again.’

Born in small town, Anglophone Ontario in a world where the British Empire was a dominant fact, Lester Pearson died at the age of 75 in a Canada that recognized its biculturalism, that stood on its own in the world and that was moving rapidly to the urbanized, and very diverse country that it is today.

What was it about Pearson himself that led him to become the best known Canadian in the world of his time, as one of his biographers, Andrew Cohen, has described him? The answer lies, perhaps, in a combination of apt temperament, cultivated skill, and opportunity. Cohen rightly underlines certain traits of his character: modesty, humour, calm pragmatism. In discussing the events that led to the 1956 Suez resolution in his biography, Cohen describes a man who could be the “imperturbable centre of the whirlwind”, drawing on a deep knowledge of the UN and of the interests and personalities of all parties, while being a seasoned professional in the right place at the right time. His relative lack of ego and his ability to detach himself from turmoil could have left him on the sideline of many debates. But his strong intelligence and the skill with which he was able to deploy it took him into the fray and gave him the chance to prevail, particularly in diplomacy.

As my father Geoffrey Pearson noted in his own book on the diplomacy of Lester Pearson, LBP proved gifted at “seizing the day”.

At the same time as the Suez crisis was unfolding, Pearson was participating fully in the drafting of the Report of the so-called Committee of Three, a trio of foreign ministers as proposed by US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles ”to advise the NATO Council on the ways and means to improve and extend NATO cooperation into non-military fields.” Here, Pearson’s skill was to steer this committee to focus not just on methods for cooperation but on the ways in which the Alliance could, in his words, “successfully adapt itself to a changing political environment and find something other than fear that could ensure close and effective co-ordination between member governments.” His ability to get along with all concerned kept the Committee moving forward. And his pragmatism led to the drafting of a Report that could be accepted by large and small members of the Alliance. As he said in his memoir, “middle and smaller powers can rarely lay down policies which greater powers will adopt unless it is clearly in their own interests to do so. They can, however, influence the policy of their more powerful friends if their proposals are sound in principle and their diplomacy in advocating them is skilful and determined.”

Pearson`s words and his advice ring true today as they did in 1956. As we enter a time of unprecedented, Internet-amplified hyperbole, misinformation and finger-pointing, we do well to remember the value of nimble diplomacy and deep learning. Our future may well depend on our remembrance of our past.

Patricia Pearson is an authour and journalist, and is the grand-daughter of Lester B. Pearson. She delivered this speech at the above noted event in Ottawa.